

## Diversity as Discrimination: Lee Maracle's *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*

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Canada, colonised by the British and the French, was originally the land of Inuits, Indians and other tribal communities like Abenakis, Alongkins, Beothuk, Chippewas, Crees, Eris, Eurons, Iroquois, Kiskakons, Mahicans, Mohawks, Naskapis, Onondagas, Puants, Sokokis, etc., who are now variously called the natives, the indigenous and the 'First Nations'. The natives, collectively, are sometimes also referred to as Indians of Canada. In fact, the word 'Canada' is a derivation of the Huron-Iroquois term 'Kanata' meaning a village or a settlement.

Canada now is a multicultural state striving to be impartial to its diverse ethnic communities. In the twentieth century, Canada has seen the assertion of the marginalised, which include various immigrants as well as the native tribes. However, in spite of the struggle by the 'First Nations', they have not been integrated with the mainstream society. This has been the major limitation of Canada in the twentieth century where material progress and development have been unable to lessen the economic, political and social deprivation of the natives of the land. The state of being varied has affected the natives culturally as well. Trying to adjust with a system so alien to the native traditions has affected their very state of existence. The position of the native women is more pathetic in the male dominated Canadian society. They are facing the problem of double marginalisation—first for being native and second, for being women.

Literature has been one of the chief means of misrepresenting the Natives. Canadian literature has been depicting the indigenous as the Whites would see them, that is people who are ignorant, barbaric and therefore, rightly kept at a distance. However, in the 1960s some of the White writers like George Ryga, Rudy Weibe, Herschal Hardin,

Norman Newton, Wayland Drew, et al gave a different image to the Natives in the Canadian literature, that of the people who have been exploited, marginalised and suppressed. Though these texts present a sympathetic picture of the natives' lives in Canada, yet these remain images by the people from outside. As Leslie Monkman says:

All the white Canadian writers who have written about the Indians approach Indian culture as outsiders. The...accuracy of each work varies greatly according to direct experience, personal study, and acceptance or rejection of prevailing social stereotypes, but no white author writes as a Native.<sup>1</sup>

Before the arrival of the White European races, literature of Canada was mainly oral. The Natives did not write down their myths, stories and experiences. Knowledge was passed on verbally and through graphic designs. In their folklore supernatural played an important role and it was anecdotal in character. As Christine Welsh comments:

Native oral history begins with the act of creation and is deeply rooted in the land; it provides a continuity that helps to nurture and sustain the people and their way of life. In it we find the expression of their cultural values and world view. In this respect native oral history is at least as accurate a version of native experience as that provided by the often biased accounts written by non-native observers.<sup>2</sup>

Europeans gave them a writing system and gradually their religions, traditions, beliefs, legends and historical events got recorded. Though the writings showed the influence of European tradition, issues central to the natives figured in the literary works.

More recently the native writers have avidly started writing about the depth of the native culture and the problems faced by them. Most importantly they articulate the dispossession and alienation faced by them in their own land.

Within the native literary scene, native women's writing is emerging as an effective sub-genre category. Writers like Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell, Beth Cuthand, Jeannettee Armstrong, Beatrice Culleton, Joyce B. Joe, et al are among those who have already made a significant mark on the literary scene. Producing literature of their own they attempt to restore their rich culture, tradition and heritage which has been suppressed by the Whites. The Native women writers also focus on double marginalisation of women on the basis of race as well as gender.

The present paper focuses on some short stories of Lee Maracle from her collection *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*. Maracle's

stories are frank, disturbing and meaningful. She amalgamates European short story technique with Native oratory to create her own aesthetic form. In this collection some of the stories are fictional accounts, few are autobiographical and most are derived from real life experiences. The paper analyses, through three stories out of eleven, the struggle of the Natives in growing up in a white dominated establishment where the Natives are considered inferior because they are different and how equal co-existence of the Whites and the Natives has remained an illusion, a mirage till date.

In Canada, the natives or the 'First Nations' are judged by the terminology framed by the Whites. In other words, the natives are being taught that to be like the Whites is being normal and valuable, being as they are is being inferior and degraded. In fact, to develop such an identification '...is a refusal of identity: it opts for pleasure and denies division, distinction'.<sup>3</sup> Racism, thus, is an important element in the process of subjugation of Natives. The Whites project their own race as superior to that of the Natives, mainly because the Natives lack the European 'knowledge'. Their intelligence is not sub-standard but because they are different, they are treated not only indifferently but often contemptuously. The Whites consider their own values of individualism, self-centredness, youth, conquest of Nature, and materialism as valuable and the norms and values of the Natives which are group orientation, co-operation, respect for age, harmony with nature, sacrifice, spirituality and equality as sub-standard. As a result, as Ronald Wardhaugh comments, 'To be an Indian in Canada is to be at the very bottom of the Canadian social hierarchy; it is to be last at everything. This then is the plight of Canada's *first* people!'<sup>4</sup>

In her accounts Maracle talks about racism, experienced by the Natives in their work place, both among workers and intellectuals. The story, "Eunice" depicts this truth quite realistically, in its account of Lee Maracle's gathering with other women, both White and non-White, at Eunice's residence. Lee Maracle, along with others, discovers discrimination even among writers and intellectuals who in fact claim to be above such petty issues. Nora, a white woman, the organizer of the gathering, reveals how her tale about a lesbian got rejected by a White publishing house as they never wanted to propagate 'immorality' in society. The Whites are not open-minded to accept a different stance. Even among themselves, a diverse perspective or practice is not acceptable, it is in fact looked down upon. Even Arun Mukherjee candidly describes this discrimination:

The enormous gap that exists between white and Aboriginal Canadian can be gauged by the white cultural establishments' response to Aboriginal spokesperson's demand that the white writers and artists stop telling Aboriginal stories. These demands were immediately branded as censorship. All the old nostrums about the freedom of the artistic imagination were trotted out and replayed over and over again.<sup>5</sup>

Lee Maracle also discloses that her story was rejected because of racial prejudice. She was asked to delete drinking from a story wherein a Native woman died of alcoholism. What Sheelagh Conway states about the publishing scene is amply substantiated by Maracle's narrative:

Publishers say they are interested in 'quality' work, not on authors gender and race . . . Juxtapose sexism with racism and the problem is compounded . . . Leonore Keeshing-Tobias, a native writer, says publishers have returned manuscripts submitted by native with 'too Indian' or 'not Indian enough' scrawled across them.<sup>6</sup>

The Whites are cognisant of their indifference and injustice towards the 'First Nations' and other non-Whites of Canada. Though some of them are trying to rectify the age-old mistakes, majority of the Whites are not ready to acknowledge their own indifferent attitude. Their 'all knowing' stance makes them define choices for other human beings. Diversity in human nature is revered by the Natives while the Whites are contemptuous of it.

The issue of racism is treated in a surrealistic manner in the story 'Sojourner's Truth' through a character, Soul, who after the physical death watches over the racism practiced by the Whites. Racial prejudice, in fact, arises out of the Whites' need to impose their cultural identity on others. As Gayatri Spivak says, 'When a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants a identifiable margin, claims for marginality assume validation from the center.'<sup>7</sup>

In heaven the White man's soul meets nine black boys who disclose the unjust cause of their death. They were hanged by the White law on the false charge of rape. Since law could not find the real culprits, these boys were punished because of their colour. The repentant Soul who was part of the jury which unjustly convicted the boys, propagates that this kind of ruthless attitude of the Whites demands action from the non-Whites.

At the time of his burial the White man's soul notices with pain the absence of a few White friends he had, who could not take out

time for the funeral. This treatment received by the body of the Soul makes him think about his own conduct. He notices the absence of the Chinese also at the time of the funeral. But he does not condemn them as he realises after his death, his own folly for their absence. He takes himself to task mentally for not trying to understand the Chinamen because of the misconceptions about them. He wishes to improve himself, but unfortunately, his death is the obstacle in his awakening. Maracle's statement elaborates what is it that is absent in the White attitude, 'Most white Canadians lack the intimate knowledge of the self that could transform this world of unbridled waste and butchery of spirit into a world rich with social and natural conscience.'<sup>8</sup>

'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians and White Folks' is an open-ended story depicting the cultural erosion of the natives because of their urbanization which is the result of ongoing colonial process in Canada. The urbanisation has started because the natives realise that the Whites are not ready to acknowledge their diverse cultural patterns, behavioural modes and spiritual practices. Hence for survival they are forced to turn to cities and a new class of the Natives has emerged called the 'Bridge Indians' or the 'Uptown Natives', who monetarily, are better off than the reserve natives, are influenced by the White way of living but still are not accepted by the Whites. In fact, they '...find themselves confronted not by uncoloured land which they must transform but by patterns of urban society which they seem to have no hope of transforming'.<sup>9</sup> These 'Uptown Natives' can be seen in 'a pricey leather jacket, wool slacks, gloves, Italian shoes and long black hair'.<sup>10</sup> In a particular incident, Tony, Mose and the writer Stace retrieve the purse of an uptown native from a thief. The native is so confused that he is unable to identify even his own purse. This particular Indian becomes a symbol of 'Bridge Indians' who are a confused lot because they can neither identify with the Natives nor with the Whites. 'Not Village, not urban'. (p.85) And this plague of urbanisation does not escape even Stace.

The town in which Stace's friends reside is a mixture of traditional Natives and the 'Bridge Indians'. Stace adopts the ways of the metropolis but is unable to cope with the feelings of isolation, loneliness and alienation in the city. So she visits Tony but is unable to simply walk into his house in the traditional Native way. 'For the first time in my life it didn't feel right to just walk in on Tony' (p. 91) as she realises that she no longer is the conventional native. Tony on finding her at the doorsteps comes out and both discuss the

process of colonial imitation by the native youth. Stace 'knew he was talking about me, us changing our ways until we were just like them'. (p. 91) Later it dawns on her that he hadn't invited me inside. And the weeping began again'. (p. 91) Thus urbanisation divides the natives and they are unable to relate to each other. The 'Bridge Indians' view urbanisation as a necessity for integrating with the White Canada whereas the traditional natives view these 'Uptown Natives' as traitors.

While the natives are collectively subjected to racial and colonial oppression, the native women have to suffer far more than the native men. Colonialism denies them their womanhood and sexuality because they are the 'females' of the natives. The Whites who consider the native men below them, further place the native women beneath the native men. As such, they face the low status not only in the Canadian society but also in the Native community. As Christine Welsh says:

For it was in working with the native oral tradition that I first discovered that we as native women have a unique history and discourse of our own, but being both women and native we have been double silenced.<sup>11</sup>

'Eunice' particularly focuses on the sexist attitude of the so-called intellectual and intelligent men. The male writers do not invite female participants to their gatherings. This distance from male cerebrals and scholars deprives women of intellectual stimulation, so essential for their writing. They are secluded from the majority and as such they have to go through inner experience for a longer time and contemplate on it before writing. Sky Lee, a Chinese, one of the participants at Eunice's place feels that if women meet frequently, they could get new ideas from each other's experiences for composing new works. She realizes that '...Native writers and particularly native women writers who are politically active' need 'to talk with each other a lot'.<sup>12</sup> Maracle responds mentally to this observation, 'Because women are still islands...' (p.57), i.e. they are unable to reach out to one another.

Women are not even encouraged to write. And if they wish to adopt it as a career, the parents are the first to scorn it. Sky Lee discloses that she too was never encouraged by her parents to pursue writing as a career. They desired a cushy job for her, which would provide her with an affluent lifestyle. Things are more complicated for the married women writers who have children. They have to steal time for scribbling while cooking, feeding the children and

wiping their noses. Their spouses generally are of no help to them but an additional burden who demand too much attention for their own comfort.

Maracle herself, in fact, divorced her first husband because he was unable to understand her need to write. For him dishes were more important than Lee's passion and devotion towards writing. Maracle, therefore, strongly advocates: 'The value of resistance is the reclaiming of the sacred and significant self. By using story and poetry' we 'move from the empowerment of...self to the empowerment of every person who reads the book.'<sup>13</sup>

The 'Sojourner's Truth' also reveals how trusting a man leads to agony and torture for a woman. The protagonist, Soul, after his death recalls his own brutal treatment of his wife. He thinks, 'Oh God, the living body of me scarred and twisted the very soul of Emma'. (pp. 122-123) He recognizes that the pain he inflicted on Emma was not only physical but also mental and emotional. Though his repentance is sincere and complete, he knows that nothing can be done to amend his wrongs. He also wishes to warn her about the blunder she would be committing by marrying the second man but knows that being dead he cannot do that.

Emma, a widow at fifty six, feels the need for human warmth, affection and companionship. The other man's concern makes her decide to get re-married. She ponders over the man, 'He seems like a nice fellow. Not like the last'. (p. 128) She hopes that the present courtship would bring love in her future marriage. Little does she realize that again the same brutal fate awaits her. 'Ah courtship if only love could grow from the sweet seed of courtship to the lovely flower the marriage was intended to be.' (p. 128)

The new husband, a drunkard, starts making unreasonable demands on Emma. Her refusal to fulfill them makes her again the victim of domestic violence. And Soul, who wants to help now, is unable to do so. Finally, Emma's patience collapses and she stabs her second husband. However, in the court she pleads non-guilty and proclaims, 'I did not kill a man; I stabbed a snake'. (p. 132) It is the inconsiderate, inhuman and sometimes ruthless nature of men which makes women turn to violence, something so contrary to their basic loving, caring and nurturing nature.

In 'Polka Partners', Maracle particularly dwells on the habit of womanising in men. Men are presented as bawdy fellows trying to seduce every woman coming their way. Frank is such an indecent

and lecherous fellow, who even while sympathizing with women, would indulge in obscenities. He even tries to involve the author Stace with him. However, awareness of his unclean and ribald thinking, enables Stace to escape his exploitation. She is even able to hurt his bloated male chauvinistic ego. And Maracle warns against such womanisers: 'Don't be a fool, guys like him got little tin badges and water pumps for heart. They aren't made of flesh and blood.' (p. 97)

From her stories, Lee Maracle does not emerge as an anti-men or anti-white activist. Her opinions come out of rational and fair thinking and personal experience. This thinking she attributes to the unbiased upbringing by her mother. She appreciates a few men who are sincere and also take care of their women. She cites her own example. Her second husband understands her need to write and is considerate enough to take care of the children while she is composing new works. Lee also holds Eunice's husband in high esteem, who understands her agoraphobia and takes the kids to the doctor, the school and goes alone to the parent-teacher meets. Such men do raise hope of a society without gender bias.

The stories of Maracle advocate that women have to come out of their desperation for companionship, especially with men. They need to realise their own values, believe in themselves and reach out to one another. They need to believe in the totality of themselves. They should not be desperate for any relationship. Each relationship of father, brother, lover, husband and son should be treated as bonus and not as necessity. This attitude would definitely make them avoid misery, pain, anguish, and torture.

The stories quite candidly reveal the problems faced by the Natives in general and the Natives women in particular. In spite of the morbid condition of the Natives of Canada, Maracle sees a ray of hope for the Natives. Her Native optimism arises out of the emotional strength of the Native women. Maracle asserts that the respect and upliftment of the Native women would surely pave the way for the general betterment of Native Community and generate harmony in Canadian society at large.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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