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## THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN BEATRICE CULLETON'S *IN SEARCH OF APRIL RAIN TREE*

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**Abstract:** The struggle for existence is the major theme in post-colonial literature. Colonialism's dangerous effects cannot be easily eradicated completely since it gets complicated with other kinds of cultural domination which coexists with colonialism. Although most of the formal colonies do not endure external political control, covert impositions of hegemony still exist in the form of economic and political power, especially in Canada. The search for ways of survival and existence is the problem of identity.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Metis people, Colonization, Native girl syndrome.

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**Introduction:** Developing self-identity is one of the most important challenges in the world full of prejudices. Over the last few centuries women have been struggling to break free of traditional roles determined by society. Today, the Canadian women have an unprecedented level of freedom in society in choosing their career and lifestyle. It is easy to take this freedom for granted, but novels like Beatrice Culleton's *In Search Of April Rain Tree* (1983) shows the difficulties faced by the Metis people in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Man is forever in search for his self. This search takes him through the dark corridors of the past into the complexities of the present, leading into the vast, unknown future. It makes him probe within the psyche, unravelling the mysteries of the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious layers to arrive at the myths and archetypes that define the meaning of existence. It also assumes the form of an outward quest, struggling against the odds of exploitation and deprivation, fear and aggression, race and gender, politics and religion identifying and paradoxical relationship between individual and community 'Self and Other' in vast and incomprehensible world. Canada is a country that depends upon its "regional" and "the local characteristic", its "localizations", its respect for international level": it holds its head high for supporting the global cause of "multiculturalism". Thus Canada confronts the Emergent Nation Syndrome but with a difference, and the differential features lie in its "multi-nationalism" and "multi-racialism". The novel *In search of April Rain Tree* was published in April 1983 and became a Canadian classic which reveals the difficulties faced by the Metis people in the middle of the twentieth century. Metis are an indigenous first people of Canada who trace their origin to mixed European and first nation's parentage. The word Metis means any mixed-blood Indian who has his own aboriginal status in Canada; or a member of a particular cultural group of mixed ancestry. Shunned and ostracized by both the Indians and Whites, the Metis were distinct in behaviour,

their attitudes and their choices of defining themselves. Representation of race and ethnicity in twentieth century Canadian writing is mostly in English. Beatrice Culleton's *In Search Of April Rain Tree* centers around April who is a Metis, and lived in Winnipeg with her sister Cheryl and her parents.

The lives of actual families and the roles of men and women in them were shaped merely by two other factors. The first was the germs that Europeans brought with them, which often advanced ahead of actual colonial forces. The commonwealth writers cannot easily forget the memories of all yesterdays of the colonial past. The memories return and compel perpetuation in scalding words. For, the injured race, the memory is galling, and it cannot be exorcized. For the race that caused the injury is a burden of guilt and sin and secret shame that cannot be washed away. An early Australian poet, Charles Harpur, in his poem makes *An aboriginal mother's* laments as:

Still farther would I fly my child  
To make thee safer yet.

From the unsparing white man,  
With his dread hand murder-wet!(1-4)

The novel helps to appreciate and discover the Metis and their struggles which are unique for them. Throughout the novel, April makes it clear that native Indians are considered lowly by most of the society. Even though April and Cheryl are Metis people they are considered more like the Indians. People use to call them 'half breeds' 'squaw', Indian etc. These terms are considered to be offensive. The women of the mixed race and the Red Indian women who were the marginalized were forced by the demoralized culture into roles which were very oppressive and traumatic. After Cheryl's funeral, April learnt about Cheryl's life and relationships. Cheryl's separation from April, the death of her mother and sister, Anna, Mark's exploitation –all these had made Cheryl a drunkard and a prostitute. April also comes to know that Cheryl had a baby boy whom she decided to adopt. Women, when marginalized, are only objects of sex. When April was raped, the incident left a scar

and not a wound which she had to carry all through her life. The novel *In Search Of April Rain Tree* lends itself to post-colonial reading as the protagonist is rooted in the power struggle between the white colonizer and the ethnic colonized, Metis. What the 'Metis' have faced in this novel is what every 'native' in each of the colonial cultures faced. Culleton has made April the spokesperson for the Metis. April and her younger sister Cheryl, when only six and four years old, were taken from their parents by the children's Aid society, first to a convent orphanage, and then to various foster homes. Even though often separated, they always thought about and wrote each other. Both children excelled in school, but while April dreamed of integrating into white society, Cheryl dreamed of becoming a social worker finding her parents rebuilding the family and eventually helping children like herself.

There is also a particular pattern of life for the native girls as Mrs. Semple, April's social worker indicated. She calls it the 'Native girl Syndrome' (48). According to her it all starts with the running away and fighting, the lies. Then they would find that everyone is against them. It will be followed by getting pregnant, inability to keep steady jobs, alcohol, drugs, shoplifting, prostitution, going to prison. Then they will live like men who abuse them. She reminds them that they will end up just like their parents living off society. April always makes sure that she is not following this route. She always made sure that Cheryl and she is not going to become what they expect of them. But at some place Cheryl took a wrong step and unfortunately she goes along the same path as Mrs. Semple drew before them. This syndrome has destroyed the life of many girls including Cheryl in the novel. Nancy Cheryl's friend deserves a special mention. Cheryl also confronts the problem of identity. She tries to identify with the natives, the oppressed. But this is doomed to failure when she confronts the ugly realities of native life passivism, internalized oppression and defeatism. In the lives of these two children who grow up in different foster homes, the identity crisis assumes different propensities. April contemplates how her race has been instrumental in her disruption, whilst Cheryl, for whom the parents were lost prior to her

picturization of a home life, begins to rumble for her roots.

April and Cheryl have to face discrimination from various places from the children's park to their married life. Everyone in this world has some hidden prejudices. If one gets proper opportunity these hidden prejudices work. The point the novelist makes is that instead of being under the influence of such discrimination, it is the responsibility of the down trodden to show others how much potential they have to live a life similar to any other. Through April, the novelist exposes the dark side of nativity, how she struggled to live trying to make a positive self-identity. Then she puts Cheryl beside her and shows how much a native has to be proud about her heritage.

Beatrice Culleton's novel is neither autobiography nor fiction, nor is it a successful blending of both. Sometimes it seems as true as imaginable. This novel is neither native nor white. There are no recurring themes such as connection to communal co-operative living or the wisdom of elders. In her writing tradition is completely absent. Two main themes that are clearly expressed throughout the novel are the identity of the Metis people as portrayed by the general society and the racism towards them. The novel essentially speaks the idea of searching for belonging and identity. In this novel both April and Cheryl learn how one's personal identity is tightly intertwined with one's cultural heritage and how Metis people live with the confusion of belonging to two opposing ethnicity. The story deals with sensitive issues, such as the consequences of residential schools on native children, the oppression of First Nations people in Canada, and often the untold tribulations of Metis women fighting to forge their place in a society who has robbed them of their rights. Culleton's *In Search Of April Raintree* was considered as a product of unsophisticated artistic talent, an author who knows her subject matter and often instinctively makes good stylistic choice, but who generally is unaware of the subtleties of literary technique. Though the novel is narrated by a woman who is ashamed to acknowledge that she is a half-breed, the novelist is trying to pass a message on to the readers through Cheryl that if one denies his or her heritage it is like denying one's own soul.

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