

**Plural Subordination of Race, Gender and Colonialism: Reading Sexual
Violence in Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree***

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Abstract

This paper on Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's novel *In Search of April Raintree* attempts to understand indigenous women's experience of sexual violence and discrimination. Through a close reading of the novel the paper contends that the sexual assault that April Raintree undergoes is not only a personal tragedy of a woman but one that is a deliberate act enabled by intersections of various oppressive forces like racism, colonialism and gender-based power hierarchies. These intersections not only determine the nature in which April is raped but also how her body is perceived as 'rapeable' because of her identity and marginalised location in the social and power hegemony. Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality is applied to illustrate how April's rape is emblematic of broader overlapping systems of forces that devalue an indigenous woman's sexual and human rights.

Keywords: colonisation, race, indigenous, rape, sexual assault, intersectionality

Introduction:

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, at three became a ward of the Children's Aid Society in Winnipeg. Thereafter, growing up in several foster homes she has borne the weight of estrangement from families, violence, racism and sexism. Her first novel *In Search of April Raintree* greatly inspired by her own life continues to represent the experiences of endurance and survival of systemic oppression in colonial Canada.

Women across cultures, age groups and economic backgrounds are vulnerable to sexual assault and different risk factors can be associated with this vulnerability. That being said, Mosionier highlights that the stakes are high if one is young and female and by all odds much higher if one happens to be from the minority section or the margin of the society. Crenshaw in her seminal essay "Mapping the Margins" argues "the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (1242). The fundamental contention is that multiple social identities like race, gender, class etc. interlock to form a system of oppression simultaneously for women of colour and thus, no particular or isolated framework can be used to truly and fully understand their experience (Crenshaw). Using intersectionality as a lens, this paper attempts to approach sexual abuse in Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* to understand how different forms of oppression like racism, sexism and power work in tandem against April Raintree. April, a Métis¹ is raped by three brutes and Mosionier lays out the brutal rape scene dispassionately leaving little to imagination. The rape of April provides ample rooms for interpretation, and ghettoizing April's rape only as an ethnic or racial discrimination would be to assuage rape of all its heinousness, for its impact is all the same – traumatizing and dehumanizing for anybody who suffers it. Nevertheless, the case of abuse of a Métis woman is not an isolated incident and it is worth examining how it is influenced by multiple factors of social syndrome which have their roots in the historical experiences of the Métis community.

Racialised Language and Human Objectification:

Racism is a pervasive experience in the lives of indigenous Canadians which has been perpetrated through policies and institutions that affected and controlled every aspect of their life including colonial domination, land reserves, displacement, introduction of Residential school and Child Welfare systems etc. Lee Maracle remarks "for us racism is not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives. The pain, the effect, the shame

are tangible, measurable and murderous” (4). Since early childhood, on account of being a Métis or halfbreed, April has suffered all kinds of racial indignity and violation of her basic human rights. Howard Adams writes:

As soon as native children enter school they are surrounded with white-supremacist ideas and stories – every image glorifies white success. Because they are unable to resist it, they become conditioned to accept inferiority as a natural way of life. They soon recognize that all positions of authority – such as teacher, priest, judge, Indian agent – are held by the whites. These people make all the rules and decisions that determine the fate of Métis and Indian people ... but natives are powerless to do anything about them. Consequently, the children internalize inferior images as a part of their true selves, often with strong feelings of shame. This partly explains why many native people attempt to hide from their Indianness, while others try to pretend they are white, French, or Italian. (Adams 9)

April encounters the darkest moment of her life when she is raped in a car. At first when April is attacked by the men it starts out like she is targeted because of her gender but when she resists and fights back, the motivation for the abuse seems to take on a different form. The rapist says, ““So, you’re a real fighting squaw, huh? That’s good ‘cause I like my fucking rough”” and this spurs him to become more aggressive because he finds his game more fun (Mosionier 128). The use of the word “squaw” implies a complete denial of a woman’s humanity because according to Lee Maracle ““squaws” do not even qualify as women” (54). April is forced into a racial identity of a squaw which Margery Fee decodes as “a figure created to justify sexual and racial abuse” (Margery Fee 220).

Even while the men attack her, April thinks to herself how they came to know she is part-Indian. Aftermath the rape, reflecting on the atrocity that was inflicted upon her, she says, “I began wondering for the hundredth time why they had kept on calling me squaw. Was it obvious? ... Except for my long black hair, I really didn’t think I could be mistaken as a native person” (Mosionier 146). Despite being the victim here, April’s thoughts seem to suggest as if sexual abuse was prescribed for a native woman. As one who has always prided in her fair skin and disassociated herself from anything native, she connects her rape to the men’s language that indicated her identity, almost suggesting that rape was meant for native/indigenous women. Being someone who could easily pass off as a white woman, April finds it more befuddling that the rapists seemed very sure of her racial identity and this

knowledge seemed to justify their brutal act towards her. Their speech and behaviour towards her indicated their entitlement to hurt and degrade her as a human subject. Lee Maracle opines that “rape has nothing to do with lust. It is all about hate” and for the native women “rape is not an oddity but a commonplace” (55).

The language used by the rapists is coated with the choicest obscenities. It is hard not to miss the intersection of racial slurs and sexism in their verbal abuses. The rapist calls her multiple gender-related indignities and over and above that, specific race-related obscenities like “squaw,” “Indian,” and “savage” are used (Mosionier 128 – 130). These words are race specific and they serve no other purpose other than to inflict racial insult. Racial insults are always intentional acts to outrage and cause harm to the target’s core self-image. They function in two ways - by categorizing a person enhancing negative stereotypes and assumptions and further depriving him or her, their rightful respect as a person. Exploring the psychological, sociological and political impacts of racial slurs, an observation that emerges is that “Verbal tags provide a convenient means of categorization so that individuals may be treated as members of a class and assumed to share all the negative attitudes imputed to the class” (Richard Delgado 135). The verbal attacks on April seem to stem from the colonial-patriarchal mentality that has for so long in colonial history viewed indigenous women as freely available for the white man to take. In this sense, an indigenous woman suffers the double bind of gender and race. April being a Métis, her rape then, takes on political overtones.

The drive to possess and control is seen in the rapist because he is a product of systematic racism that thrived on stereotyping. The rapist who is white thinks she is a racial minority and thereby, without moral scruples and that is reason enough to have sex with her even against her will; “... we’re going to have to teach this little Indian some manners. I’m trying to make her feel good and she pulls away. The ungrateful bitch” (Mosionier 129). This language of the rapist referring to April “this little Indian” indicates his position as a white supremacist and how this attitude seems to give him the social and cultural license to “make her feel good” and disgustingly expects gratitude in return (129). He also tells her, “... I know you want it, so quit pretending to fight it” underscores his misogynist attitude coupled with cultural assumptions about indigenous women as hypersexual beings (129). This reflects a game of mastery and of submission between the rapist and the victim based on the denigrating stereotyping that indigenous women are always receptive to sexual advances. April’s resistance is misinterpreted as playing hard to get. Negative stereotyping and

objectification of women is an extension of socio-cultural prejudices and when internalized, it produces dominant images of sexuality that define and influence sexual malpractices.

April's resistance is perceived as a threat to male dominance and masculinity. When the rapist senses this threat, this provokes him even more, inflating his power to further the sexual violation using a variety of abuse strategies. He becomes more vicious and hits her and puts the onus of the crime on her, "Why you fucking little savage. You're asking for it" (130). The stark imbalance of power dynamics at play surfaces here. The rapist starts off as in the manner of offering his service to make April feel good but when he is rejected and resisted, his masculinity feels threatened and so April must be punished. The whole sexual encounter becomes a deal in which April must pay heavily for being non-compliant with the male sexual demands. In the middle of an act which April describes as "pure agony" her rapist yells, "Hey, she likes this, boys. These squaws really dig this kind of action (130, 131). The sadistic triumph of the rapist here shows that rape is not only a masculine and sexual conquest for him but also a racial and political conquest. The act of gang rape is accompanied by verbal abuses and the hellish torture culminates with the rapist urinating into April's mouth. Completely battered and retching violently, she is thrown out of the car and the rapists speed away in the car shouting into the air "Fucking squaw" (132).

By not sanitizing the language or the violence, Mosionier is pointing to not only the rape of April as an individual but also to the relationship between the indigenous and the whites especially when it concerns a crime. It also makes one ponder whether the intensity of the crime and the question of one being more rapable than others is exclusively determined by one's racial identity which itself is constructed on a set of stereotypes² about indigenous people. Lee Maracle in *I Am Woman* recounts a similar experience of Rusty who was raped repeatedly by white people where "Each one was the same as the one before and the ones that came later. It was like a re-run with the same actors playing the same parts over and over again" (50). Rusty also suffered rape in the shackles of her white father:

I heard him warn me not to bite. When it was over, he was laughing and I was vomiting. I swore to my grandmothers before me and my grandchildren after me that no white man would ever have my love. I swore to make myself the finest Native woman possible and withhold my affection from the people that reduced me to the sub-human. (Maracle 49)

Long after the rape is over, the racial slurs and insults haunt April. The physical assault is over but the psychological assault continues. The rapists not only hijack her bodily autonomy but also their language is dehumanizing and reductive. It is a language laced with misogyny, entitlement, racism and upholds sexual objectification and male conquest.

Sexual Violence - An Extended Metaphor for Colonialism

While abuse of women is not confined to the indigenous women alone, a woman's location to a specific social and cultural hegemony plays a vital role in making her a potential victim to sexual predators. Peter Cumming in his essay "The Only Dirty Book": The Rape of April Raintree" sums up the atrocious rape as "multiple and prolonged ... raped vaginally, anally, orally;" (313). April's rape is a crime of opportunity and her rapists who have internalized socio-cultural attitudes that promote power and sexual dominance capitalize on her multiple disadvantages. Rape and colonisation go hand in hand in damaging the body and the soul. Sarah Deer draws parallels between a rapist and a colonizer and argues that both use the same tactics of "deceit, manipulation, humiliation, and physical force" (26). Both colonialism and rape involve violation of cultural and bodily boundaries where the perpetrator's dominance over the subject – land/body is meant only for appropriation and exploitation. Sexual violence is intertwined with colonial exploits and history is witness that from the very beginning Eurocentric patriarchs deemed it their right to violate the native land and by extension the women too who inhabited it. Emma La Rocque has rightly observed that indigenous women are among the "most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified of women" (122). This observation helps explain how colonialism has contributed to fostering attitudes that devalue indigenous women's dignity and humanity. Consequently, such dehumanization allows violence and crime against them to remain invisible or inadequately addressed. Thus, the rape of April can be read not just as an isolated case of brutality but as symptomatic of the deeper workings of colonial structures.

A colonial structure creates hierarchies within itself and especially in the context of the Métis and the indigenous communities of Canada, several agents within this hierarchy practise violation. This perspective sheds light on the larger experience of the marginalised communities in the residential school system and the notorious 'Sixties Scoop' from 1950s through the 80s. The forceful removal of children from families, foster care and residential school system resulted in cultural genocide through forced assimilation, disruption of the indigenous family unit and profound mental trauma. By misinterpreting the indigenous

family structure, child upbringing and using neglect and poverty as excuses, colonial policies through the Children's Aid societies, the social workers, foster families and the white society at large reveal a systematic structural and institutional violation of indigenous people's consent and wellbeing. This provided a sure and secure ground for victimization by institutions and different agents of colonial power which Mosionier powerfully depicts through the experiences of April and Cheryl.

This imposed state of alienation became an environment conducive for sexual abuse for the Métis and the indigenous children. Thus, sexual abuse and oppression are inseparable and indistinguishable from the structures of colonial power. The novel shows how violation that begins in a political, cultural level permeates even into the most intimate spaces of personal life – the political violation of April and Cheryl's removal from their family, domestic abuse and humiliation by the DeRosiers, their foster family, April's failed marriage with Rob, a white man, Cheryl's descent into alcoholism, prostitution and suicide and finally the sexual violation of April. Deer posits, "Rape embodies the worst traits of colonization in its attack on the body, disrespect for physical boundaries, and disregard humanity" (112). Deer's idea of rape as an extended metaphor for colonialism can be thus, validated because the ramifications of rape are that it violates the victim's "autonomy" over her body and also "disrupts the sense of ownership over her actions and decision" (Sorral and Poltera, 18).

This argument is further extended by considering that the rape of April also suggests social and individual factors that work in tandem to cause and perpetuate sexual abuse. In the court it is revealed that the sexual violation of April occurred due to the instigation of Sylvia Gurnan who was insulted and hit by Cheryl. This evinces the establishment of another hierarchy within the male dominated social structure. By virtue of being a white woman, Sylvia considers herself to be out of Cheryl's league and there can be nothing common between them especially a man as she would not share her man with anyone "Especially no squaw" (Mosionier 202). Sylvia is aware that the society is hierarchically structured based on race, class and gender and although she herself figures at the bottom of this hegemony, she exploits this disparity. She derives her value and sense of superiority by way of othering Cheryl as a Métis and prostitute of which she is neither. Sylvia while being a subordinate member of the society leverages her white status over a person of her own gender who is a Métis. By addressing Cheryl by a racial slur "squaw" she exhibits the white supremacist attitude and shares the power of colonialism with her male counterparts to denigrate, dominate and oppress a woman based on her colour (202). This shows that colonialism which

thrives on racism is not a male domain alone and that the white woman is also an agent that serves to bolster whiteness as an agent of power to control and subjugate the other. This prompts one to rethink women's connection to violence and complicates common assumption about gender and victimhood in a colonial structure that legitimizes devaluation of certain lives.

Attitude – origin of violence:

Traditionally violence is perceived as acts of harm, force, violation and suffering but Amanda Cawston in “What is Violence” suggests that to define violence one need not necessarily only focus on the adverse effects of an action or how worse off the other party is. She offers an alternative definition of violence and says “it is more useful to think of violence as an *attitude*” (Cawston 224). To consider violence as an attitude the focus has to be reversed from the effects of an act to the “actor” (224). Although actions are the most obvious signs of violence, Cawston claims that an egoistic attitude can be expressed in indirect as well as many different means. An egoistic orientation is more than anything else a moral failure in recognizing the full humanity of the other person and privileging oneself over the other in every which way. Seeing egoism as the foundational attitude from which flows all kinds of violence enables to reframe and broaden the definition of violence. Thus, it brings under moral scrutiny acts which may pass off as non-violent. This attitude-based violence framework captures both direct personal and structural, institutional violence as manifestation of egoism that operate through diverse mechanisms.

Applying the attitude-based violence framework to the case of April's experiences reveals that not only her outrageous rape but every form of indignity and suffering inflicted either by individuals or the society at large on her and her sister is rooted in an egoistic attitude. Further reframing violence as attitude-based makes one of the most apparently inculpable persons, Sylvia Gurnan, as the most direct agent of April's gang rape. A traditional view of violence would make Sylvia blameless and put the onus of the crime solely on the rapists but it can be argued that she is the catalyst for the whole sexual assault that April suffers. The attitude-based framework highlights that violence need not always be loud nor obviously devastating. Its insidious nature can be embedded in minimalism. Sylvia instructs her brother to “scare” Cheryl (Mosionier 166). Her egoism is compressed in this single word “scare” through which she constructs a power relation between herself and Cheryl. Her egoistic attitude is expressed by presupposing that Cheryl can be scared and

taunted because the colonial hierarchy already renders Cheryl's body and her human rights as a Métis to be violable and unprotected. She wields this power over Cheryl even for a man like Mark Desoto who in Cheryl's words is a "Drug pusher, bootlegger, stealing, breaking and entering, pimping" (180-181). Interestingly the man in question here is not even white which underscores how deeply colonial egoism can be internalized.

The conflict between Sylvia and Cheryl arise not only because of Mark Desoto but also because they traverse different racial orbits which is fiercely guarded and endorsed by existing social structure. Her knowledge that Cheryl is also a prostitute coupled with her attitude jaundiced by racial prejudice drive her to consider Cheryl as someone worth violating and hurting. When the lens of examination is shifted from the act of rape, the victim and back to the rapists and then still further back to Sylvia, she does not seem to be the direct, personal, physical violator of April. However, despite her physical distance from the crime, the idea of the attack originated from her. Her conception of the idea to "scare" is translated into violence and executed through the rapists (166). This makes her complicit in the rape and culpable because she enables a gender-based and racialised violence. This further emphasises that moral responsibility and act cannot be separated from each other. That Sylvia merely spoke a word and it carried the full moral gravity of an outrageous assault it set in motion powerfully demonstrates what a traditional definition of violence as action-based fails to reveal.

Cawston's idea of violence as an attitude further enables to understand the intensity of the sexual assault on April. It can be argued that the perpetrators' perceptions of the victim based on her race or ethnicity shaped their attitude towards the victim which influenced their act. Pervasive socio-cultural beliefs and stereotypes surrounding the Métis affected the way the rapist interpreted and processed the information on Cheryl (that she is a Métis and prostitute) thus, granting them a self-entitlement to sexual liberty without her consent. This also explains why the rapists used the denigrating and racially abusive language and the leader's dehumanizing act of urinating into April's mouth after raping her. Cheryl's racial identity and her personal circumstance which invited social stigma predisposed the rapists to the criminal act increasing the likelihood of rape and projecting her as someone who is more sexually violable than another in the colonial hierarchy. Their attitude had already conceived violence even before they laid their eyes on the victim and this is why they never realised they had the wrong person while all the time they assaulted April. Their violence was aimed not so much at an individual/woman per se but at a particular racial category, a sex worker

and this is a direct expression of their egoism. Hence, April suffers the gang rape having being mistaken as Cheryl but any other individual in the same category could have become the rapists' target. The rape happens in an isolated place at night but also their vision is blinded by a fusion of racism, sexism, physical aggression and hostility. The incident happening in the cover of the dark is metaphorical of their attitudinal darkness from which the seed of violence originated.

Conclusion:

April's rape exposes the multiple layers of disadvantages that converge to create the experience of an indigenous woman. Her subordination is plural and the fact that she is not male, white and elite cements her subordination. When multiple variables like race, sex, gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality intersect, it results in simultaneity of oppression. Crenshaw identifies this convergence of multiple oppressions as distinct and irreducible to a single axis frame which is why April and Cheryl's experience as Métis women cannot be studied as just racial, gender or the colonized but all at the same time. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality also sheds light on the legal invisibility and lack of protection for indigenous and other minority women.

Due to the existence of this structural invisibility observed by Crenshaw, Sarah Deer rightly proposes indigenous feminism as a tool to evaluate the sexual assault of a woman from minority categories. In *The Beginning and End of Rape*, Deer remarks, "Like intersectional feminism, indigenous feminism considers gender and race - but also the role of colonization in the lives of Native women" (167). This perspective on sexual violence deconstructs it going far beyond gender and sex issues and unpacks the racial, political, class and power variables at play which are embedded in the sexual abuse. At the core of all these variables is colonial egoism which is the source of all forms of violence. The need for indigenous feminism is further emphasised by Joyce Green arguing that it fosters "critical political consciousness and solidarity" to fight for justice on the issues of "colonialism, racism and sexism" (16). She calls indigenous feminism "a powerful emancipatory tool for decolonization work" underscoring that this framework exposes the simultaneous operations of colonialism and patriarchy in the lives of indigenous women (15). Gender justice and indigenous empowerment cannot be divorced from decolonization. From the light of these arguments, it becomes possible to recognise that violation of an indigenous woman is multiple and simultaneous and that no single lens is sufficient to capture the full architecture

upon which their violation is built. The position of marginality in the colonial hierarchy must not normalize the devaluation of indigenous women's sexual and human rights.

Notes

1. Howard Adams explains "Métis" as "a light-coloured Indian. In Canadian history, "halfbreed" refers specifically to the group of people who are part Indian and part white. These halfbreed people did not have a choice as to whether they would be Indians or whites or in-between; society defined them as members of the native society and it still does today. Halfbreed was the original name used by white traders in the early fur-trading years, but today this word has become unacceptable to mainstream society. To white, halfbreed became a vulgar expression, so they adopted the name 'Métis' – the French expression for mixed blood – which seems to be a more polite term ... Society segregates and isolates Métis as rigidly as it does Reserve Indians and, like them, most halfbreeds see themselves as separate from the white mainstream world. There is no independent halfbreed society separate from the Indian nation: the Métis are part of the total native world. " (Adams, ix-x)
2. The white people believe that the native people are "lazy, diseased, and evil people incapable of doing anything for themselves, a breeding-ground for violence" and that "natives have no culture, no ethics, no sensibility to morality, and no appreciation of law and order." (Adams, 40)

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