

Regenerating Indigenous Identity: A Reading of *In Search of April*

Raintree

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Abstract

This paper suggests that Beatrice Culleton was one of the prominent Native Canadian novelists who voiced the condition of the Natives in a world dominated by the Whites. Through her seminal work *In Search of April Raintree*, she opened doors for others to articulate and write back to the majority culture and, in the process, highlighted the healing and regenerative power of her own tradition. This paper explores the themes of resistance, trauma, and transcendence, illustrating how the characters' experiences in the novel reflect broader sociopolitical realities faced by Indigenous people in Canada. The very act of telling the traumatic story in written form accentuates not only the need for speaking out but also a call for transcendence. Culleton succeeds in amplifying the native voices so far marginalised, and also in paving the way for other native Canadian writers to engage creatively with the cultural dislocations.

Keywords: Identity, Foster Care, Native Literature, Memory, Trauma, Transcendence, Sixties Scoop

Memories. Some memories are elusive, fleeting, like a butterfly that touches down and is free until it is caught. Others are haunting. You'd rather forget them, but they won't be forgotten. And some are always there. No matter where you are, they are there, too (Beatrice Culleton 1).

In Search of April Raintree (1983) by Beatrice Culleton begins with this eloquent testimony to the exploitation, marginalization, and trauma suffered by Canadian Indigenous people at the hands of White Canadians. The novel tells the story of two Métis sisters growing up in separate foster homes in Manitoba, Canada. April, the younger of the two, in her attempt to climb the ladder of success and lead a comfortable life like that of White Canadians, uprooted herself from her Métis culture and traditions and distanced herself from her sister Cheryl, who romanticized and idealized her Indigenous culture. In this process, Cheryl, however, was trapped in a vicious cycle of violence, drug abuse, alcoholism, and prostitution, a condition that drove her to suicide. The dream of a happy life was shattered when April herself was gang-raped by men who mistook her for Cheryl. Cheryl's diaries made April realize how Cheryl had suffered and took the blame on herself because of April's traumatized condition after the gang rape. April also learned about Cheryl's son and realized that, to overcome her traumatized past, she had to go back and reclaim her Indigenous past, her Métis heritage, and reconfigure a new self to survive and live.

Beatrice Culleton portrays the deeply personal journey of survival and illustrates how individuals and communities respond to historical and ongoing oppression. It is a work of Indigenous literature that steers through the harrowing realities of the Sixties Scoop.

Patrick Johnston, a researcher for the Canadian Council on Social Development, first used the term "Sixties Scoop" in his 1983 report on Indigenous children in the child welfare system, entitled *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. In the report, Johnston describes the large-scale apprehension of Indigenous children in the 1960s from their homes, communities and families of birth — often without their parents' or band's consent — and their subsequent adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous families across the United States and Canada. The Sixties Scoop was not an isolated event propelled by inferior Indigenous parenting, but rather an extension of paternalistic

policies in Canada that sought the assimilation of Indigenous cultures and communities (Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Sharon Dainard).

From 1950 to 1980, the Canadian government came out with a series of policies through which the native children were removed from their families and placed in foster homes. The main purpose of “scooping up” the children of native and marginalised communities was to reshape their identity through education, social control, and cultural reorganization.

The praises for *In Search of April Raintree* in its 40th Anniversary Edition hail the book as a “groundbreaking and life-changing masterpiece (Cherie Dimaline),” and a foundational text for Canadian Indigenous literature. The text’s authentic representation provides a significant boost to the new generation of writers who are navigating the lasting impacts of the foster care system. The novel provided the first opportunity for Indigenous people to see their lives reflected in literature. For Nahanni Fontaine, the book is a “Seen” Experience for a young Indigenous woman like her (Nahanni Fontaine). Dr. Warren Cariou praises it as one of the “all-time great works” for presenting the Métis experience in a gripping and authentic way. The novel is celebrated for its unapologetic honesty. Rosanna Deerchild praises it as a “beautiful honouring” of the refusal to abandon family, culture, and ceremony, despite the “tender and brutal” realities it depicts. Even 40 years after its publication, the book is a significant piece of work in Canadian literature.

This book, which reads like a memoir of April Raintree, tells her tale in contrast to her sister Cheryl Raintree’s. The two Métis sisters go through a landscape defined by systemic trauma, individual and collective resistance, which was a result of the foster care system in Canada. The lifelong struggle of the sister duo with their Indigenous identity eventually ends in a kind of transcendence, but not before informing the readers of the historical injustice very systematically perpetuated by the state that was motivated by patriarchal whites. It is not only about the native Canadians but also about how cultures meet and interact. *In Search of April*

Raintree, after it was published, became a kind of cult for so many writers, mostly the aspiring native writers.

In Search of April Raintree (ISOAR) was very important. It was a revelation, not only for me but for so many of us. I remember hearing a story when it first came out in which someone was on a small plane going north, and every person on board had a copy of ISOAR. I don't know if that's true, but if it wasn't, it might as well have been. Everyone I knew read ISOAR, and everyone who didn't still knew what it was. (See? Very important.) It wasn't an easy read. It didn't make life look perfect or even make our lives seem all that great, but it was real. So real. That was the other revelation of it—it was like me, and it was real. Other books were real, or at least I thought they must be for some people, for the Scarlett O'Haras and Cathys and Heathcliffs of the world maybe. But April was real for me, too (Katherena Vermette, forward to the 40th Anniversary Edition).

In Search of April Raintree, as an act of writing and a story, is both an overt act of defiance and a subtle form of resilience. Culleton, in this novel, her first, talks of the acceptance and rejection of the Métis identity of the two sisters. This is a result of systematic discrimination as a result of colonialism. The acceptance and rejection are based more on the prevalent dominant system than on their own skin colours. April, who has light skin and can pass as a white, wishes to be accepted as a white woman. Cheryl, on the other hand, is dark-skinned, has dark hair, and is proud of her Metis identity and heritage.

April, as a child, distances herself from her Métis identity as a means of self-preservation in a society that values whiteness.

Two different groups of children went to the park. One group was the brown-skinned children who looked like Cheryl in most ways. Some of them even came over to our house with their parents, but they were dirty looking and they dressed in real raggedy

clothes. I didn't care to play with them at all. The other group was white-skinned, and I used to envy them, especially the girls with blonde hair and blue eyes. They seemed so clean and fresh, and reminded me of flowers I had seen. Some of them were freckled, but they didn't seem to mind. I imagined they were very rich and lived in big, beautiful houses, and there was so much I wondered about them. But they didn't care to play with Cheryl and me. They called us names and bullied us (7).

April's resistance takes the form of assimilation. She was grateful for the acceptance she received from the white children, "Although I found them bossy, even haughty, I was very grateful for their acceptance" (8). She attempts to conform to mainstream society's expectations, changing her outward appearance and suppressing her cultural heritage to escape the stigmatization attached to being Métis. She married a white man and allowed herself to be abused by her mother-in-law, and ultimately her husband who had an affair with another woman. April's internalized racism and self-denial serve as a reflection of the impact of colonialism, which has forced Indigenous peoples to either fight for acceptance or face marginalization.

Cheryl loves her Métis heritage. She is proud of her roots despite the way it is viewed by other people and the actual problems it faces. She proudly associates herself with the world of Métis; "...we should be proud of our heritage. ...we're part Indian and part white. I wish we were whole Indians" (40). She becomes an activist fighting for the rights of the indigenous people. She denied the values emphasised by the whites and worked for the recognition of the rights of the natives. Her nonconformity is another form of resistance. Her characterisation and the Winnipeg Native Friendship Centre, the organisation she worked for, echo the indigenous movements in Canada. The main motive of the Winnipeg Native Friendship Centre, like the present-day Métis National Council, was to reclaim and celebrate Métis cultural identity.

The approaches to rebellion and submission of the sisters in the novel can be seen as the predicaments of survival in the complex situation created by white supremacy in a postcolonial setup. April's approach may seem self-defeating, and Cheryl's activism more acceptable. It might be considered purely a matter of the protagonists' personal choices, but what is evident is that they have both been cornered by the overarching reality of systemic hegemony. The indigenous population is left with no alternatives other than the two. Nevertheless, Culleton succeeds in detailing the choices as modes of resistance, because the formation of a new identity from this inescapable situation is the only option available.

The trauma the sisters suffer from is a result of oppression that has been historically institutionalised. Suicide is one of the haunting intergenerational tragedies resulting from trauma, and Alice Raintree, April and Cheryl's mother, was a victim of this. Later, we see Cheryl succumb to this cycle, unable to navigate through the search for identity. Like her mother, she commits suicide by jumping off the Louis Bridge.

April refuses to engage with the trauma she faced as a child in foster care homes. The more she is looked down upon, the more she longs for assimilation, trying to grow up as a white girl. She desperately tries to escape the Métis identity. She silently suffers the exploitations because expressing pain and agony was seen as weakness or defeat, a thing of the marginalised communities. She wanted someday to be a white person. "When I got free of this place, when I got free from being a foster child, then I would live just like a real white person" (45).

Neither Cheryl nor April could become what they desired. April couldn't assimilate herself into the white society, and Cheryl failed miserably as an activist. Cheryl's idealism pushes her to despair and depression. April's efforts are not rewarded; she realises that she doesn't have a space among the whites. Both sisters become the victims of unresolved trauma, while April is rejected and humiliated by her husband's white circle, and Cheryl fails to get

support for her efforts to work for teenaged girls. Both of them suffer from what the social workers in the novel call the “Native Girl” syndrome (64). This is an example of the psychological toll a legalised practice can cause on the individuals and the community. What the sisters go through calls for the need for reconciliation, healing, and transcendence.

Cheryl ended her life, but her commitment to Métis identity and the idea of justice became a beam of transcendence. It provided April a stage for reconciliation with herself and her Métis heritage. April, after her sister’s death, is forced to confront her long-suppressed pain and denial. Her discovery of Henry Liberty Raintree, Cheryl’s son, paves the way for acceptance of the past and forging a new identity. The son becomes a symbol of acceptance of the past, reconciliation, and regeneration. The middle name ‘Liberty’ symbolises self-determination and cultural revitalisation. This paves the way for a new beginning for April and the Métis, as Cheryl had wished for Henry, “May you grow up to be all your grandfather is not” (238). This young innocent child makes April accept the rediscovered Métis identity as a new life, a better future for herself and her family. In the words of April,

All life dies to give new life.” Cheryl had died. But for Henry Lee and me, there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it. For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people (245).

Thus, Beatrice Culleton explores the regeneration of identity of the Indigenous people in the context of Canadian colonial history. While telling a tale of despair, she shows a ray of hope for new possibilities, a new beginning, through acceptance of the past and present, and reclamation of the cultural identity. *In Search of April Raintree* becomes not just an account of survival but of renewal and healing, both for individuals and the community.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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