Chapter Two

A HOMELESS WORLD: MARIA CAMPBELL’S HALFBREED AND BEATRICE CULLETON’S IN SEARCH OF APRIL RAINTREE
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A Homeless World

Maria Campbell publishes her first autobiographical account in 1973 under the title *Halfbreed* which is considered by many literary critics as an autobiography in the western classification of literature. Many have considered it as a fictional autobiography or an autobiographical novel. Some have even regarded it as a socio-historical document. This book is written in episodic manner like a novel having no chronological or linear development of the story. She dedicates this narrative in 24 chapters to the children of her grandmother Cheechum. In the Introduction, she states: “I want to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in Canada, about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and dreams I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: This is what it was like, this is what it is still like” (2).

Maria is a 33 year old young Métis woman when she writes this story about her life and her Métis people. She was born as a Native in the Spring River area of northern Saskatchewan and from an early childhood, she faces a lot of challenge in life. She describes her people as the “Road Allowance” people living on welfare donations. She loses her mother early in life and finds her father in prison. In order to provide her siblings with a secure and better living condition, she marries with a white man at her 15. The man who informs the police about her siblings being accommodated in his house betrays her. The Children’s Aid people to be put in foster homes separate the small children from her. She cannot avail a happy life in the mainstream society marrying a white person. On the contrary, she finds herself being trapped in the slum of Vancouver. She ends up being a drug-addict and a prostitute on the street. She is on the verge of ending her life in suicide. But she survives by chance and reaffirms her position in the Canadian society as a community healer and social activist. She remembers her grandmother and her words inspire her always in happiness and in sorrows. Her words give her self-confidence and determination to move ahead and dream of a bright future.
Rudy Wiebe, a major Canadian author who has written the famous novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*, says in the review of Maria's text "Here speaks a voice never heard before with such direct frankness, such humour: the voice of the true Canadian woman" (Cover-page) In her interview with Doris Hillis, she gives the detailed background of her writing her early autobiography She is working as an executive and a paid employee in a native organization that used to receive government grants for several developmental projects in native communities on the reserves Being an elected member of the Band, she isn’t in favor of accepting government grants. In order to make her people independent and self-reliant, she wants to educate them about liberty, sovereignty, and dignity. She states “You know, when you grow up on a trap-line, you know that you can’t get bullets into the moose if you don’t go out and hunt him” (Hillis, 1988, 44) She, being very vocal, loses her job as a result of her protest against the President and other officials. Maria being a single mother of four small children to few! is jobless and without any earning. She has to work as a waitress on tables in a restaurant for $2.50 an hour.

Maria then meets with a Quaker lady from Edmonton named Peggy who becomes her intimate friend during this bad time. She states “If things get so bad, and you have got nobody to talk to, write yourself a letter” (Hillis, 1988, 45) She goes to the restaurant dressed up and sits there for a long time having no work to do. She is reminded of her friend’s words and she brings out her note-pad to start writing the so-called letter. Her writing continues for days and nights till the letter becomes a very long one of about 2000 pages. She thinks initially of writing about her own past, childhood, adulthood, marriage and separation, etc. The first half of the letter becomes very “ugly” as she hated everybody and had bitterness in life.

Maria gets a job as a janitor. She does a little bit of freelance writing for radio and newspaper in Alberta. She can speak Cree fluently and correctly. So she is selected as a local reporter to collect news items from the reserves and Native communities. She even writes radio dramas and earns a good living. She becomes an addicted author and continues to write all kinds of things. As she says to Doris Hillis: “After all this negative
stuff came out, I felt there must have been something good in my life. It couldn’t have been all this terrible. So I stopped writing for a long time, and then started again. And that was when I started with myself growing up, and the different people I’d met along the way, really good people” (46).

One such good person that Maria comes in contact with is Jack McClelland who is interested with her manuscript and decides to publish it. She is very excited because she has never dreamt of being a writer in life. The way she used to live her life doesn’t make a person a writer too. Jack finds the book very important for the Native Canadians as well as for the whites who don’t have any idea about the minorities. Maria says: “I thought of *Halfbreed* as a tool in my work to try to educate people and to make it easier for other women who were still in those kinds of circumstances” (Hillis, 1988, 47). This autobiographical fiction functions as a medium of telling all what it was like to grow up Métis in underprivileged circumstances, in a racist and sexist Canadian society.

Maria remembers her roots always and realizes that her self-identity is very closely connected with her family, her people, her community, her language, religion, and culture. She is never separated from all these vital elements throughout her life as a community worker and Native artist. She has put on the badge of a mixed-blood and proudly uses the name “halfbreed” for herself knowing fully that this is a derogatory term in a racist country like Canada. She strongly believes in the cyclic nature of her life. To Doris Hillis, she says: “I believe everybody’s life is in cycles. In the first cycle of my life, it was the Métis—the mixed blood. That’s a race in itself. It’s a distinct culture. That was the one, for me, that was associated with grandmothers, grandfathers, parents and language. The second cycle was the Indian. When I was going to pieces, when technically I should have been dead from an overdose, it was the Indian part that saved me from going over the edge. The other part of my life—the writing part—I think it was only at that point that I started to see the part of me that was European. That was the part I had hated so long. But strangely, I never saw myself as part-white, I was always part-Scottish, part-French” (Hillis, 1988, 47).
Thus, she completes her search for identity and has a sense of her political and cultural history as a Métis person and as a Canadian citizen. She gets to hear all such different ancient voices that whisper in her ears always.

Cheechum, her great grandmother, has a great influence in her life and thinking. Her wisdom has always affected her action as a Native woman. She is a rebel with enormous strength and innate pride like her granny. She has strong faith in her words “ka tip aum” which means “we who own ourselves” (Hillis, 1988, 48). She elaborates that Native people are responsible for their destiny, for their disempowerment. They had choices and what they chose, that happened to them. Earlier her people were very independent and used to face challenges united. They had a rich oral tradition and a sacred culture. They should try to renew their spirit and revitalize their ancient culture.

Mana has been able to revitalize her spirit only listening to her grandmothers.

Maria is the chief narrator of the narrative, named after the author. She recounts some of the incidents and experiences of her early life. We see her revisiting her reserve after a gap of seventeen years. She finds the place changed like her. She recalls some of the joyful experiences of her childhood and adolescence spent in that community. While walking through the narrow dirty roads to the reserve, she gets frustrations and anger in heart. She can have no happiness and peace there any more. She remembers how her father was very much disappointed in her birth as a girl. He always wanted a boy and that is why he gives her training in rifle shooting and trap-fixing. She also learnt cooking, sewing, and knitting from her mother to be a grown woman. She remembers how her great grandmother Cheechum taught her to be a proud and dignified Native person in life. She learnt how to sing, play music, and dance in festivals as a small child.

Maria grows up reading English classics of Shakespeare, Dickens, Walter Scott, and Longfellow. She could get proper education in English because her mother was convent-educated. At her seven, she goes to a residential school for higher education not possible on the reserve. The then federal government had made such policies as opening up residential schools far away from the reservations to separate small Native children.
from parents in order to have total assimilation into the mainstream. Their languages and religions were banned in schools and communities. Maria experiences effects of racism even as a small school-going child. She narrates: "We weren't allowed to speak Cree, only French and English, and for disobeying this, I was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light, and locked in for hours" (47).

As a victim of poverty, Maria used to eat roasted gophers, bannock, and cold potatoes with salt and pepper. She feels ashamed and hates her parents for all such conditions. She gets a poor treatment in school as a Native kid. She hears her teacher saying that Native are the "blessed and the poor" (50). She has been punished for several times for her disobediences in class. She plans to run away and work and earn a lot of money in the nearby town called St. Michele. Maria becomes a responsible woman and assumes the role of a mother to her own brothers and sisters when her mother dies out of depression and disease. She does house cleaning jobs to support her siblings.

When the relief people arrive to take away her siblings, she decides to save them by marrying to a white man named Darrel from Vancouver. She marries at the age of 15 in October 1955. He expresses his unwillingness to provide her siblings any security of housing and food. Then she loses not only siblings but also her husband who betrays and deserts her. She has to start working in a Chinese restaurant as a waitress. She starts partying and drinking a lot with several men. Then Darrel reappears to take her back with him. She follows him to be pregnant and give birth to a child named Lisa.

Darrel again deserts Maria. A brothel owner called Lil who introduces to a wealthy and influential person rescues her. Ray provides her with a lovely apartment, beautiful clothes, and jewellery to have a happy and comfortable life. She is paid a high salary that makes possible to do a lot of saving. She then decides to stop working for Ray and leave for Calgary with her daughter who is under the care of a nun in a convent. But she doesn't succeed in her attempt to get a good job there. She again becomes a drug-addict and a victim of alcoholism. Then she gets a job of a cook in Alberta which she
accepts for some days. Meanwhile, her previous boss Ray is arrested and she is left with a briefcase full of notes to manage her expenses in future months.

Maria returns to Calgary in February 1960 at the age of 20. She cooks for Calgary workers on a ranch on the bank of the Bow River. She continues her previous hobbies of drinking and going to dances in the bars with workers. In the meantime, she gets pregnant due to her physical relation with one of the workers. She decides to go for an abortion but gives birth to her second daughter Laurie. She then lives with an Indian named Marion who is on welfare. He being an activist fighting for the rights of Native people helps her to recover from her traumatic condition. She starts working in a salon for $200 per month. She also seeks for the welfare fund to manage her children's expenses being a single mother. But her situation worsens as she continues to drink heavily and to use sleeping pills.

Maria leaves her job and searches for another. She again does the job of a waitress in a restaurant in the south town of Calgary. She states “My life became an endless circle of work, drink, and depression” (158). She is humiliated at the DIA office when she goes there to collect her cheques. She feels ashamed of her wretched life and burns internally with rage and hatred. Then she meets with David, a truck driver who is a bachelor of 28 and loves her. Having physical union with this man, she gives birth to her third child Robbie. Her sponsor Don and his wife Edith help her to come out of her bad situation. She then realizes that she has to attend AA meetings, which are essential for her survival and self-determination as a Native woman.

At the end of the story, we find that there is a happy reunion of Maria with her father, great grandmother Cheechum, and some of her own siblings who are grown-up persons. She is happy with her present companion David and has been mother to the fourth child Lee. She works in a research project and feels herself like a “messiah” (184). She participates in the Native movement in Alberta for constitutional rights and ownership over their lost lands. She takes oath to make this world a better place for her people to live in. She desires for solidarity of her people like her ancestors. Finally she
succeeds to become a community “healer” (184). In May 1966, her great grandmother dies and her funeral she can’t attend because she is busy in fulfilling her Cheechum’s goal. She has now found her brothers and sisters with her.

This personal narrative also documents the history of her people. An individual in a Native community always represents the community and is represented by the community too. The character is never the chief protagonist but the spokesman of the traditions and values of the community. There are multiple characters that are equally important in the development of the story like the narrator. Maria describes about all her family members in detail. She has chronologically outlined the history of her people from the beginning to the end. This presents the Native perspective and was not mentioned earlier in any history book written by the white historians.

Maria begins the narrative with a detailed history of her people from the 1860s. She speaks of the Saskatchewan communities “The Halfbreeds came here from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the prejudice and hate that comes with the opening of a new land” (3). The Canadian government acquired land for the Hudson Bay Company and for the expansion of white settlements. Louis Riel, the Métis freedom fighter, established a provisional parallel government at Fort Garry, Manitoba. He led the *Red River Rebellion* in 1869 to protect their sovereignty. He was declared as a traitor and he had to hide himself in the USA in 1870. The Métis people went to Saskatchewan to settle down at Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Louis, and St Laurent. They fashioned their own way of life in their traditional manner, “the order and discipline of the great Buffalo Hunts” (3). Gabriel Dumont was elected as their President supported by other eight councilors. They formulated their own principles to govern their life democratically and resisted the policies of the federal and provincial governments to assimilate and acculturate them.

The life of Half-breeds worsened when the settlement expanded with the arrival of more Europeans to the new land presumed to be unoccupied anybody legally. The railway tracks were constructed across the country. About her own people, Maria states “They were squatters with no title to the land they lived on. They wanted assurance from
Ottawa of their right to keep the land before the incoming white settlers encroached on them by using homestead laws" (4) Louis Riel who lives on exile returns to his home country to unite with Gabriel Dumont and fight against white legislation and injustices meted to their people. Indians who were not sanctioned rations and farming assistance under the government policies did not favor Macdonald's conservative government. They filed petitions against the Ottawa government to get legal protection of their basic rights.

When they failed to get legal justice, they planned out an armed rebellion against the colonial administrators. Riel seized Fort Carlton and again declared about forming his provisional government. He gave an ultimatum to the NWMP to leave the land otherwise he would go for an open battle. In fact, Gabriel Dumont led the war against the British army with the support of a few skilled and armed Natives. He won the Battle of Duck Lake against the NWMP led by Crozier. This is in fact the true beginning of the Red Rebellion in Saskatchewan. A committee is formed by the government to look into their grievances and as a recommendation of it, the government issues land scripts to a few Native people allowing them ownership of their lands. In order to suppress the movement, attempts were made to arrest all leaders.

Maria mentions about the historical incidents at the end of chapter one. She presents an outline of the defeat of Half-breeds at Batoche in 1884 as following.

"Louis Riel was hanged in November of 1885
Charge: high treason
Gabriel Dumont and a handful of men escaped to Montana;
Poundmaker and Big Bear surrendered, were charged with treason, and sentenced to jail for three years.
The other Halfbreeds escaped to the empty pockets of North Saskatchewan.
The total cost to the federal government to stop the Rebellion was $5,000,000" (6).
As a reader, any one would be worried about the incident and its relevance to the Canadian First Nations people.

Maria narrates about her people's life during the 1920s in the second chapter. We come to know about different names of her people, including Chartrand, Isbister, Campbell, Arcand, and Vandal. She depicts their pitiable conditions and mentions how it was difficult for them to break ten acres of land in three years to get the legal title of ownership. They couldn't cope with the changing situation and became totally frustrated and discouraged. They turn into landless people, drifting back to the road lines and crown lands unoccupied white settlers. These “Road Allowance people” lived in small cabins and barns on the roadsides. Maria states: “You sometimes see that generation today — the crippled, bent old grandfathers and grandmothers on town and city skid rows; you find them in the bush waiting to die, or baby-sitting grandchildren while the parents are drunk. And there are some who even after hundred years continue to struggle for equality and justice for their people. The road for them is never-ending and full of frustrations and heart-break” (8).

Maria sees that the Métis people who were once a proud and brave nation are now completely defeated and destroyed by the colonizers. She is hurt inside to see them in such a bad shape. Earlier they used to dance and laugh in merriment for their enjoyment. They were people of love and compassion, always caring for others and being ready to help in need. Now they have no aspirations in life and no bright future. They simply live to die one day.

Maria doesn't forget to write her family history also. She informs readers about her great grandfather, Grandpa Campbell who came to Canada with his brother from Edinburgh, Scotland in search of his fortune. Both married to native women and settled down in Prince Alberta, Saskatchewan. Her great grandfather actually married to a niece of the Métis leader Gabriel Dumont. He ran a Hudson’s Bay store and was deeply involved with the North West Rebellion in 1885 as a supporter of the white settlers. She also mentions about her great Grandma who built a cabin beside the lake near the Prince
Alberta National Park and lived there after her husband’s death. The RCMP was sent by the government to vacate the place for the park. She didn’t move from the land and threatened to shoot at the police. Maria heard a lot of Native stories from her as a child. She also writes about her grandparents and parents. She mentions about her people who were sent abroad to fight during the World Wars for the British monarchy. Many didn’t return and some brought with them white “war brides.” (22) The Métis of Canada are a combination of everything—hunters, trappers, and ak-ee-top farmers.” (24) Her people are mostly Roman Catholics who believe in all sorts of rituals and are very superstitious having faith in ghosts and spirits.

Maria knows about her people’s interest in politics. They use to campaign for local white leaders. They can be responsible for the downfall of a popular government if it doesn’t listen to their demands. They also take interest in all social issues including education, health, economy, and community development. Maria is enraged to know about the colonial government’s oppressive policies made for her people. They suffer because the majority, the dominant race, exploits them. Her granny Cheechum used to say “When the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return—Your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul. When they are sure that they have everything, they give you a blanket to cover your shame.” (159). Each Native person feels like a victim of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Being oppressed by the mainstream, they cover themselves in shame with the gift blanket received from whites. Alcoholism has affected their lives tremendously. They have become victims of drug-addiction and alcoholism out of shame and anguish. As Maria states: “The homes were the same—one-roomed log houses, ten to sixteen children, dogs and skinny horses. But something had changed. The gentle mothers of my childhood were drunkard now, and neglect was evident, everywhere, most of all on the faces of the children.” (173)

Cheechum who is living at the age of 104 listens from Maria about her community works to improve the condition of her people. She is still strong and powerful. She comments on Maria’s social work: “I am glad you believe that, and I hope...”
you will never forget it. Each of us has to find himself in his own way and no one can do it for us. If we try to do more we only take away the very thing that makes us a living soul. "The blanket only destroys, it doesn't give warmth." (175) Maria always meets with her family and old relatives in her community. She tries to contact her people and spend her time with them sharing their feelings and emotions. She feels herself empowered and through her social activism she can help others to heal and empower themselves. She finds a lot of changes taking place around her. Native youths are actively engaged in community works for the development of their people. Many Native organizations including the Métis Association of Alberta and the Indian Association unite their people to fight for their fundamental rights, right to live independently as human beings with self-respect and determination. They should feel proud of themselves being members of the First Nations in the multicultural country like Canada that honors every race, religion, and culture.

Maria as a Métis elder has found her brothers and sisters all over North America. She is not alone in her struggle for sovereignty. Her grandmother's prediction has been proved true due to her tireless labour and perseverance. She realizes finally that either she or her people "no longer need blanket to survive" (184). They need not cover themselves to hide their shame and depression. This personal narrative is realistic in presentation of her people's history. This book is an authentic historical document depicting the social, political, and cultural condition of Native peoples in Canada during the 1960s and '70s. The author describes the history of several communities as her first hand experiences.

Beatrice Culleton is highly critical of the projection of the Native mixed-bloods consistently developed from a framework of white western values and political constructs, reflecting the attitudes and values of the dominant society. The white mindset focuses on the so-called "deficiencies" or lack of white ways of the Natives, it always harps on the negative, emphasizing the division of the natives and the whites, and it supports and justifies the treatment of the natives on racial grounds. By highlighting the historical roots of racism, Beatrice Culleton also increases our understandings about the
complexities and challenges of living in an urban world without the protection of shared common values of a Native culture. In the process she also states the urgency of people with widely different cultural and ethnic backgrounds living together peacefully.

Through her narrative she explores the social policies pertaining to the education of Canadian Natives to assimilate them into the mainstream and the effects of such policies on Canadian Indian identity which resisted assimilation. Both the Métis sisters, April and Cheryl, were subjected to the oppressive nature of the educational experience in foster homes and the detrimental effects of the significant cultural clash between the white and the Native value system. Suicide in a way was the cruel inevitable consequences of the defiance to the oppressive nature of a rootless foster home system raised by a dominant white culture for forced acculturation and assimilation.

Beatrice Culleton's fictional narrative chillingly reminds us of the coercive assimilationist stand of the Canadian government evidenced in many official dispatches like this one from a minister in 1920: "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question and no Indian Department" (Miller, 1991, 207). There was also the problem of alcoholism which aggravated when the Natives severed from their natural home were without any culturally sanctioned way "to blow off steam" (Ross, 1992, 149) and when all traditional methods of spiritual healing were eradicated.

"My shortcoming, I guess, is that I am very lazy. I get involved with other things, and writing isn't a priority with me. I've never been an ambitious writer" (Culleton, 105).

This is what Beatrice Culleton Mosionier has said in her interview with German Professor Hartmut Lutz, which was recorded, at her home in Toronto on 10 October 1989. Earlier she has also confessed that she is "not a scholarly type of reader" (104). She is rather a lazy person who is not interested in Native politics or organizational works. She has not read many Native writers and their various writings. She has less contact with other Native writers and social activists. Mary Barton has quoted her stating, "I am
limited to what I can do. I make no long term plans. I lack ambition and do what I have to do pretty much on a day-to-day basis" (Barton, “Write the Wrong”, 14). She has published her works during her job at the Pemmican Publications as manager Marie Barton also quotes Culleton’s following statement: “For a long time I was reluctant to call myself a writer. If I hadn’t been published by Pemmican, which is a Métis publishing house, would I ever have been published? I still have doubts about that and no matter how many readers of my books reassure me, I still wonder” (Barton, “Write the Wrong”, 14). She didn’t begin writing until the age of thirty-one.

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier is one of the most famous Métis women writers in Canada. She has honestly stated that she never intended to be a writer, but two suicides in her own family and many more suicidal deaths in Native communities in Canada compelled her to do something about it. In her interview with Prof. Lutz, she states:

“I decided to write the book after the second suicide of a member of my family. I have two sisters and a brother. Both of my sisters committed suicide at different times, and I just decided that I was going to write a book after the second one. And what I would use in the book was what had affected our lives. And part of that was being raised in foster homes, because of the alcoholism of my parents” (Lutz, 97).

Beatrice Culleton’s second sister Kathy committed suicide in October 1980. Her other sister Vivian had also committed suicide earlier. She received a phone call about her sister’s death and went to Toronto to attend her sister’s funeral. On her journey to Toronto in the plane flight, she met with an editor who was working with McLean Hunter trade magazine and who suggested her to write and send him some short stories based on her experiences and feelings. She returned to her first husband’s place on a farm in Vita, Manitoba and thought of writing a short story. She bought a typewriter and paper in order to fulfill her dream. Her house caught fire and her family moved to a new house at Oakbank near Winnipeg. She could finish the story in the new home in March next year. She sent him a story that was “an Alfred Hitchcock type of story that had nothing to do
with native people” (Jenkinson, 47) The editor viewed that her story was “saleable” (Lutz, 105). This small incident inspired her to concentrate more on creative writing. Then she started working on her pioneering project— the novel April Raintree.

Beatrice Culleton had no idea of research to write the novel or collect the material for the work. She wrote the novel on her own knowledge and feelings. She wrote full time during the whole month of April 1981 to finish her first rough draft. Then she wrote two more rough drafts before submitting the manuscript to the Pemmican Press for publication. The book was originally planned to be “about alcoholism”, but it finally turned out to be about “search for identity” (Lutz, 99). She published the first novel under the title In Search of April Raintree in April 1983. Many Native people in Canada consider this novel as the sacred Bible. It has been reprinted three times and is always prescribed as a classic Native text in schools and universities in Canada, the USA, Germany, Australia and other countries. Many scholars have done research and produced theses on the text as a part of Canadian English literature.

This semi-autobiographical novel is partly based on her personal life and experiences as a Métis in Canada. Beatrice was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba on August 27, 1949. As the youngest of four children of her Métis parents, Louis and Mary Clara Mosionier, she becomes a ward of the Children’s Aid Society of Winnipeg at the age of three along with her brother and two sisters. She grows up in different foster homes in and around Winnipeg. Most of her childhood was spent away from her real family and her people, with the exception of several years when she lived with one of her older sisters in one foster home. She became seventeen and moved to Toronto leaving school.

Beatrice writes this novel in memory of her two sisters, namely Vivian and Kathy, who committed suicide. After the second suicide, she asks herself “Why are my family-members alcoholics? Why do we have so many problems?” (Lutz, 98). Her parents and brother were alcoholics. She grew up with a lot of foster kids who had problems in life. They couldn’t cope with life as adults. She writes this book with an aim to figure out why all that stuff happened to her family and also some answers to these problems. She was
not alcoholic at all though other Native and non-Native foster kids had the problem of drinking.

The title *In Search of April Raintree* comes to her mind when she starts writing the book. In an interview with Makeda Silvera, she says:

> “April, for me, was spring time, the beginning of new things, which was why I picked up April And Raintree I’d never heard of being used for a Métis or Indian person in Manitoba, so I picked it because I didn’t want to use anybody’s real name. And *in search of* gives you the idea of searching for identity” (Silvera, 313).

Marie Barton in her review of *In Search of April Raintree* states, “To accept a loved one’s death is an enormous feat. To come to terms with the understanding that the death was caused by society’s treatment of your people seems almost beyond imagination... Nevertheless Beatrice Culleton has done just that And in the process she has produced a work of art that throws light upon the condition that drove two of her sisters to suicide” (Barton, “Write the Wrong”, 14).

This book remains one of the most favorite Native novels in Canada along with Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* and Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*. As Prof Lutz writes

> “The book was a great success and remains one of the most favourite Native novels in Canada. It follows the lives of two Métis girls caught between assimilation into dominant white society and cultural self-determination as Métis” (Lutz, 97).

Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in her review of the novel states, “A powerful first-person narrative, this book tells a young Ojibway-Métis woman’s struggle to survive the bureaucracy of the Children’s Aid Society of Winnipeg and the rejection of the dominant society and to emerge with a positive self-image” (Tobias, RFR, 58). Actually the novel was initially written in the third person, but she changed to the first person in the third rough draft. She thought that the third person narrative would be “preachy” (Jemkinson, 48).
This first-person fictional narrative is about the life of two foster kids, April and Cheryl Raintree. It depicts their foster home experiences as Native children in Canada. April and Cheryl are torn from each other and from their own family. April feels like a helpless victim of the European bureaucracy that is blind, cruel, and uncaring. She has to control the things happening around her as a foster kid at the age of five. The narrative deals with several burning issues including poverty, alcoholism, women and children abuse, disease, death, and self identity. It reflects upon the Métis culture in Canada in particular and the Native people all over the North America in general. It highlights their life styles, oral traditions and Native cultural values. Canadian Native people are always described as savages, either noble or barbaric. They are treated as children to be properly looked after by the white parents. They are uncivilized savages and alcoholics. They gave their land receiving wine, bullets, blankets and other gifts as price in return. They were forced to live in poverty, sickness and humiliation. There are plenty of instances of alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, children and women abuse, and suicidal death in Native communities. The novel depicts all these social issues honestly and plainly. Some issues are critically discussed below.

The Native children become the wards of the Children’s Aid Society at an early age. They are forcibly taken away from their alcoholic and sick parents and kept in various foster homes. The CAS looks after them till they become adults and bears the expenses of their food, clothing and education. It arranges for their family visits at the office on Sundays and holidays. However, it deals with these small children very strictly and harshly. The CAS officials and the foster parents join hands together to put pressure on these children physically as well as psychologically. They don’t bother about these young minds, their needs and feelings, and behave with them very badly. At times, the foster parents force these children to do physical work at home and farm-houses to earn their living. In the narrative, Henry Raintree who is portrayed as the source of Métis culture and heritage is stricken with tuberculosis and is forced to relocate from the small northern community of Norway House to the urban setting of Winnipeg city. This move
along with his family changes their way of life as Native. They are largely dependents on welfare handouts and they turn to alcohol and drug out of poverty. In the novel, alcohol has been renamed as “medicine” which the Natives consume in parties and create noise and nuisance all over the place. April as a small child has witnessed such scenes at her flat. She finds her mother sleeping with a stranger after such a “medicine party”. Her mother becomes pregnant giving birth to a sick child named Anna in the hospital. Then the colonial administrators declare her ill and she can no more look after her children.

April is about six years old when her life with her own parents and real family comes to an end. One summer afternoon she returns home from her play in the park with her little sister Cheryl and is surprised to see some cars in front of her house. She finds four men and one woman talking to her parents. Then Mrs. Grey tells her: “We have to take you and Cheryl with us. Maybe if your Mommy and Daddy get well enough, you can come to live with them again” (April Raintree, 16). She doesn’t understand what the lady speaks to her and sincerely prays her mother not to let them take her away. She says, “Mommy, please don’t make us go. Please Mommy. We want to stay with you. Please don’t make us go. Oh, Mom, don’t!” (17). She fails to convince her parents and her mom hopelessly pleads her to leave with the CAS people. The Children’s Aid Society of Manitoba represents the colonial guardian of Native kids. The officials take control of their lives and put them in several foster homes separating them from their own parents.

April and Cheryl are being taken to an orphanage where “Mother Superior” takes charge of them. A nun undresses them, baths and cuts their long hair short. They are being fed some of the day’s leftovers. In the infirmary, they share a common bed for the last night. Nuns treat both sisters as animals. April undergoes a traumatic experience for the first time in her life and becomes a victim of “fear”. She recalls, “I feared being ridiculed in front of the other children, I feared getting the strap, I feared even a harsh word” (19). Her condition worsens due to separation from parents and she dreams about them. She dreams of her freedom and family reunion while being hospitalized due to high fever.
April and Cheryl are sent to two separate white foster homes. When April insists on her being with her little sister, Mrs. Semple discourages her and sends her to a school. April is taken to the first foster home, that of the Dions on September 9, 1955. She goes to a new school far away from her place, being very much scared as well as excited. She gradually settles down in the new environment, both at home and in school. She begins calling her foster parents “Papa” and “Mama” and receives her first communion as a Christian. She celebrates her eighth birthday with the foster family. Soon Mrs. Dion gets sick and goes to the hospital. She is then moved to a new foster home, the DeRosiers’ family.

Mrs. DeRosier is a great disappointment to her from the very beginning. She starts calling her a “Half-breed” which is an unacceptable identity for her. On her arrival, she is supplied with a daily timetable to follow and is asked to work for her living though the CAS usually takes care of the foster child’s expenses. She has to accept the reality without any complaint. She does all the household chores like Cinderella. She is being tested like a saint. Her situation worsens once Cheryl joins her there. She has to protect her little sister from the evil eyes of Mrs. DeRosier and her children. However, they are soon separated from each other.

Cheryl was earlier sent to the foster family of the MacAdams who were very nice and loving persons. Mrs. MacAdams, being a Métis herself, had given her many books on Indian tribes to read and to know about her heritage. She has written a number of letters to her sister mentioning about her foster parents and her experiences with them. As a fast learner, she learns how to read, print, paint, and count without even going to school. She is proud to be a Métis and worships their leaders like Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont.

After brief stay with April, she is shifted to the Steindall family. Despite her sincere requests, her elder sister is not allowed to stay with her in the new foster home. She is happy to be with her new foster parents who are also very good and cooperative. Cheryl is full of enthusiasm and courage. She is trained how to ride horse.
April has a terrible experience in the meantime. Mrs. Wartzman, her guidance counselor, calls her and gives a warning: "April, I have heard some disturbing things and I feel I should talk this over with you. I know that you're a foster girl and perhaps that's the reason. You feel a psychological need to be loved. Well, what I'm really trying to say is that you shouldn't be letting Raymond and Gilbert fondle you. From what I understand, you've also been trying to flirt with Mr. DeRosier" (79) She is very much humiliated and feels ashamed of herself hearing it. She is so helpless that she can't even prove her innocence because the authorities won't listen to her but her foster mother who has made this allegation against her. She could tell the truth neither to her teachers nor to her social worker. Mrs. DeRosier has even stopped her family visits with her sister on Sundays. She even tells lies about her living conditions to her new social worker, Mr. Wendell. April loses her temper and strongly reveals the truth during his supervision. Then she is freed from the torture and oppression of her terrible foster mother. She is taken to the Steindall family to have the summer-break with Cheryl. She keeps her emotions under control and doesn't reveal anything about her sufferings and misery to Cheryl.

April goes to a boarding school and completes her graduation. The CAS gives her an option of a summer job which she eagerly takes up. She makes herself free from the Children's Aid Society. While thanking to Mr. Wendell, she says: "I'd probably see him again but I would no longer be a foster child. I was free, free! FREE!" (96) She works as a waitress in Winnipeg and comes across with some Natives like her there. She continues her search for her lost parents with whom she has no contact at all. She remembers her parents always though they were alcoholics and responsible for her present state. She enters into a house on Saint Charles Street and finds it a horrible place with dirt and flies. Returning home, she washes herself of all the germs and says "If I hadn't been brought up in foster homes, I would most likely have been brought up with flies, with mice, and rats, and lice, and germs. I would have been brought up by alcoholic parents and what would I be like now? Would I have any ambitions?" (99). She feels that it is better to be a foster child than a child of the drunken parents.
Alcoholism is one of the predominant issues in Native communities. April finds her parents taking a lot of “medicine” after receiving the welfare cheques. As a consequence, they become sick and suffer from diseases like TB. They live in various run-down houses due to poverty and misery. After taking liquor, they behave differently. April remembers: “Mom, who was usually quiet and calm, would talk and laugh in a loud obnoxious way, and Dad, who already talked and laughed a lot, just got clumsier. The times they took the medicine the most were the times when many other grown-ups would come over and drink it with them.” (10) Then they would yell, fight, knock things over and bump into walls, terrifying the little kids. April also finds her Mom having an illicit affair with a stranger due to her drunkenness. She gets pregnant and gives birth to a sick baby in the hospital. Because they are unable to look after their children, the CAS takes over the responsibility and separates their children from them.

April draws a conclusion: “once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. And if one’s own children weren’t enough reason for one to recover, then there would be no reason at all” (123). The white kids for having alcoholic parents are taunting her. She knows that her people are a weak people and they are inclined to be alcoholics for no reason. Cheryl has got an answer to this problem of alcoholism. In her essay about her people, she addresses the whites and writes, “You say that we are drunkards, that we live for drinking. But drinking is a way of dying. Dying without enjoying life. You have given us many diseases... The worst disease, for which there is no immunity, is the disease of alcoholism. And you condemn us for being its easy victims. And those who do not condemn us weep for us and pity us” (169-170). Cheryl entirely blames alcohol for the destruction of her people. Without it, they would be a “fabulous” people. The author admits that her upbringing in a foster home is only due to her parent’s alcoholism. In her interview with Prof. Hartmut Lutz, she states “When I look back at my own life, at my parents. My parents were both alcoholics, but still, in spite of that, they are fantastic people” (100). Beatrice in her real life is not close either to her parents or to her first foster parents. She was separated from her parents at the age of three and she had
absolutely no sense of family. She states, “I think, at an early age, I rejected both of them, you know, I rejected the idea of family. But my parents are really -to me- very admirable in spite of their alcoholism” (Ibid. 100).

Cheryl searches for her old and sick father whom she finds in one of the dejected huts. She considers him “a gutter creature”. In her diary entry of June 1970, she writes, “Awkwardly he hugs me. I smell the foul stink of liquor on him. Hell, he probably sweats liquor out of his pores” (218) She feels ashamed and her heart is filled with hatred for her parents and people for the first time in life. Her dream of being a social worker and do something important for her people gets dismantled soon. She goes in the direction of the “native girl syndrome” and becomes a whore, a Native squaw, and an alcoholic. She finally commits suicide like her mother jumping off the Louis Bridge. In her room April finds an empty whisky bottle that mocks her. She breaks it into pieces out of hatred and screamingly says, “I hate you for what you’ve done to my sister! I hate you for what you’ve done to my parents! I hate you for what you’ve done to my people!” (214). Alcohol has destroyed her dreams and future and turned down the lives of her family and people.

Her drunkard father rapes Nancy, a Native friend of Cheryl, in her adolescence. He regularly beats up his wife. In order to support her family, Nancy has become a regular prostitute and taken to drinks. Cheryl also joins her when her father demands more money for his booze and her husband wants her to be a prostitute for better income. April is mistaken to be Cheryl and gang-raped. She also joins her sister in taking alcohol out of disgust. She finds her people on the roadways taking booze and living on welfare.

Racism is found to be practiced openly in the white-dominated mainstream societies everywhere. It was also seen in Canada that was first a French colony and then a British colony, mostly ruled by white European colonizers. The ethnic communities and the aboriginal peoples experience the colonial oppression and racial exploitation in the country that formally supports multiculturalism in principle.
The federal government of Canada imposed several policies on Aboriginal peoples to assimilate with the mainstream white Euro-Canadian society and forced them to give up their languages, religions, traditions and cultures. Prof. Lutz writes in the introduction on Culleton's novel: "It follows the lives of two Métis girls caught between assimilation into dominant white society and cultural self-definition as Métis" (97). Later on, the author also says, "I think the effect of growing up in urban Canada today, is that there is a lot of pressure on you to assimilate and forget totally what you are as a person, what your heritage is, and everything!" (97). April, being the eldest child of Henry and Alice Raintree, resembles her mother, who is part Irish and part Ojibway. She has a pale skin like whites and doesn't look like a Native or an Indian who have usually brown skins. She is reported to have been baptized as a Roman Catholic. She has learnt prayers in French and reads the Bible regularly. She considers herself to be a white, not a Métis. She thinks of herself, "I could pass for a pure white person. I could say I was part French and part Irish. If I had to, I could even change the spelling of my name Raintree looked like one of those Indian names but if I changed the spelling to Raintry, that could pass for Irish. And when I grew up, I wouldn't be poor, I'd be rich" (49).

April always wishes to live just like a real white person, when she gets freedom from being a foster child. However, she is very much confused about her little sister Cheryl who resembles her father. Cheryl has got a brown skin and easily passes herself as a Native or a Halfbreed. Cheryl writes to her letters and essays about "Buffalo Hunting", "Métis History" and "Louis Riel and the Red River Insurrection". She doesn't like to know about her people or their history. She despises of being one of the "savages" and says, "Knowing the other side, the Métis side, didn't make me feel any better. It just reinforced my belief that if I could assimilate myself into white society, I wouldn't have to live like this for the rest of my life" (85).

April goes to St. Bernadette's Academy to complete her grade twelve. She gives false identities of her parents and declares herself as an orphan in order to have the sympathy of others. Then she goes to Winnipeg to do the job of a waitress. She makes
friendship with others in the boarding where she stays. After finishing a secretarial course at the Red River Community College, she joins the law firm of Harbison & Associates. She always likes to be among whites. In school, she has a white friend named Jennifer. She helps her like a true friend and acts as her messenger often. She links April with her sister Cheryl through letters being received in her home address. She even saves her from humiliation giving her some of her own dresses to wear in school. April also loves a white boy called Peter of grade eleven for a while. In the law-firm, she dreams of her future life partner in a white lawyer namely Roger Maddison. Later on she accepts the love of Mr. Jerry McCallister, Cheryl’s professor, who extends his love and emotion towards her.

When April prepares herself for a “promising” future in the white world, she comes across a white guy named Bob Radcliff, her “prince charming”, who comes to her office in some work and falls in love with her at first sight. He invites her for lunch immediately. She thinks a lot about this guy as her would-be husband and they spend many evenings together. She finds him a gentle, good-natured and very considerate human being. Bob proposes her and they soon tie up in marriage bond in a civil ceremony there. April sees her sister at the airport before her departure with her husband. She conveys her desire and reveals her selfishness “I can’t accept being Métis...to me, being Métis means I’m one of the have-nots. And I want so much I’m selfish I know it, but that is the way I am. I want what white society can give me. Oh, Cheryl, I really believe that’s the only way for me to find happiness” (111).

April enters into the Radcliff’s Mansion as the daughter-in-law of Mrs. Radcliff, better known as the ‘Mother Radcliff’ who receives her politely and extends a gracious welcome. She, however, behaves like the ‘Mother Superior’ and April feels like landing in another foster home. Barbara, her mother-in-law, teaches her all the white ways: how to go on shopping excursions, how to go to hair salons on twice-a-week appointments, and how to attend social invitations, theatres, concerts, dinners and clubs. Initially she is both thrilled and nervous with this new and strange experience. As Cheryl states, April is
very much "prejudiced" and looks at things through "white man's eyes" Legally she becomes April Radcliff being accepted in the white society. She likes to be a white and loves the white ways of living.

However, April's attempt to assimilate into the mainstream is not totally achieved. Her happiness as Bob's wife in the white world does not last for long. She realizes her mistake of identifying herself with the whites only because of her fair skin. She realizes that she can't get rid of her brown-skinned sister, her Native people and culture. She takes a long time to accept her true identity and return to her people and community. She changes her attitude towards her people and ultimately realizes the bare truth.

Although the novel was initially about alcoholism, foster home experience, and racism, yet it came out as a book on quest for identity. April, in an interview with Prof. Hartmut Lutz, says: "As I wrote, it wasn't going to be about a search for identity. But while I was writing that's what I realized about myself. That I had to accept my identity, not to make everything right or things like that...it gives me, I think, a strong foundation" (Lutz 98).

As we know, both April and Cheryl are Half-breeds and both are foster children. But their viewpoints are entirely different from each other. Through their life-stories, the author presents an "alterNative perspective" of the history of Canada (Armstrong, 97). She is very much concerned with the real history of her Métis people in Canada, not the false representation that has been made in the history by the mainstream white Canadian society. She tries to reflect upon the stereotypes made by the government and whites about her people and how everyone accepts that fake image without verifying the truth. The novel addresses the various ways in which "white lies" about the Métis in particular and the Aboriginal in general have caused lots of cultural violence and destruction to Native communities at present.

The Métis are usually recognized as one of Canada's aboriginal peoples. Genetically they are described as the mixed-bloods with a mingling of the white and the
Indian blood. They are the epitome of Canadian history that has blended the traditions of Europe with the Aboriginal people of the continent called North America. They belong to both traditions and have a claim to both, but they are not recognized constitutionally as a part of the mainstream. Paul Wilson states. “There is a striking similarity of tone and theme between this book and Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, written more than a decade ago; a woman’s search for identity and her struggle to overcome degradation and exist in harmony with two vastly different worlds, both potentionally her own by birthright” (Wilson, 30).

The Native peoples of Canada are depicted as “gutter creatures” or savages in this novel. April feels ashamed of herself to be a Native due to her painful and struggling childhood on reservation. She has suffered due to the poverty of her parents, their drunkenness and disease. When Mrs. DeRosier addresses her as a half-breed, she gets a terrible shock and hates her parents. She is immediately unable to recognize and accept this new identity. She says, “I wasn’t a half-breed, just a foster child, that’s all. To me, half-breed was almost the same as Indian” (39) The children in her foster home use derogatory terms like “squaw”, “mixed-blood” or “half-breed” to taunt them. She never identifies herself as a Native in the school. She despises to hear anything negative about savage Indians and Half-breed people because she knows the truth and experiences the same in her day to day life. For her, “being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people. And giving your children to white people to look after. It meant having to take all the crap white people gave” (49).

Only once April refers to herself as a half-breed when she teases Maggie and proves herself more intelligent by scoring high in the school. She tells lies about her parents and gives them fake identities. She says, “It wasn’t until June that I came up with an outright lie, an excuse for being with the Children’s Aid. I told my friends that my parents died in a plane crash” (90). Thus, she makes many friends who become sympathetic to her orphanage and couldn’t know that she was part Indian. She always
desires to live like a 'rich white' and plans accordingly for her success. She considers Natives as a disgusting people, living for the booze only. They are sick and 'a lost cause'. She does not wish to be among them in future. She vows not to live like them and in their place. She even stops searching for her parents as they are liars, weaklings, and drunkards.

April's marriage with Bob fails because her mother-in-law doesn't want to be the grand-mother to her children, "a bunch of little half-breeds". Her desire to be a 'pure white' dismantles into pieces. She informs Roger Maddison about her divorce from Bob who is also involved with his earlier girl-friend even after marriage. Roger sympathizes with her and says: "Why would she say a thing like that? You're not an Indian, are you?" (156). She had to accept her real identity for the second time in life. She responds to Roger's question saying, "No. I'm... a Métis" (Ibid). She is back in Winnipeg. Some rapists mistake her to be her sister and they gang rape her to take revenge for Sylvia Gurnan, Cheryl's rival. Her white skin doesn't come to her rescue.

Roger finds that she is not proud to be a native at all. She is very much ashamed of being a half-breed. As she says, "It would be better to be a full-blooded Indian or full-blooded Caucasian. But being a half-breed, well, there's just nothing there" (156). Later on, she states that she feels only the shortcomings of both sides. She doesn't want to be a part of the drunken Indians seen on the main street.

Once she comes to know about an Indian Powwow and proposes to Cheryl to attend it. Both go to the powwow on Roseau River reservation. She finds people coming there in traditional costumes. She is very much impressed by the sight and sound of the program. She feels good and alive being exposed to such a nice ceremony in her life for the first time. There are "stirrings of pride, regret, and even an inner peace" inside her. She feels as if all of that is part of her own self and she is also a part of the whole thing. She gradually and slowly accepts her native identity. She visits the Native Friendship Centre in Winnipeg where Cheryl works for her people. There she meets with an old woman, White Thunderbird, who touches her hands. About her mystifying feeling, she
says, “It was a part of me I was part Indian” (175). Without speaking a word, the elderly woman could impart of her message with her eyes and April had a spiritual overwhelming experience.

April’s quest for and acceptance of identity becomes complete when she pays her virginity for her sister’s wrongdoings. She becomes a victim of racism and sexism existing in the Canadian society. While she fights and wins her case in court and when the criminals are given due penalty and punishment, her sister commits suicide to end her life. Out of shame and hatred, she realizes her own selfhood and the tragic death of her sister enables her to accept the true identity. She gets Cheryl’s letter and comes to know that her sister has left behind a boy named Henry after their father’s name. She brings her son from Nancy and makes herself a promise to strive for a better future for her child and her people. She acknowledges that she has to change the situation of her people instead of blaming them or expressing hatred and disgust for them.

Cheryl is a very strong woman and proud to be a Native. She is proud of her native identity and native heritage. She has luckily grown up in various foster homes, which are very supportive to her learning and growth. She has decided to be a social worker after her schooling and do something good for the betterment of her people who suffer from alcoholism, disease, and racism. She is an ardent supporter of her Métis leaders like Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont who are real great heroes and have sacrificed their lives for their nations. In an early letter to April, she writes, “Mrs MacAdams says we should be proud of our heritage. You know what that means? It means we’re part Indian and part white! I wish we were whole Indians” (45).

Cheryl is not ready to accept the white version of history of Canada and her people who are totally invisible in it. She rejects the historical details regarding her people outlined by her history teacher in the class. When her teacher describes how Indians scalped, tortured, and massacred brave white explorers and missionaries, she announces these as ‘a bunch of lies’. She says, “If this is history, how come so many Indian tribes were wiped out? How come they haven’t got their land anymore? How
come their food supplies were wiped out? Lies! Lies! Lies! Your history books don’t say how the white people destroyed the Indian way of life. That’s all you white people can do is teach a bunch of lies to cover your tracks” (57). She is being strapped but she doesn’t bother about the threats. She is very stubborn and defends herself without changing her mind or submitting to her teacher. As a result, her foster mother cuts down her hair and she loses her pride and glory, her beautiful black hair. Giving a threat of her separation from her sister ultimately controls her.

Cheryl is considered to be a troublemaker in the school and foster home. She accuses everybody for being against her. She finally goes in the direction of the “native girl syndrome” as detailed by her social worker Mrs. Semple. She proves to be a “skid-row”. She rewrites the Native history. She writes essays on her people and on Louis Riel, delivers a talk on “buffalo hunting”, and writes about her own life, her parents and her relatives in her diary. According to her, history should be “an unbiased representation of the facts” (84). She refers to the prescribed history book Canada: The New Nation that shows only the white side of Canada and wrongly depicts her people. She feels like presenting the Native side of history removing the stereotypes and falsehood.

Cheryl always dreams of “living like olden day Indians in the BC Rockies with her parents”. She thinks: “We’d live near a lake and we’d build our own log cabin with a big fire place. And we wouldn’t have electricity probably. We’d have lots and lots of books. We’d have dogs and horses and we’d make friends with the wild animals. We’d go fishing and hunting, grow our own garden and chop our wood for winter. And we wouldn’t meet people who were always trying to put us down. We’d be so happy” (90-91). Cheryl being very smart and intelligent gets a scholarship from the University of Winnipeg to complete her higher studies with Social Work as her subject. She visits the Winnipeg Native Friendship Center to serve her people. She makes a lot of friends there always tries to help others at the time of need.

When April decides to marry the white guy Bob, she dissuades her from doing so. She predicts that Bob’s family and friends may be prejudiced against the Native peoples.
She may not receive proper reception at her in-law’s place. She may give birth to babies who would look like Indians or halfbreeds and who would be treated as others in their own house by their own family. April should not invite to such troubles unnecessarily. On the other hand, she should marry a person of her own kind, either an Indian or a Métis.

Cheryl, while explaining the consequences of such unusual marriages, says, “I’ve always felt so out of place, living with white families, surrounded by whites. You really want that for your children. Oh, of course, you’re going to pass yourself off as white, aren’t you? You’re not going to tell anyone who and what you are, are you?” (110). She makes her best efforts to present the Native image correctly. She knows that April would be proud of her Métis identity one day. She goes to the Indian powwow and takes part in the dance, listens to Indian singers’ chants and tales. She enjoys every moment of her life spent with her fellow Natives. When April speaks her about the future plan of assimilating into the mainstream and living like a real white, she says, “the Indian blood runs through your veins, April. To deny that, you deny a basic part of yourself. You’ll never be satisfied until you can accept that fact” (167).

Cheryl has immense faith in her people who are definitely “fabulous” except for their alcoholism. She is very much aware of the problems faced by the Native peoples of Canada. She is also concerned about their future and their survival against such challenges like racism and sexism. She discusses about Native-white relationships, Native-Land relationship, and other issues like health, education, and culture. In one of her diary entries, she writes, “White Man, you say that we are a people without dignity. But when we are sick, weak, hungry, poor, when there is nothing for us but death, what we are to do? We can’t accept a life which has been imposed on us” (169). Cheryl easily mixes herself with the Native elders and April can observe how her sister has seen “the quiet beauty and the simple wisdom” of her people. Her search of her parents comes to an end in June 1970, when she meets with her father and their union takes place like a miracle. After seeing her old decrepit father who looks like “a gutter creature”, she gets
frustrated and disheartened. She breaks down saying, “All my dreams to rebuild the spirit of a once proud nation are destroyed in this instant” (217). She completely loses her self image and dignity as a proud Métis. She becomes a skid-row person and selling her body finances her husband and father. She drinks a lot and becomes pregnant also as a result of her relationship with Mark DeSoto. Her son Henry Liberty Raintree is looked after by her friend Nancy and her mother. She writes, “I’m an old pro now. I’m working the streets full time. I avoid the pigs by picking Johns that are obviously not pigs” (224).

Cheryl comes to the main street finally. She belongs to that place where her father and other gutter creatures stay. She is very much lonely and alienates herself from her sister and friends at work. She takes to drinking and follows her mother’s footsteps. She commits suicide jumping off the Louis Bridge and forces her sister to accept her true identity ultimately. She dies because her instinct to survive is lost. In her letter to April, she writes “April, there should be at least a little joy in living and when there is no joy, then we become the living dead. And I can’t live this living death any longer. To drink myself to sleep day in and day out. Be proud of what you are and what you and Henry Lee are. I belong with our mother” (227). The author deliberately portrays her character in such a way that readers would obviously sympathize with her due to her suffering and love her due to her virtues. In her interview with Prof. Lutz, she states, “And, I guess, another part of the story, the way I wrote April Raintree, was to make Cheryl more lovable than April. When she died, she could have attained a lot if she had gone all the way through with what she could do. Even if she became a social worker, she wouldn’t stop there, she could do a lot good for Native people. She has the brains and the possibility of doing it, of going through the whole thing. And, plus, she was very likeable when she wasn’t drunk, when she wasn’t drinking” (Lutz, 101).

On the suggestion made by the Native Education Branch of Manitoba, the author revised the novel and drops the long rape scene. In 1984 it was republished under the new title April Raintree to be used for young adult learners in schools. Joyce Carlson who prepares a Teacher’s guide to this novel writes the “Foreword” to this revised version.
She writes, "The theme of April Raintree, simply stated, is a young woman’s search for her identity. That the central character is a young Métis woman in a contemporary Canadian urban setting draws us into a much larger story—the story of the Métis" (vii). She adds, "A strong sense of self-identity is a prerequisite to self-determination" (vii). She gives a historical background of the Métis people who evolved a distinct culture, separate from, yet embracing values derived from their Aboriginal and European roots.

The Métis emerged as an important political force in the west in the mid-nineteenth century. For a variety of reasons, the Métis people were dispersed and their political and economic strength declined. Today, they continue to work towards re-establishing their unique place in Canadian society. They are aware of the importance of regaining their own self-determination. No doubt, they have many difficulties that obstruct in maintaining a positive self-identity. The author illustrates some of the problems such as poverty, alcoholism, drug-abuse, child and woman abuse, racism and the issue of identity.
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