

Gender Perspectives in Lee Maracle's *I am Woman*

Dr, V. Elizabeth Glory

Government Arts College

University of Madras

Nandanam, Chennai, India

elzygladis.v@gmail.com

Abstract

Lee Maracle is a prolific Native Canadian woman writer, whose memoir *I Am Woman* abounds with gender perspectives. In *I Am Woman* Maracle discusses about the oppression of Native women and the anti-woman attitude of the Native men. Violence over Native women are expounded with incidents from Native women's lives in some of the remarkable chapters like Rusty. In *I Am Woman* Lee Maracle also discusses about the violence within and outside Native women's home. The paper also tells us how Native women are doubly oppressed and how their contribution towards society goes unrecognized. It also discusses how Native women are considered as subhuman. The paper at its conclusion points out how Native women attempt to reconstruct their society inspite of oppression.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal Domination, Native Women, Oppression

Gender discrimination and violence over women is an everyday issue not only in Canada but in every part of the world. In spite of the manifold developments in all walks of life oppression of women is a continuing grief all over the world. Effort to fight against this

evil has been endeavored by a number of strong women. One such strong woman who determinately fights against patriarchy and oppression of native women is Lee Maracle.

Lee Maracle (1950) is a world-renowned Native woman writer, who has authored several critically acclaimed literary works such as *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories* (1990), *Sundogs* (1992), *Raven's Song* (1993), *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel* (1990), *Daughters Are Forever* (2002), *Will's Garden* (2002), *Celia's Song* (2014), *Bent Box* (2000) and *I Am Woman* (1996). In all her writings Lee Maracle addresses issues concerning indigenous women of North America. Through her writings she strives to attain emancipation of women from the age old domination and oppression by men.

In Lee Maracle's memoir *I Am Woman* she focuses on patriarchal domination and Native women's oppression. In her preface to *I Am Woman* the author remarks her purpose of writing it: "*I am Woman* represents my personal struggle with womanhood, culture, traditional spiritual beliefs and political sovereignty, written during a time when the struggle was not over". She further states that her original intention in writing *I Am Woman* was to "empower Native women to take to heart their own personal struggle for Native feminist being" (I.A.W. vii). She declares her desire that she and other Native women ought to come out of their spirituality, culture and womanhood free of sexist and racist influence.

As a woman Lee Maracle feels that she and the other Native women are enslaved by the social system men have created for women. Their oppression results from the accumulation of hurt sustained by them over a long period of time. Lee Maracle regrets over the fact that sexuality "is promoted as the end-all and be-all of womanhood, yet perversely it is often a form of voluntary rape: self-deprecation and the transformation of women into vessels of biological release for men" (IAW 24).

In *I Am Woman* Lee Maracle discusses the violence over women in North American homes. She informs that at home every man knocks down his wife once in a while. On every Friday night in the North American homes the drunken men beat their women and after such a brutal treatment they expect the women “to open up to further scorn by groaning happy sounds while the man who beats her helps himself to her body” (I.A.W. 23). Lee Maracle the representative of Native women condemns the extreme abuse of women by both Native men and white men in the following words: “how could I resist the reduction of women to sex objects when I had not been considered sexually desirable even as an object? We have been the object of sexual release for white males whose appetites are too gross for their own delicate women” (IAW 16).

One of the most memorable incidents recorded in *I Am Woman* is a chapter titled: “Rusty”. Maracle reports the trials of the young woman Rusty, her mother and the narrator herself. In brief in “Rusty” Maracle records the trials of the native women in general. In it the author enters into a dialogue with Rusty who though is laid down in her coffin throughout the dialogue, “and one suspects that it is either a series of recalled conversations between the two women or a reconstruction in hindsight”. Like Rusty many of the Native women’s lives are reflected in the pages of “Rusty” who are “imprisoned by society’s chains such as gender discrimination” (Creed 153). In “Rusty” Lee Maracle vividly pictures violence at home. She reveals that rape is a commonplace occurrence both at home and outside.

Further in the same chapter “Rusty”, Lee Maracle reminisce an incident where a thirteen year old girl has been raped and killed by a rapist and left in the gravel pit quite near her home. After this incident Maracle’s mother warns her and her sisters cautioning them of such rapes. In her desire to spare them of the agony of such rapes she tells them that there

are some terrible men in this world, though she is not cynical about all men. She tells them the truth that it is not out of love such men rape women but it is the hate they bear on women that they do so. On this context Maracle writes “Don’t let anyone try and kid you, rape is nothing to do with lust. It is all about hate. Fight back. Resist. No woman has to accept violence in any form” (IAW 55).

It is a regrettable fact as pointed out by Maracle that such violence on women is a common-place occurrence not only outside but within their homes. While talking about such conveniently made crimes she says, “In the home it is not a crime. What is worse, in our desperate fear of being unloved, good many women plead for mercy and accept responsibility for the beating and beg forgiveness for imaginary transgressions” (IAW 23). When we dwell deep to see why men behave in such a way at home we find Maracle’s answer that they neither want their women nor do they like them. She says “we are just here for them to vent their frustrations, just whipping posts. If you know what I mean. Worse, we are with them because they couldn’t get a white woman” (IAW 51). Maracle observes elsewhere in the book that both the white and non-white boys acquire their first taste of sex at the expense of Native women as though Native women are some sub-human being, incapable of any serious love. She says, “being unloved is hard but being raped is death” (IAW 61)

Native women are doubly oppressed. On one hand, they are oppressed by their own Native men and on the other hand they are marginalized by white women. Native women are denied of their womanhood to such an extent to the reduction of the whole people to a subhuman level. “The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath White women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women” (IAW 17-18).

In the name of culture Native women have been submissive to all kinds of oppressive behavior from Native men. Very often the contribution of Native women towards the development of the society goes unrecognized and unacknowledged, as though Native women are 'invisible'. In every organization Native women are found at the lowest level, "the least heard and never the leaders" (IAW 21).

Native women have been considered both by Native men and by White men as though they are species of sub-human animals. Lee Maracle points out that it is a common sight in the newspapers, when there is some mention of the death or murder of Native men they are referred as 'Native man' but in the same paper the victimization of Native women is referred as 'female Native' as though they are some female horse.

Amidst such patriarchal oppression of Native women Lee Maracle, a Native woman herself attempts through her writings to deconstruct the patriarchal society. Along with her there are several other Native women and men who attempt to recreate and restructure their social setups. As Lee Maracle mentions in, *I Am Woman*, "There are a number of amazing women, struggling to recreate and rebuild the family system of our past. There are also a number of men struggling to recreate and rebuild the political institutions and governing systems of the past" (IAW x).

Lee Maracle's original intention in *I Am Woman* is to empower and liberate Native women. She is aware of the fact that liberation is not simple and quite impossible. She sometimes feels that she is like a foolish young grandmother "armed with a teaspoon, determined to remove three mountains from the path to liberation: the mountain of racism, the mountain of sexism and the mountain of nationalist oppression" (IAW x). Yet she is affirmative in reaching her goal.

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