ABSTRACT

This thesis titled "Contemporary Native Canadian Novels: A study of Changing Response" attempts an ethno-critical study of contemporary Native novels of Canada, with added emphasis on the oral tradition of song and chant from which the Native writers draw most of their themes. It also makes an in-depth analysis of major problems discussed in these texts. It reflects upon the growing prominence of the Canadian Native writers and suggests that the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are no longer on the margins and theirs is very much a vital part of the mainstream Canadian literature. In this thesis I tried to direct the readers to the rich oral traditions of the native people from which the writers draw their story and themes.

The Native authors under study include Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Lee Maracle, Jeannette Armstrong, Ruby Slipperjack, Thomas King, and Joan Crate and Jordan Wheeler. The first novels published by all these authors are taken as primary texts for this dissertation. Contemporary Native novels include Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973), Beatrice Culleton’s *In search of April Raintnee* (1983), Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1985), Lee Maracle’s *Sundogs* (1990), Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun* (1987), Thomas King’s *Medicine River* (1989), Joan Crate’s *Breathing Water* (1989), and Jordan Wheeler’s *Brothers in Arms* (1989). We can see that there is a linear chronological arrangement of all these works in the dissertation, which would hint at the development of the Native novel as a genre from its origin to maturity. However, I couldn’t include any novel written by any Inuit author because I had no opportunity to get any text. I have referred to the interviews, articles and letters of these Native writers and several book reviews, newspaper clippings and critical articles published in various journals and periodicals as my secondary sources.
Chapter One introduces the Native novels and discusses their major themes, prefaced by a short history of Canadian Native literature. By this phrase "Native literature", I mean the literature of the first Nations people in Canada.

Chapter Two deals with the first two autobiographical fictional narratives produced by two Metis women authors namely Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton. Though there is a gap of ten years between the two texts, publication, we can hardly see any improvement in the condition of Canadian Native peoples. Both focus on the Metis people's social conditions, challenges and problems, and their identity issue due to their hybrid nature. They are also called the "Mixed blood" or "Half-breed" people in Canada. Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is about Maria's struggle as a Metis woman and Beatrice Culleton's *In search of April Raintnee* narrates about two Metis sisters who are separated from their alcoholic parents and forcibly put in foster homes and residential schools by the white government officials for total assimilation. Major problems faced by Native people and discussed in the above texts include alcoholism and drug abuse, child abuse, and violence against women, poverty, disease, suicide and death.

Chapter Three discusses the next two novels - Armstrong's *Slash* and Maracle's *Sundogs*. They highlight the Native life on the reservations and off the reservations too. *Slash* is a narrative about the American Indian movement during the 1960's and 70's and *Sundogs* is about the Oka crisis in 1990. Both these works stress upon the government's decisions against the Native peoples to oppress and colonize them. They critique the policies made by the federal government and the provincial governments of Canada to exploit the Aboriginal people politically, culturally, and economically. On the contrary, they also focus on the Native traditions and values that are very much essential for their survival, self-determination and cultural sovereignty.

Chapter Four examines Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun* and Thomas King's *Medicine River*. The chief narrators of both these texts, the Owl and Will the photographer are typically Native characters that are completely rooted in the Native traditions. Will struggles to survive in the modern dominant society, but fails and returns to his community and "home" on the reservation. The Owl has
complex experiences in life as she grows up in her community. These individuals finally succeed in their struggle for survival only due to their total faith in Native way.

Chapter Five analyses Joan Crate's *Breathing Water* and Jordan Wheeler's *Brothers in Arms*, a collection of three novellas. In these texts, the narrators struggle to survive and fit in into the dominant society. The western value system corrupts their life and they gradually distance themselves from their own traditions, customs and values. They have to perform rituals and ceremonies for their "Cleansing" (spiritual). They not only fall back on Native oral traditions but also regain self-determination and reconstruct changing images breaking down imagined stereotypes about them.

Conclusion summarizes major themes and changing responses to them as discussed in the Native novels. It highlights the promises and the possibilities of Native peoples in Canada as Native novelists have dealt with in recent novels. The dissertation makes an attempt to show how the Native writers are very much firmly rooted in their Native heritage and also are disturbed by the complexities of the present day world. Here I attempt to show how the Native characters come to grips with being a Native in harmony with his/her identity in two worlds—both Native and White. Often their initiation and cultural immersion follows the same steps, leading from tribal identity to separation, to alienation, to conflict and finally to a return to their own community. And in some cases, leaving home and community estranges them and draws them further and further away from mental balance, thus frustrating the hopes of a return. In portraying these Native characters, the writers have succeeded in overcoming the persistent stereotypes of the earlier centuries created by the non-Native writers. They have gone beyond the "social misfit" and "cultural conflicts" of the present in their works. They have also achieved a mastery of western techniques and literary forms and have maintained their unique Native voices and visions. Finally, the thesis contains a comprehensive select bibliography on Canadian Native novels for further research in future.