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## Deconstructing the Colonial Historiography: The New Historicist Reading of Canadian Métis Fiction

Pramod Kumar K. V.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mahatma Gandhi College, Kerala, India

### Abstract:

*The pre-1980s historiographical tradition in Canada had, indeed, forgotten the Métis by confining them to a secondary role in Canada's national story. If we were to take our cue from this historiography, the Métis did not survive very long into the twentieth century, and had no history outside the political and economic contributions they made to Canada's founding--particularly through their involvement in the fur trade and in the creation of Manitoba. The Riel-centrism which subsequently dominated in the literature, at least up to the 1980s, only confirmed the illusion that Métis history was one-dimensional and event-based. Consequently, so many of the stories, histories, and cultural practices of the Métis remained relatively unknown in academic literature. However, more recent changes in both focus and methodology have resulted in a new approach to Métis history. The denial of Native women hood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub human level. Animals beget animals. 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. Lee Maracle suggests that the native women have to make the native men understand that they are with their men to fight the national oppression; They want their men to be again strong and lively in spirit. Maracle envisages a relationship not of conflict but of mutual support among the genders.*

*It is unquestionable that New Historicism is part of the post modern trend in literary history and Culture studies. It welcomes the breakdown of genre and analysis of discontinuities linking anecdotes to the disruption of understanding history. Finding no boundaries between the text and history, and between fiction and reality, New Historicism eventually and inevitably, has now come to terms with the decision to set up its priority in a place between textualism and contextualism. The Colonial dominant power stereotyping used to consider the Native Canadian people as the howling one and positioning themselves as the noble one. Similarly John F Kennedy declared a Great American society instead of a Just society In Search of April Raintree vehemently interrogates the colonial myth of assimilation. "Assimilate or get lost" was the arrogant attitude of Euro centrism Initially conceived as a story about alcoholism, the novel In Search of April Raintree became a much more essentialist work, exploring the experience of living as a Métis, a person whose heritage is mixed Native and European Jeannette Armstrong's novel Slash presents the fictional biography of a Native man, describing his personal development from childhood to father-hood. In the process, it depicts the discourses employed by the education system, Christianity, and organizations such as AIM during the 1960s and 1970s. Critics have repeatedly argued that due to the accuracy of the historic events – all the occurrences are verifiable through government records – and the realistic manner in which the novel is written, Slash is more fact than fiction At the end of Lee Maracle's Ravensong, Her mother, carrying her daughter's suitcase, insists that she and Stacey "walk over the bridge together -- alone" (Ravensong p.194-95) . Standing on the bridge with Momma, Stacey has a view of both her destination. The politics of crossing the bridge is fundamentally a representation and assertion. "Too much Raven" (p.179) echoes through the novel as a promise of continued resistance to assaults on the Native spirit, even in the face of great oppression and difficulty .*

*The relationship between history and text remains in the centre of the New Historicist arguments. Literary texts are constituted within historically specific institutions and related to other texts produced within other historically specific institutions. Similarly, society is constructed as a text of interrelated institutions. Different New Historicists may have different inclinations to historicity and textuality, Montrose for instance is said to emphasize the historical dimension whereas Greenblatt is more interested in documents as textual systems. However, a New Historicist position never privileges "historicity" or "textuality" to the exclusion of either. This is because they need the correspondences between "the aesthetic conventions inscribed in the text"*

### 1. Women and the Double Marginalisation

The pre-1980s historiographical tradition in Canada had, indeed, forgotten the Métis by confining them to a secondary role in Canada's national story. If we were to take our cue from this historiography, the Métis did not survive very long into the twentieth century, and had no history outside the political and economic contributions they made to Canada's founding--particularly through their involvement in the fur trade and in the creation of Manitoba. The Riel-centrism which subsequently dominated in the literature, at least up to the 1980s, only confirmed the illusion that Métis history was one-dimensional and event-based. Consequently, so many of the stories, histories, and cultural practices of the Métis remained relatively unknown in academic literature. However, more recent changes in both focus and methodology have resulted in a new approach to Métis history.

Apart from writing about the rich heritage, the native women writers focused on the racial and gender bias faced by them. The explicit theme in all these works is the double marginalisation of women. First of being colonized by the whites and secondly by their own native counterparts. The Atlantic Canadian writer Rita Joe's "Poems of Rita Joe"(1978) contain twenty six poems which talk about the harsh experiences of once self sufficient people. Her song of *Eskasoni:More Poems by Rita Joe*(1998) deals with various subjects. One of her extracts reads like this:

I am not  
 What they portray Me  
 I am civilized  
 I am trying  
 To find in this country--  
 ( Rita Joe, 1998)

Her words are assertions of making their community visible to the main stream Canada. Likewise Lee Maracle, Beatrice Culleton and Jeannette Armstrong in varying degrees could be seen making their own land and claims in the Canadian cultural milieu. *Ravensong*, *In Search of April Raintree* and *slash* are in one sense the documentary autobiographies and history of native Canada and the pathetic story of the patriarchal imperial hegemony, the spatial and cultural displacement of a race by unleashing the malicious instruments of oppression, torture and denial of rights.

## 2. Indigenous Writing as Resistance

The denial of Native women hood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub human level. Animals beget animals. 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. Lee Maracle suggests that the native women have to make the native men understand that they are with their men to fight the national oppression; They want their men to be again strong and lively in spirit. Maracle envisages a relationship not of conflict but of mutual support among the genders. She describes the emotional, mental and spiritual powers of women which can rescue their men from death,

I am an asset to a man Who seeks liberation from death colonialism is....

(“Reflections from the summit,” 1996 p.59)

The Canadian Educational policy dominated by the colonial pedagogy, intellectually and emotionally enslaved the natives, consciously imposing their tastes and preferences. As in India where McCauley introduced a new English education to accelerate the colonial programme, In native Canada too education was used as a tool of oppression. This is quite evident in *April Raintree* where she becomes a rebel that attempts to label and stigmatize her and her race. She is able to see through the inherent politics of writing history as she articulates before April who considers easy submission a way of getting along with dominant white race,

You probably don't agree with me, do you April? But history should be an unbiased representation of the facts. And if they show one side, then they ought to show the other side equally. Anyway, I'm writing the Métis side of things but just for myself

( *April Raintree* p.63)

Of course the role of education and the Church for over a century indistinguishable forces in the lives of Native people — cannot be underestimated in any discussion of the imposition of European ideologies and traditions on Natives( Celia Haig-Brown', *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* 1988 ,p.67) Internalized oppression, the result of the indoctrination of the colonized in their deficiencies as defined by the colonizers — such as "laziness," "savagery," or "drunkenness," for example — which allow the colonizers to justify and maintain their superior position ( Memmi, Albert. *The Coloniser and the Colonised*(,1991, p. 79), can be more damaging than material forms of oppression. Education is a vital tool by which the colonizers put their definitions of the colonized “homogenized into a collective 'they' ” ( Pratt, Mary Louise,*Under English Eyes: Constructions of Europe in Early Twentieth-century*, 1985,p.139] ) into the heads of the colonized. The result is that everyone 'recognises' the inadequacy of the colonized relative to the colonizers; the educational system, like the political and economic systems, is structured to maintain that inadequacy.

It is unquestionable that New Historicism is part of the post modern trend in literary history and Culture studies. It welcomes the breakdown of genre and analysis of discontinuities linking anecdotes to the disruption of understanding history. Finding no boundaries between the text and history, and between fiction and reality, New Historicism eventually and inevitably, has now come to terms with the decision to set up its priority in a place between textualism and contextualism.

## 3. Decease, Regression and Hegemony

A correlation between decease and the contemporary power discourse may appear seemingly irrelevant. But a serious introspection into this neglected matter or the novels or some “Thick descriptions” in the words of Clifford Geertz would provide some alarming statistics about the human death in aboriginal Canada. Aboriginal women in Canada carry a disproportionate burden of poor health. Aboriginal women have lower life expectancy elevated morbidity rates and elevated suicide rates in comparison to non aboriginal women.( Priarie Women' Health Centre 2004).Aboriginal woman living on reserves have significantly higher rates of coronary heart decease, cancer, cerebro vascular decease and other chronic illness than non aboriginal Canadian women(Waldram H erring and Young ,2000). A significantly greater percentage of aboriginal women living off reserve, in all age groups report fair or poor health compared non aboriginal women. . Epidemiologists suggest that many of these chronic health conditions are a result of the forced acculturation imposed on aboriginal peoples (Young p.1994)

## 4. The Howling Savage and the Noble Savage

The Colonial dominant power stereotyping used to consider the Native Canadian people as the howling one and positioning themselves as the noble one. Similarly John F Kennedy declared a Great American society instead of a Just society. They tried their best to set up a system of oppositions or binaries. — white/ black, good/evil, civilized /barbaric — invariably privileging the dominant power. The model of colonization has been applied to white-indigenous relations in Canada at the social and economic levels, but it works at the ideological and literary levels as well. Of course it is not an easy task to decentre these binaries. And Yet the Native Canadian women writers like Lee Maracle, Beatrice Culleton and Jeannette Armstrong through these novels were emphatically trying to sabotage the colonial stereotyping. Their novels were trying to open up a space between the negative stereotype of the Indian and the romanticized popular view — Paula Gunn Allen (*The sacred Hoop*,1986,p.4) calls the two sides the "howling savage and the noble savage"— or the even more depressing dichotomy resulting from enforced acculturation, that between those April calls "gutter creatures" (*April Raintree*, p.115) and the assimilated Indian: the "brown, white men" (*Slash* ,p.69 ). And how is that space opened up? And what is to be inserted in that space? A simple answer to these

questions from these writers is "our way" and "whatever we work out." A comprehensive answer is impossible (since the "working-out" process will continue indefinitely), but some generalizations can be made. (*Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, W.H New, 1990 p.170)

### 5. The Political Conscious and the Psycho Dynamics

Living constantly exposed to the emotional and mental tortures of colonial Canada fragmented the perceptions and dreams of Lee Maracle. Beatrice Culletton and Jenette Armstrong to the core. This ambivalence and predicament as symptoms of inhibitions as felt by the writers and characterised differently in the chosen novels could be seen in the words of Jenette Armstrong :

Imagine how you as writers from the dominant society might turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination. Imagine in your literature courageously questioning and examining the values that allow the dehumanizing of peoples through domination and the dispassionate nature of racism inherent in perpetuating such practices. Imagine writing in honesty, free of the romantic bias about the courageous 'pioneering spirit' of colonialist practice and imperialist. Imagine interpreting for us your own process, people's thinking toward us, instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives, and our stories .... Imagine these realities on yourselves in honesty and let me know how you imagine that you might approach empowerment of yourselves in such a situation. Better yet, do not dare speak to me of 'Freedom of Voice,' 'Equal Rights,' 'Democracy' or 'Human Rights' until this totalitarianistic approach has been changed by yourselves as writers and shapers of philosophical direction. Imagine a world where domination is not possible because all cultures are valued.

(Jeannette Armstrong, *The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment through Their Writing*, p.209)

### 6. Ravensong: The Politics of Crossing the Bridge

At the end of the novel *Ravensong*, Her mother, carrying her daughter's suitcase, insists that she and Stacey "walk over the bridge together -- alone" (*Ravensong* p.194-95). Standing on the bridge with Momma, Stacey has a view of both her destination and the "home" she is leaving behind: White town glared at them from beyond the bridge, sterile white homes with bright colourful trims, roofs all in full repair. Automobiles trundled apathetically along the road, music from one or two of them wafted out the windows and hung about the women reluctant to move on. Down the side of the road to town was a concrete sidewalk. It was the only road in town which boasted such a thing. Stacey had watched the men working in the hot sun building it. They were planning to build more of the miserably hard things. Soon there would be no earth under their feet in town. The picture of white town stood incongruous with the village. Behind the women stood the homes of people so familiar to them that no questions about their lives were ever exchanged. Ahead lay a land of strangeness -- a crew of sharp-voiced people almost unintelligible to the people behind them. (*Ravensong*, p.196)

The politics of crossing the bridge is fundamentally a representation and assertion. "Too much Raven" (p.179) echoes through the novel as a promise of continued resistance to assaults on the Native spirit, even in the face of great oppression and difficulty. From memory and experience only in Maracle's *Ravensong*, one could see a bold colonial encounter, the strategic politics of crossing the border or a challenging attempt of negotiation, not a blank submission, aboriginal chauvinism but a cautious cultural contact. Through Stacey, Raven seeks to bring about fundamental and "gut-"transformation from the deep" (p.83) wrenching" (p.14) change in the condition of Native people. In this capacity to transform, the trickster acts to "disrupt" the order of things in human society and "take the human spirit to a higher place, a second becoming, a new humanity" (Maracle, "Native Myths" P.184).

Paula Gunn Allen suggests that

There can be no adequate interpretive access to Native literature except through the trickster figure; this is because the concept of the trickster is absolutely fundamental to the Native "frame of reference -- a frame that extends all the way into the depths of consciousness that marks a culture, differentiating it from another" (W.H New, *Border Studies* p. 308)

The narrative of native literary and intellectual development that Fanon constructs in his study on colonialism talks about a panorama on three levels. And that third stage is the emergence of a national, fighting and revolutionary literature. If the native writer tried in the previous stage to live in the past of his people, he now "turns himself into an awakener of the people." Joining the masses in their national liberation movement, the native writer now will not be able only "to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of his people," but he will also become "the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (p.179).

Unlike Beatrice Culletton's *In Search of April Raintree* or Jenette Armstrong's *Slash*, *Ravensong* corroborates thematically with the third level but only as a passive "encounter of discourses."

### 7. Beatrice Culletton's In Search of April Raintree: Interrogating the Myth of Assimilation

The ten essays which follow the re-edited text, cover a variety of issues: the nature of identity as a Native person in a largely racist white culture; April's story as a document of cultural displacement from one's heritage; the legacy of cycles of abuse, violence, and denial of human rights; the story as the lived experience of foster care, alcohol abuse, family violence, and suicide; history, as written by white historians and as told by First Nations tradition; censorship and the revision of the original text into *April Raintree*; and the book's place in Canadian Aboriginal literature. As well. The historical context that necessitated the making of Culletton's novel is evident from these essays. Describing the novel as a "therapeutic" exercise, Mosionier has said that she sought in its composition to understand the suicides of her sisters, Vivian and Kathy, and "to find answers to questions relating to her own family" ("Special Time" p. 248).

In *In Search of April Raintree*, Beatrice Culletton anticipates by several years the conclusions of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry. Indeed, the motifs of enforced acculturation, abduction, and assault through which she documents the powerlessness of indigenous peoples in Canada necessarily derive, as Jeanne Perreault argues, from the traumatic "social and physical realities" of Aboriginal experience (261). The native girl syndrome in the fragmentation of social realities are echoing in the novel.

It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen, uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away, or you can't find or keep jobs. So you'll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution, and in and out of jails. You'll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. You'll end up like your parents. . Now, you're going the same route as many other native girls. If you don't smarten up, you'll end up in the same place they did. Skid row! (Culletton 1983, p.62):

*In Search of April Raintree* vehemently interrogates the colonial myth of assimilation. "Assimilate or get lost" was the arrogant attitude of Euro centrism Initially conceived as a story about alcoholism, the novel *In Search of April Raintree* became a much more essentialist work, exploring the experience of living as a Métis, a person whose heritage is mixed Native and European..Through the loss of Cheryl, April comes to accept the reality of her own mixed heritage. Cheryl has left a son behind, however, and the reader is left to wonder if April will be able, through her nephew, to witness a new generation of Métis. April's emphatic emotional determination not to assimilate is the ideological strength of the novel. The ending of the novel highlights this ideology and thoroughly interrogates the myth of assimilation.

Nancy began explaining but I stopped her. I told her I understood everything. As I stared at Henry Liberty I remembered that during the night I had used the words 'my people, our people' and meant them. The denial had had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl's death to bring me to accept my identity. But no. Cheryl had once said, 'All life dies to give new life'. Cheryl had died. But for Henry Liberty 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  
(*April Raintree*,p.184)

The two sisters in the novel goes through different ideological contexts which are often antagonistic and binary. But from antithesis of assimilation and pervasion the novel regains the native identity through the mental metamorphosis of April Raintree.

Frantz Fanon's second level of panorama occurs just before the start of the anti-colonial battle, that is, just before the emergence of a fully conscious and concerted decolonizing force in the colony. Characteristic of the literature produced during this phase, argues Fanon is the re-narration or re-interpretation of past times and old legends "in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies". Here the native writer starts "to remember what he is" and to (re)turn to his people.

April Raintree's return to the native culture is a deep realization. At same time one could say that April's earlier attitude really supported Fanon's first level. That is the first stage, which he calls as the "period of unqualified assimilation", the colonized native writer's literary production shows that he is completely assimilated into the culture of the colonizer. This literary output is European-inspired and imitative of the literary trends and intellectual fashions of the metropolis. The native intellectual "has thrown himself greedily upon Western culture" (Fanon,1967, p.176). Truly speaking Beatrice Culleton in general and the character April Raintree in particular represent the conflict between the first and second levels.

### 8. Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*: The Inertia of Revolution

Jeanette Armstrong's novel *Slash* presents the fictional biography of a Native man, describing his personal development from childhood to father-hood. In the process, it depicts the discourses employed by the education system, Christianity, and organizations such as AIM during the 1960s and 1970s. Critics have repeatedly argued that due to the accuracy of the historic events – all the occurrences are verifiable through government records – and the realistic manner in which the novel is written, *Slash* is more fact than fiction.

His search is a long struggle through 'modern' and 'traditional' society, and his political activism leads him to prison, many debates and conferences as well as spiritual gatherings and traditional feasts. More than once, *Slash* experiences the physical and cultural symptoms of colonial violence.

In his analysis, Teuton describes two ways in which a Red Power novel differs from a bildungsroman: Firstly, in Red Power novels there is a desire to return home due to the protagonist's need to reconnect with his or her traditional culture and community, which happens in a process of reinterpretation and transformation of cultural knowledge. Secondly, instead of an individual journey, the quest is depicted as a collective practice, which means that the protagonist's individual progress is closely linked to the growth of the Native community. Hence, a Red Power novel uncovers how Natives can 'awaken politically, reclaim a history, and build a community' (Teuton 33), which are all aspects that can be identified in Armstrong's *Slash*. With *Slash*, Armstrong created a novel that is didactic in purpose, primarily focusing on a Native readership to educate them and point out opportunities they have. While the author's didactic message just subtly shows through in the main chapters, it is explicitly stated in the epilogue of the novel: 'I decide to tell my story for my son and those like him because I must' (*Slash*, p.209).

In various interviews, Armstrong states that her quest was to 'put together a profile of the thinking of the period' (qtd. in Williamson p.122) and to portray 'what they dreamed, and what their pain and joy were during that time' (qtd. in Lutz Challenges p.14). Indeed, the novel manages to revive the events that most First Nation peoples experienced during that period.

While tracing the energy and the revolutionary desires in *Slash* one would think that he will cross the boundary and after repeated encounters with the colonial power will essentially establish a counter discourse and hegemony materialising down to earth the liberation from the visible and invisible fetters. Not only will that *Slash* satisfy Fanon's third stage. That is the emergence of a national, fighting and revolutionary literature. If the native writer tried in the previous stage to live in the past of his people, he now "turns himself into an awakener of the people." Joining the masses in their national liberation movement, the native writer now will not be able only "to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of his people," but he will also become "the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (p.179).

Of course *Slash* taught his people the politics of freedom, but his sudden disillusionment and frustration showed the inertia or abortion of a possible revolution. A sway from the second and third stage of Fanon's panorama is implicit in Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*.

### 9. New Historicism: Political and Historical Commitment

There are wide ranges of convergences and differences in the practice of New Historicism. But there are directions in which the movement could be attempted to restore historic dimension to American literary studies which ideologically monopolise the entire enterprise with an imperial hegemonic emphasis. Hayden White writes they wish only to supplement prevailing formalist practices by extending attention to the historical contexts in which literary texts originate"("New Historicism a Comment" Ed. Aram Veaser *New Historicism*1989,p.293). Hayden White clarifies the project more politically as the New Historicists have advanced the notion of,

A "cultural poetics" as a means of identifying Those aspects of historic sequences that conduce To the breaking, revision or weakening of the Dominant codes-- social,political,cultural, psychological and so on—prevailing at specific times and places in history.Whence their interest in what appears to be the episodic,anecdotal,contingent, exotic,abjected or simply uncanny aspects of the historical record (p.301)

The relationship between history and text remains in the centre of the New Historicist arguments. Literary texts are constituted within historically specific institutions and related to other texts produced within other historically specific institutions. Similarly, society is

constructed as a text of interrelated institutions. Different New Historicists may have different inclinations to historicity and textuality, Montrose for instance is said to emphasize the historical dimension whereas Greenblatt is more interested in documents as textual systems. However, a New Historicist position never privileges “historicity” or “textuality” to the exclusion of either. This is because they need the correspondences between “the aesthetic conventions inscribed in the text” and “the hegemonic political forces of society” to foreground “the silenced or marginalized positions” often contained by the literary and social order. Hence the well known New Historicist dictum of “historicity of texts and textuality of history” for the “dialectical tensions” produced by a referentiality through literary representation and a mimesis of historical “textuality.”

Lee Maracle, Beatrice Culleton and Jeanette Armstrong share not only the same identity categories, as *Mètis* and as female, but also the same postcolonial experience, as those who are positioned at the border crossings of different histories and languages trying to make sense of their lives and complex histories of displacement and belonging amongst and within indigenous and settler populations.

The New Historicist practitioners like Gallangar and Greenblatt put it “We are trying to deepen our sense of both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific cultures by broadening our view of their specific artefacts” pp 13-14), this thesis is only a modest and moderate attempt to do a similar approach. But at the same time though very limited the circumference of the volume focused here the attempt is confidently looked upon as essential. As Ipshitha Chanda pointed out

I encourage each of you to continue empowering these women and the work that they’re doing, and you can do that in many different ways. You can do that by raising the issue within the learning schools of whether or not their books are part of the schooling.

You can do that by seeking out their books and reading them. You can do that by sharing what you learned here today with your beloved ones, because each of us in our way can help each other come to a better understanding by really sharing.

*(Literary Historiography: Literary Studies in India p. 14)*

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