

Thematic Analysis in Beatrice Mosionier's Novel 'April Raintree'

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Abstract

Beatrice Mosionier's debut novel *In Search of April Raintree* reveals much of her own traumatic experience that she has beautifully framed with realistic depictions. It not only deals with her personal life but also it implicitly deals with the life of many Canadian women who experience similar kind of issues in the Canadian multicultural society. The most common issues are racism, alcoholism, prostitution, and other social challenges that have been strongly voiced by Mosionier in the novel. Moreover, social oppression and individual transformation have been framed parallel in the novel to highlight the conflict part of the novel. Further, the central characters of the novel, the twin sisters April and Cheryl Raintree's two different perspectives of life indicate a clear message of victimization by all the oppressive powers. Further, the difference in the attitude of the two sisters, their determination and resolution gain a prime importance in the plot of the novel. Hence, a thematic study upon these matters would give a detailed outlook to the novel.

Keywords: Racism, Canadian Literature, Victimization, Oppression, Rulticultural, Feminism

Introduction

The Classical novel *In Search of April Raintree* has made a literary sensation in Canadian literary circle because of its depiction of various tragic events in the life of two women protagonists April and Cheryl Raintree. It mainly deals with the foster care system and how the system affects the poor and destitute children's psychological growth. It is found in a survey that according to 2011 statistics 14,200 aboriginal children of 14 years had been housed in foster care that has become a growing issue in the lives of Indigenous children. Beatrice Mosionier, being a Metis and being brought up under many foster cares, has well capsuled the problems of such children. She mainly highlights the relationship issues and discriminations faced by these weaker sections of the society.

The Canadian Métis author, Beatrice Mosionier, the fourth in her family was born in the year 1949 at Saint Boniface, Manitoba and has been grown up under several foster cares in Winnipeg from the age of three. Since her parents being alcoholic, she has been kept away from her family and also separated from her brothers and sisters. Having a disastrous childhood, she has come up in life by getting good education from St. Charles Catholic School, and Gordon Bell High School and graduated at George Brown College and Banff School of Fine Arts. She married Bill Culleton and got two children, Bill and Debbie. Her marriage life is an unsuccessful one which often experiences separation and finally both got divorced. She has been constantly moving from place to place like Winnipeg, Manitoba, Oakbank, and St. Norbert because of her nature of work. She initially has worked as a watch inspector and later as a bookkeeper.

After encountering her life's traumatic experiences that the suicide of her two sisters, she being raped and her divorce from her husband, she has started her writing career which she found comforting her as it is shared with others. Her first novel, *In search of April Raintree* is published in the year 1983, and the second novel *In a Shadow of Evil* is published in the year 2000. Both the novels deal with the life of young children in foster care. And her children's book *Spirit of the White Bison* explains the fall of bison after the invasion of the colonizers which symbolizes the fall of aboriginal tradition and culture. Moreover, her memoir *Come Walk with Me: a Memoir* is a sharing of her emotions and experience as Métis.

The novel *In Search of April Raintree* is highly an attention grabbing work since it captures many tragic and sensational events in the life of the woman protagonist April Raintree. And so, it has created a huge impact in the mind of the readers. The novel allows the readers to travel with the two woman characters who have transformed themselves from their powerless nature to the state of empowerment. However, one meets a tragic end and the other comes out victoriously. Amidst their growing, they face challenges such as hostility, adversity, indifference, separation and discrimination. Despite these social turbulence and pressure, one of them has strongly held the Metis identity and the other have left behind the same. The difference in their approach gains the central attention to the novel. In addition, the novel recounts a number of thematic elements which has become a backbone support to the paper.

The story of the Metis twin daughters who are not identical by their skin color reveals the hidden realities of the multicultural issues in Canadian society explicitly. Their names are April and Cheryl Raintree. April is paler than Cheril so she embraces white identity and the later embraces the Metis Identity. Because of their parents' immoral life style as being alcoholic, these girls have been adopted by foster homes. The story is told by April Raintree who submits her inner struggles that she has experienced right from her birth to the age of twenty four. She tells her miserable days in the foster care as being separated from her parents and sister. Also, she tells her sense of shame she encounters when she has

been discriminated because of her Métis identity. So, she wanted to have the white identity as hers and she always represents herself as white that she feels proud about. In fact, she has married a white man to continue her white identity. Unfortunately, her marriage life has been very disastrous as she has been discriminated by her husband and her mother-in-law too. She has divorced her white husband and has turned to seek her sister Cheryl's companion. On the other end, Cheryl who proudly embraced Métis identity has lost hope in her community when she come to know about her mother's sorrowful life. She learns that her mother also has undergone the same problems which she is facing in the society. Her mother got addicted to alcoholism and moved on to prostitution. In the same manner, Cheryl becomes addicted to alcoholism and lives her life by doing prostitution. When April lives with Cheryl, she was raped by a gangsters mistaken Cheryl which has become a traumatic experience for April. This incident also has greatly affected Cheryl. April in order to make Cheryl not guilty, she tries to come out from her trauma and eventually she succeeds. However, all the perils and pains in the life of Cheryl have made her to commit suicide. Finally, she has ended up her life by committing suicide like her mother did. April learns from Cheryl's son about the dark side of Cheryl and Métis life. April has started developing a sense of positive views about her Métis tradition and has felt a strong sense of affirmation to her life. She becomes a foster mother to Cheryl's son and finally finds meaning to her life.

Due to the colonial and racial impact, aboriginal people have lost control over their personal and public life. They become subjugated to the norm of the colonial powers. Colonization still exists there at the psychological level. In this context, search for identity is a most common challenge that every aboriginal and Métis people are encountering in their life. In the story of Beatrice Mosionier, April, Cheryl and their parents are in the pursuit of the same. However, April alone could be successful in the pursuit. Notably, she is the one who has suffered the most in the foster care system and under the clutches of racism. When she was under the foster care of her second foster family DeRosiers who are racist, she feels loss of dignity, feel inferior and

this has made her to develop self-hatred. April's basic rights are denied in DeRosier's farm. The following lines indicate the suppressive nature of racism that is revealed in the statement of Mrs. DeRosier giving order to April.

"You will get up at six, go to the henhouse, and bring back the eggs. While I prepare breakfast, you will wash the eggs. After breakfast, you will do the dishes. After school, you'll have more chores to do, and then you will help me prepare supper. After you do the supper dishes, you will go to your room and stay there. You'll also keep yourself and your room clean. I know you half-breeds; you love to wallow in filth.

However, April has accepted the white's treatment politely. She says,

"It seemed to me that what I'd heard indicated that Métis and Indians were inclined to be alcoholics. That's because they were a weak people. Oh, they were put down more than anyone else, but then, didn't they deserve it? Anyway, I could pass for a pure white person. I could say I was part French and part Irish."

This indicates that she has internalized the colonial oppression. However, at a time, she has tried to reconcile with the White superior nature. She embraces White culture to have a strong identity for herself. She has married a White man to sustain her identity but the family has been oppressive and racist. In fact, she has been ill-treated because of her Métis origin. Finally, she realizes her true identity as Métis who are Non-Status Indians. In the novel, April and Cheryl have never claimed themselves as Métis instead they have embraced aboriginality as their actual root. The change in their attitudes towards aboriginality resulting after their bitter experience of colonialism is a sign of gaining control over their social and personal life. For April Raintree, a strong native identity is formed in response to the social oppression she has faced in her life. As April and Cheryl are removed from their family, they lost connection with the aboriginal life. They have been imposed to embrace false identities. April Raintree's negative stereotypes about aboriginal people have been changed gradually and later she feels proud about her community. On the other end, Cheryl from the beginning has developed faithfulness and

positive affirmation towards aboriginal heritage by reading books and idealized her parents as one from such heritage but she loses faith and has broken the idealized image of her parents when knowing their real condition and state. She ends her life with the broken identity. However, Cheryl has helped April to understand their ancestry and aboriginal identity.

April and Cheryl Raintree are the victims of racism. Racism is shown as a social evil at various juncture in the novel. April has internalized racism from her very childhood days onwards as she was grown up under the absence of aboriginal influence. She has been made to develop a sense of alienation as she was isolated from her Métis heritage. The white dominance and racism have a drastic effect on the emotional and psychological experience of April and Cheryl. They have internalized racism and have been forced to deny their ancestral heritage and familiarize White culture. April is the most victimized girl because of her white skin. April exhibits low self-esteem about her and her community because of the benchmark framed by the colonial power. She experiences rejection for her parents that they are drunk and they show much care to Cheryl. She is bullied by many racist children in the playground and in many other occasions. She says, "They called us names and bullied us." The white children never play with April and Cheryl because of their ancestry and their poor condition. Hence, she has developed an attitude that she wants to play with the White children and should rise to their standards. She dreams to become wealthy to get their relationship. This internalization of racism has made her the victim.

As the novel makes a true account of the predicaments in the life of the Metis twin daughters, victimization of a whole community is clearly visible. April and Cheryl and their parents are not the only victims but also the entire community is victimized by the colonizers. April and Cheryl are just a sample of the victimization. The Métis and Native people have been made internalizing the idea of racism, oppression, and colonial power psychologically and been made to assimilate the ideologies, rules and cultures of the colonizers in their practices. April realizes such victimization very lately after being oppressed constantly several years.

Though, Cheryl's realization of the reality has made her strong, the powerless nature of her community members has made her to succumb to the Euro dominance. Though, April has become a victim to it, she doesn't reconcile with them whereas she seems to be resilient and resists victimization.

Separation is one of the major themes in the novel because it is the sole reason for April and Cheryl Raintree's miserable condition. And notably, it is favorably the reason for the character's realization of the facts. April and Cheryl Raintree are experiencing separation from their parents and siblings at the very young age which has resulted in developing a sense of alienation from the family and society. The reason behind the separation is the family's poor financial condition that their father Henry is affected by Tuberculosis and not able to go for work. Moreover, their parents are addicted to alcohol. Except quarrel, nothing has left in their family. However, April and Cheryl are happy with that life with their parents. But, when they are separated from their parents they have lost everything from their life. Moreover, the separation of the two sisters gave more pain to each other. They start feeling alienated to the core. The novelist gives an implicit message about the importance of parenting and living together in family and society. The separation has made April and Cheryl to long for love, happiness, peace, and relationship in life.

Powerlessness is another most important theme in the novel. Women and children are the weaker section in any society but in the case of Canadian society, as mentioned in the novel, there have been a community of people who are powerless because of their origination as Natives and Métis. Even the male members of the society are seen powerless because of the inability to meet their family's need. They are hunters once and powerful within their aboriginal practices but the interference of White culture has pictured them barbaric and powerless. Whites, in the process of civilizing the Natives, has made them powerless and suppressed them. April Raintree initially felt powerless but when she has been discriminated by her racist husband, and when she has been raped, she transforms to a state of empowerment. Later she takes pride in her community. The transformation comes to her when

she learns about the aboriginal culture, its values, and their pride, she says,

“That night we sat, Indian-style, around a bonfire, listening to the chanting and tales of Indian singers. Cheryl told me that was probably how it had felt on those long-ago buffalo hunts. I was impressed by all the sights and sounds. I went deeper than just hearing and seeing. I felt good. I felt alive. There were stirrings of pride, regret and even an inner peace. For the first time in my life, I felt as if all of that was part of me, as if I was part of it.”

Alcoholism is a curse on the Native and Métis community. It is the reason for all social evils that prevails in the society. It has affected the harmonious and peaceful life of many including the life of Henry's family. April and Cheryl are separated from their family because of their parents addiction to alcohol. The Native's and Métis' addiction to such practice shows that they have internalized the domination of the colonial power. They get yielded to the domination of the colonizers. The once hunters and brave men are now becoming really barbaric because of this addiction. The white's idea of natives as barbaric is attested by this behavior of the natives. Henry and Alice have got addicted to it and finally have ended up their life tragically. And in the same way, Cheryl has succumbed to the same and has met with the same tragic end. But, April resists it and turns empowered.

Shame has become the routine for the Métis people. The once celebrated bravery is made to see as savage and shame because of the false narratives and interpellation by the colonial forces. Alice has lost her life because of the shame and in the same manner her daughter Cheryl also has lost her life. The natives are made to feel ashamed of their identity. The idea of shame is sowed in the minds of the people right from their childhood days which germinate to a tree as they grew and it is clearly indicated by Beatrice. It is evident when April tries to play with the white children, they hesitated to play with her and even they called her by names. These discriminating incidents have developed an inferior feeling in April right from her childhood days. This similar incident is commonly experienced by most Métis children of Canada and they are made

to internalize their native identity as a shameful one and Whites as superior to them. Though, Cheryl has had high esteem on her native identity, her strong conviction is broken by this kind of White's influence. But April transforms the shameful identity to a positive one. The transformation has come as a reaction to the oppressive forces. Despite the traumatic experience of rape, April has strengthened her positively by seeking pride in her Métis Identity. April hadn't felt shameful after being raped but Cheryl's guilty feeling has killed her. April has handled her bitter experience of shame boldly. Here, the author wanted to highlight that the rapist must be ashamed of their shameful act. Also the racist must be ashamed of themselves. A similar context in the novel 'The Scarlet Letter' by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the protagonist Hester Prynne turns the shameful scarlet "A" in to a symbol of pride. In the same manner April has transformed herself positively.

To conclude, the author's thematic concern is very visible throughout the depiction of every incident. Moreover, the contrastive nature of the twin sisters carries the major attention and the traumatic situations that both the sisters' experience makes the novel an unhappy one. However, Culleton ends the novel with the positive note that the transformation of April which can be seen as the victory of the Métis and Native people. The transformation is nothing but

the acceptance of the past. Because of the realization and acceptance of the past, the rich heritage and all the tragic incidents happened in the community has made April to reshape her identity and has given a strong root to hold tightly.

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