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## THE COLONIZED MIND IN LEE MARACLE'S BOBBI LEE: INDIAN REBEL

*Indigenous Canadian Literature*

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**Abstract:** Stories are an integral part of who we are as people.. For First Nations people traditional story telling was mostly based on the spoken word. The literature produced by the native women writers of Canada is the literature of protest challenging established value systems: colonial, patriarchal or upper class.

The history of Canada is a history of the colonization of Aboriginal people. It is a society marked by a structural and psychological relationship between the colonizer and the colonized whose relationship is reflected in its history, politics and literature. Lee Marable, is one of the first Aboriginal writers in Canada to publish fiction and she is considered the grandmother of Aboriginal literature, especially after her groundbreaking work in 'Bobby Lee: Indian Rebel' and "I am a woman." In this paper an attempt is made to analyze Lee Miracle's novel Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel, especially the impact of colonization and dehumanization which seem to surface in the lives which help understand what it really means to be a native in Canada. The social and cultural background traces the writer's feminine concerns to find out how she became personally and politically aware not only as a women but as a true "Native woman". Living in isolation in the margins of society, the original people of Canada have suffered a great loss that can never be recovered.

**Index Terms -** Sto:lo, aboriginal, metis, Saskatchewan, Trotskyists.

### INTRODUCTION

Stories are an integral part of who we are as people.. For First Nations people traditional story telling was mostly based on the spoken word. The culture and tradition and history of a nation during earlier times was passed on by elders through oral narratives from generation to generation.

The literature produced by the native women writers of Canada is the literature of protest, challenging established value systems: colonial, patriarchal or upper class. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse Lee Miracle's novel Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel, the impact of colonization and dehumanization that mirror's the reality of what it really means to be a native in Canada.. Living in isolation in the margins of society, the original people of Canada have suffered a great loss that can never be recovered. Lee Marable, is one of the first Aboriginal writers in Canada to publish fiction and she is considered the grandmother of Aboriginal literature, especially after her groundbreaking work in 'Bobby Lee: Indian Rebel' and 'I am a woman'.

Born on July 2 1950 the Canadian poet and Sto:lo. ("People of the River" speaking a dialect of the coast Salish language, who relied on the Fraser river and its tributaries for their way of life) author is one of the prolific aboriginal authors in Canada and a recognized authority on issues pertaining to aboriginal people and aboriginal literature. A poet, novelist, performance storyteller, scriptwriter actor and the cultural director of the center for Indigenous theatre in Toronto Lee Miracle's birth place was Vancouver, British Columbia. She was the first aboriginal child to be allowed to attend a normal state school.

A prolific writer Lee Miracle's works include 7 works of fiction 4 nonfiction 2poems and many other collaborations and anthologies. Her works of Fiction include 'Sojourner's Truth and other Stories,' (1990) 'Sundogs' (1991) 'Ravensong' (1993) 'Daughters are Forever'(2002) 'Will's garden' (2002), 'First Wives club: coast Salish style' (2010), 'Celia's song Toronto' (2014). Of her 4 works of non-fiction which primarily are autobiographies, 'Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel' (1975) revised (1990) and 'I am woman: a Native perspective on Sociology and Feminism' (1968) won her critical acclaim.

Lee Maracle was one of the founders of the En'owkin International school of writing and the cultural director of the Centre for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto. She has delivered hundreds of speeches on political, historical and feminist topics related to native people and conducted dozens of workshops on personal and cultural reclamation and she is an international expert on Canadian first nations culture and history.

The history of Canada is a history of the colonization of aboriginal people. It is a society marked by structural and psychological relationships between the colonizer and the colonized whose relationship is reflected in its history, politics and literature. From the point of view of history the 1960s was a time of importance for the development of Canadian culture as it marked the emergence of anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial voices by way of women's Liberation and Black power movement that challenged all supremacies of people and their living. In subsequent years a predominant number of unheard melodies questioned the established authority and practices vehemently and asserted their presence, identity and quest for recognition.

Besides Lee Maracle, there were other native aboriginal women writers such as Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton and Jeannetten Armstrong who voiced the oppressive conditions of their living and echoed the emerging identity of the native people in their writings. Striking at the roots of their oppression on the basis of sex, race class in Canada's colonial history was a matter of concern and interest.

Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* is a tough autobiography of an Indian women's life from the mud flats of Second Narrows Bridge Vancouver, to the Toronto of the sixties and seventies. Lee Maracle here takes us through an important sense of the tough terrain of struggle toward political consciousness which all oppressed people undertake. It is an autobiographical exploration of post colonial tensions in Toronto between 1960-1980 and sheds light on the then existing racist and sexist sentiments reflecting the struggles of the indigenous communities.

The contributions of metis (a person of mixed Indian and euro-American ancestry) writers like Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton and Jeannetten Armstrong voiced the oppressive conditions of their living and we can one can discern that these women have told their stories with unflinching realism and clarity by using the language of the colonizers. The colonized Native Canadians have found their problems compounded by the complex system of classification for native people, one of them being increasing differentiation which is an instrument of imperialism.

Lee Maracle appears to have resolved the identity questions in the novel *Bobbi Lee*. Living in a colonized nation, and in her own mind and in the perception of Euro-Canadians she is an Indian. Although her father is white and her mother Metis, she recalls going to the home of her white friend after school when her mother explodes by stating "don't you know we don't want Indians here?" (490). Her identity as an Indian is due more to her dark skin and her white father's rejection than to any sense of tribalism. Ironically this is a text that condemns colonization in all its guises and is an example of the literary colonization that natives have been endearing for long.

As a genre Autobiography has functioned as an effective literary practice for the writing of life narratives. The distinguishing feature of this genre is that it allows the readers to remain in touch with the personal experiences of people from distant places and differing backgrounds.

Lee Maracle's autobiographical narrative '*Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*' depicts her experience as a metis Native, through her protagonist, in the colonialist, racist, sexist Canadian society. The text, of the first edition of the narrative, was dictated by Maracle in 1972 into a tape recorder as part of a project on life writing. Two of Maracle's associates, Don Barnet and Rick Sterling, transcribed her words, reduced and edited the eighty hours of tape and three inches of manuscript (interview) into a slim volume with the title '*Bobbi Lee, Indian rebel: Struggles of a Native Canadian woman*'.

The narrative of Bobby lee is divided into three parts. The first part written in the 1970s consists of short essays on about 14 different topics, devoted to the various episodes in her life. The second portion the 'Epilogue' written in the 1990s, comprises ten captions and clearly shows Maracle's evolution as a writer. Here the things she had missed in the first part she unravels. The third part is more focused, issue based and analytical. It is a political writing depicting her emotion as a political activist, very much like the writing of Lee's second narrative, '*I am Woman: A Native perspective on sociology and feminism*'.

*Bobbi Lee* opens with Maracle's short essay entitled '*Oka Peace Camp*' – September 9, 1990. This was one of the most important historical events that took place in the lives of the natives. On 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1990 nearly 100 heavily armed police officers suddenly attacked the region, resulting in a lot of bloodshed with the intention of grabbing the vast land, in the Okanagan region, cutting pine trees and turning the land into a golf-course. The event spurred a political awakening with turbulent moments like road blockades, rail blockades in major highways and dams that reflected the unity and strength of the native people. The struggle signifies not only the life of a particular native woman's suffering but also the story of the sufferings of Aboriginal people in Euro-Canadian settler society.

The chapters "*Turbulent childhood*" and "*Early Rebellion*" describe Maracle's early childhood and racism both at home and at school. Maracle throws light upon the troubled and unpleasant experience of her childhood. She along with her eight brothers and sisters was the victim of her wicked, rancorous and merciless father's domestic violence. She faced the turbulence caused by her father's racist and chauvinist behavior. Her mother came from Metis community and father was a Saskatchewan. Though theirs was a love marriage it was not long before they started fighting and getting on badly. Maracle recollects her father's arrogance and insensitivity when she was hardly three.. He was mean, selfish and a sadist person who enjoyed other's sufferings. She states: "Around that time things got really bad in the family. The old man was always beating Ed my oldest brother. He'd throw him against the wall and sometimes end up hurting him pretty badly" (24). This callousness and indifference would extend to his wife too. He could never respect her but only hurt and insult her by all ways and means. Insulting her mother her father would call her a "dirty old squaw" and even refuse to take her to hospital when she was seriously ill:

Soon.... Mom became very ill.... I was very worried . I thought it was my dad's fault that she was dying because he would not take her to the hospital. I decided I would shoot him (28)

After this incident Maracle cherished emotional rejection and hatred for his father. She could see her mother dying by inches both emotionally and mentally everyday. When her father left her mother for accusing her of being unfaithful, her mother had to earn a living for everybody all alone. Besides, poverty had also added to Lee's woes and turbulence in her childhood years. Recollecting the economic condition of the family she writes:

We never seemed to have anything to eat but the fruit and vegetables we canned.. We almost never bought anything, I never wore a regular pair of shoes till I was ten – only runners – and we never had any heat in the house. I also began wondering why most most people – white people – didn't like Indians and treated us badly. How, we could change the situation we people – white people – didn't like Indians and treated us badly. How, we could change the situation we found ourselves in. (32)

Such experiences of racist bias not only at home but at school also disturbed them all the more. Three months after she entered school she became aware that she was an Indian and that white people did not like her not even talked to her but called the lees, "halfbrees" and little Lee Squaws. Unlike her sister Joyce, who was a "Yes Girl", Miracle fought all the time to maintain dignity and refused to accept any racist crap and was the last to accept this sort of treatment .

It was really ugly. Because I am Metis and light skinned, ...It happened fairly regularly that one would come up to me and ask 'No offence, but are you Indian' I would always reply, saying "Yes, I am ... but, no offence are you white? This happened a lot at school and sometimes all hell broke loose. It got to be that I was ostracized by all the white kids (50)

Native children at school, are treated as second class citizens, and the issue of racism at school is a predominant issue with these native women writers. Maracle's ostracization by all the white students is the revelation of white supremacy even at the root of native culture in Canada.

Thus colonizing the minds of the Native children even at school is a type of neocolonialism in Canada. This racism made Maracle abhor her learning institution. At the age of fourteen she started playing hooky and at the age of fifteen she became delinquent – smoking, drinking and stealing things. And Furthermore Maracle's frustration caused a nervous breakdown, resulting in her hospitalization in a psychiatric ward for about a week. And in spite of many promises to her mother, she never improved. Delinquency had so completely gripped her. Notwithstanding the real causes which were probably due to disturbed family conditions and instability at home and their repercussion, her mother kicked her out of the home.

In May 1966, just before I turned sixteen, mom kicked me out of the house.. I had become just too much for her to handle. I wouldn't help out at home, didn't answer when she spoke to me, played hooky from school a lot and was always running around. It was really getting bad for her , so she kicked me out . (51)

In chapter 'With California Farm workers' , Maracle narrates the experience of blatant racism she experienced in Mexico during her four months stay at Visalia with her sister and her husband Arturo and then with Lorenzo, Arturo's brother in Visalia, a small town in California. There she worked as a farm worker in the vineyard to pick vine and helped carry those loads into crates. She came to know very late that these people thought her to be Mexican.. the whites treated the Mexicans with contempt and when the whites came to their domain they too got the same treatment. This Mexican experience, however, made her recognize that the Indians were doubly inferior.

An important aspect of evolution of the political self of Maracle, in fact, was initiated here in Visalia. It was Lorenzo who introduced her to politics though she was least interested. Maracle felt Lorenzo didn't have a small town mentality. Instead of just thinking about what was happening in Visalia, he would think about the reasons as to why such things happen in the world. Lorenzo was utopian and I was something of a cynic. He would talk about the a perfect society and the place to live and I'd just say: "One thing you have to learn is that you really have to go all out for something you want really bad" (64-65)

Lee Maracle here reminds of an important sense of the tough terrain of struggle toward political consciousness which all oppressed people undertake. It tells the narrative of an indigenous woman who finds her strength despite the forces that challenge and oppress her.

While living in Visalia for about four months , she got a letter from home saying her mother needed to be operated. And with whatsoever money she had saved while working in the farm, she left for Vancouver. The narrative of the chapter "Problems At Home" describes how Maracle returned home to find the whole house and the inmates in a disheveled condition. One of her two sisters had been raped, her brother Rogers' unemployment had made him frustrated and her mother had broken his ankle. Under such circumstances instead of helping them Maracle decided to leave the house once again as she could not take the restrictions imposed by the family life.

Though she got a job at A & W drive-in restaurant and rented a little room, she could not stick to the job for long because of the racial prejudice .Thereafter at her mother's insistence, Miracle had left Vancouver for Toronto to bring back her brother Ed from there as he had joined a band of Hippie and was influenced by drugs. Miracle herself just couldn't help herself but by pushing herself a little 'with drugs, listening to Bob Dylan music and that stuff' (76). There in Toronto, Maracle started living with Doug, a fine guitarist and singer.

Doug initiated her into politics and peace demonstrations organized by 'Trotskyists' and later to an anti-war march. And in an endeavor to achieve native solidarity against the racist and to save natives from getting degraded, Maracle decided to become politically active.

The narrative of the chapter 'a Real Bad Trip' recounts her Toronto trip when drug had completed her process of dehumanization. In May 1968 her brother Ed came to take her back to Vancouver, but in an inebriate condition Maracle refused to go back as she suffered from an overdose. When Karl Lecours, a friend of Doug and Maracle was soaked in blood she could not react and was petrified. Later she even stopped caring for Doug, who always insisted that she work so that she could come out of emotional stupor. But she did not desire a life of work or home for she sought for a meaningful existence which would give her fulfillment.

Maracle intended to describe the view point that European colonialism penetrated deep into the societies of the Aborigines which generated superficial contacts with the natives which led to their economic imbalances which were necessary for the European capitalism and industry. Fanon in his translated work "Black Skin White Mask" authenticates "colonized people as not simply those whose labour has been appropriated but those in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality"(10).

In the chapter 'Involved with life', Maracle describes her journey to Vancouver and Porterville. Upon returning home in Vancouver she finds herself in a pretty rough shape. To soothe her torn, ruptured and mangled self her mother sends her to Toni's (sister's) place, Porterville. There she started getting involved with life again working in their orange grooves amidst natural, rural surroundings which gave her a sense of fulfillment. Finding herself in a state of perfect contentment and peace she started reading the slave narratives of Black Americans especially Malcolm X.

The chapter 'Red power' refers to her meeting with the members of NARP (native alliance for Red power) by her sister Joan. She met Howard Adams a member of NARP. There she got acquainted with Henry Mack, Gerri and Gordie Andrew all members of NARP. Together they published news letters against the white atrocities. In many ways Bobbi Lee can be seen 'as juvenilia' a work produced by the author in her youth. The tone of Bobbi Lee resounds with self-hatred, self-loathing and abuse which become the touchstones for establishing textual identity in the narrative that of an inclusion of sexuality, gender, race and class. Bobby Lee's epilogue confesses 'I thought I hated white people when in fact, I did not love my own.(229-30)

#### THE EPILOGUE

The Epilogue of Bobbi Lee: An Indian rebel is worth a study attention as it is a reflection of the construction of self in the text. Scott in 'Spaces like Stairs' reviews the epilogue as "the sign posts of a certain period (11). Bobby Lee's epilogue, with a similar self-examining, self-critiquing reflective gaze, seeks to "fill in the missing pieces that came alive through the long process of unraveling that begun in 1975"(201).

There is a sense of confidence and optimism as the epilogue ends when Maracle asserts her stance that, "success is my ability to move people to another way of thinking, another way of being"(Kelly,76)

Maracle's social and cultural background traces the writer's feminine concerns which helps us examine how she became personally and politically aware and emerged not only as a woman but as a true native woman. Nevertheless it is a hopeful text that suggests possibilities for envisioning a world that does not continually suppress indigenous people.

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