

# Is Nativity Threatened by Drugs, Alcohol and Prostitution? A Retrospection of 'Native-Girl Syndrome' in Select Canadian Works

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## Abstract

Canada, the land of wilderness, has a history that is rich in culture, heritage, tradition, and spiritual practices. The indigenous people who have lived there for several centuries have been uprooted and alienated from their lands post colonisation. Outsmarted by technology and the 'civilization' of the colonisers, the once-majority of the indigenous people become minorities in their own country. Among the natives, indigenous women are subjected to all forms of violence and are left highly vulnerable at the hands of vicious colonisers. The native women have been forced to endure physical, mental, and sexual abuse, all of which goes against the values associated with them in a native community. The majority of the native women go through what is called the 'native girl syndrome' that draws attention to the aftermath of the above-mentioned malicious acts of subjecting them to drugs, alcohol, prostitution, and finally suicide. This concept is further illustrated by analysing three Canadian works of different genres – a novel named *In Search of April Raintree*, an autobiography named *Halfbreed*, and a play named *In Care*. The paper addresses how these literary works are representations of Native women who have endured all of these and more at the merciless hands of the colonisers, and questions whether the colonisers have succeeded in disrupting the nativity with their new interventions such as drugs and alcohol.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Women, Native-Girl Syndrome, Violence, Drugs, Alcohol and Sexual Abuse

## 1. Introduction

Canada, the land of wilderness, is a settler colony that once had been the home for thousands of First Nations and the Inuit who have taken pride in the land and its unlimited resources. The richness of their culture, traditions, and communal togetherness shared by the indigenous people are the precious treasures that are passed on through generations. Indigenous literature also shares a rich history in culture and heritage in addition to showcasing Native beliefs, ideologies, and sentiments. Although they come from different cultures, many native writers, including Tomson Highway, Armand Ruffo, Shirley Cheechoo, Drew Hayden Taylor, and Paula Gunn Allen, have chosen to use literature to demonstrate their close ties to their home countries and their determination to survive and pass on their cultures' legacy to younger generations. With a wave of settlers like the British and the French arriving in the rich and vulnerable lands, the peaceful and nomadic lives of the indigenous people are disturbed beyond repair and it would not be wrong to mention that the horrific acts of the settlers towards the Natives resonate even today. The central objective of the colonisers has been to eradicate the age-old traditions and practices and bring forth their European culture as the norm. This has resulted in a severe identity crisis, marginalization of the Natives in their own land, and psychological trauma.

## 2. Role of Indigenous Women in a Community – Before Colonisation

Among the native people who have suffered miserably at the hands of the colonisers, this paper highlights the violence and injustice against indigenous women. It is imperative to note that while native women have been treated as sexual tools post-European contact, they have been worshipped as life-givers and have possessed leadership roles in the communities prior to colonisation. The true strength and power of Aboriginal women as compared to European women are explained by Winona Stevenson in her article:

Where European women were fragile and weak, Aboriginal women were hard-working and strong; where European women were confined to affairs of the household, Aboriginal women were economically independent and actively involved in the public sphere; where European women were . . . dependent on men, Aboriginal women had considerable personal autonomy and independence—they controlled their own sexuality, had the right to divorce, and owned the products of their labour. (Stevenson, 1999, p. 55)

Aboriginal women are considered to be hard workers who never shun physical labour. As a part of the 2022 International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the value of the indigenous women in a community is glorified on the UN website through the following words:

Indigenous women have always been the backbone of indigenous peoples' communities and have played a crucial role in the conservation and transmission of ancestral traditional knowledge. They have always played a collective and community role as caretakers of natural resources and keepers of medicinal and scientific knowledge. Now, many indigenous women are also leading the defence of indigenous peoples' lands and territories and advocating for the collective rights of indigenous peoples around the world. ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/indigenous-women-heartbeat-keeps-ancestral-communities-alive\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/indigenous-women-heartbeat-keeps-ancestral-communities-alive_en))

As much as the indigenous women have been celebrated, they have been severely humiliated and dehumanised at the hands of the settlers. Their honourable position as 'life-givers' and 'carriers of culture' is threatened during colonisation with its primary objective of eradicating the indigenous culture.

### 3. Native Girl Syndrome – Predicament of Indigenous Women Post-Colonisation

One strategy of the settlers that directly targeted native women of Canada is the Scoop of the Sixties, a term created by Patrick Johnson in his book *Native Children and Child Welfare System* published in 1983. The Scoop of the Sixties refers to the phenomenon, beginning in the 1960s and going on until the 80s, that apprehended thousands of native children from their families and are often fostered out or adopted out, usually into white families. While this act of forcible removal of children has not been legislated by the Indian Act, it has emerged only because of it. The Act has given the settler government a free hand in controlling the indigenous people, thereby giving them to freedom to decide the fates of the indigenous children. This Act has made native women vulnerable and has made them easy targets for the colonisers. They have got a chance to dehumanise and destroy their nativity.

The settlers have worked hard at breaking the strong-willed spirit of the Indigenous women who have once been celebrated for their strength and tenure. Due to colonisation, they experience what is called the 'Native Girl Syndrome' which is associated with the aftermath of colonisation and its merciless strategies to assimilate native people into the European culture. The term 'Native Girl Syndrome' is well explained in Beatrice Culleton's novel *In Search of April Raintree* by Mrs. Semple, a social worker of the Children's Aid Society (CAS):

You girls are headed for the "native girl syndrome." It starts with fighting, then running away. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you and then feeling sorry for yourself. You'll soon start with alcohol and drugs. From there you'll graduate to shoplifting and prostitution. You'll live with men who will abuse you. You will end up like your parents, if you don't smarten up. (Mosionier, 1999, p.64)

The concept of 'Native-Girl Syndrome' has also been embodied in popular street culture by Lara Kramer, a Montreal-based choreographer and an artistic director. Her new creation, NGS (Native-Girl Syndrome) draws inspiration from the horrifying experiences of her grandmother, a First Nations woman forced to migrate from her native community into an urban setting. The raw and unsettling performance deals with the themes of "Self-destruction and addiction, cultural disorientation and alienation" (Scherders, 2014, p.9). While researching her grandmother's life, Kramer learns some disturbing facts about the plight of the indigenous women who have been forced to fight mental health issues and addiction:

There wasn't any work there, so her and her sisters wound up in Winnipeg living on the streets. She had a rough life. She dealt with addiction. She lost her children to the system . . . There is a long history of identity being stripped . . . There is a huge history here. There is not a simple solution . . . It is not a hopeful piece. It puts the audience in a position where they cannot look away. It creates a sense of awareness and empathy . . . It is the aftermath of genocide. (Scherders, 2014, p.9)

Aboriginal women have had a long and painful history of racism and discrimination leaving them extremely vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The sexist attitude and policies working against Indigenous women have displaced thousands of Native women, thereby damaging their ties to their land, community, and subsequently their children and grandchildren. Emma LaRocque, a Metis woman and a Professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, has addressed the ways in which Indigenous women have been stereotyped at the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry:

The portrayal of the squaw is one of the most degraded, most despised and most dehumanized anywhere in the world. The 'squaw' is the female counterpart to the Indian male 'savage' and as such she has no human face; she is lustful, immoral, unfeeling and dirty. Such grotesque dehumanization has rendered all Native women and girls vulnerable to gross physical, psychological and sexual violence...I believe that there is a direct relationship between these horrible racist/sexist stereotypes and violence against Native women and girls. I believe, for example, that Helen Betty Osborne was murdered in 1972 by four young men from The Pas because these youths grew up with twisted notions of "Indian girls" as "squaws." (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry hearings, 1990)

Colonisation has mostly targeted indigenous women even from the beginning, stripping them of their Indian status, forcible removal of their children, breaking the matriarchal cycle that has been a part of their lineage for centuries, and so on. Not only are they forced to take up drugs and alcoholism but are also humiliated bodily as they endure men battering their bodies mercilessly. Bentham et al, in their paper, *The Truth As We Hear It From Indigenous Women*, discuss how native women are forced to take up prostitution for survival:

. . . prostitution exists because men believe that they have the inherent right to access the bodies of women and girls. Men's privilege, power, and entitlement to Indigenous women's bodies keep Indigenous women oppressed. People label Indigenous women as "survival" prostitutes. This is of no surprise to Indigenous women because no matter what Indigenous women do, they are always operating in a desperate state of survival mode. The brutal forces of poverty, racism, and inequality effectively

negate women's ability to freely consent to engage in prostitution. (Bentham et al, 2016, p. 241)

#### 4. Retrospection of Native-Girl Syndrome in Select Canadian Works

The works chosen for this research recount the story of three indigenous women suffering from the 'native-girl syndrome.' The characters chosen for this analysis are Cheryl Raintree from *In Search of April Raintree*, Maria Campbell from *Halfbreed*, and Janice Fisher from *In Care*. All of the above-mentioned characters are native women who are subjected to extreme poverty, and hopelessness leading them to take up drugs, alcohol, and prostitution.

*In Search of April Raintree* is a novel that deals with issues like racism, abuse and violence, social ostracism, and discrimination faced by the Raintree sisters. They get separated at a very young age due to their parents' alcoholic habits. April and Cheryl embark on a struggle to stay together despite the problems they face in their journey of life. They are brought up in different ways with different values, ideas, and morals. While April renounces her Indian heritage and tries to fit into the white society, Cheryl is proud of her ancestry and attempts to find the truth about her past and ends up killing herself. Even though Cheryl dies, there still is new hope for April and her people. And it is at the death of her sister that April identifies herself as a Métis and embraces her people as Cheryl once did.

Maria Campbell's first book, an autobiography titled *Halfbreed*, to this day, stands as an eye-opener in Canadian Aboriginal literature. The work covers nearly all the issues that has posed a threat to the Aborigines during the time - Residential schools, identity crisis, the plight of the native women, and so on. Maria's bitter experiences in poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, and prostitution have made her publicize her life and the injustices done to the Aboriginal people by the settlers. Maria's determination to identify herself as a 'halfbreed' has made her an activist and advocate for the Aboriginal rights of women. Maria completes her autobiography with the following words, "The years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me. Cheechum said, "You'll find yourself, and you'll find brothers and sisters." I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive" (Campbell, 1973, p.184).

The third work chosen for the research is Kenneth.T Williams' play titled *In Care*, which recounts the journey of a mother who fights against the corrupt social system to reclaim her stolen children. Janice Fisher's trauma begins when she is brutally raped at thirteen. It continues cruelly when she gets pregnant at fifteen, has her baby taken away from her, and is forced to take up drugs, alcohol, and prostitution during her early teenage years. Her life clearly echoes the hopeless situation of indigenous young women hit by the 'Native Girl Syndrome.'

##### 4.1 Cheryl Raintree

The first character taken up for the study is Cheryl Raintree, one of the protagonists of *In Search of April Raintree* by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier. Unlike April, the main protagonist of the novel, Cheryl has a happy childhood at her different foster homes except for her brief stay with the DeRosiers. Even then she too is not spared racial injustices. Her foster mother Mrs. MacAdams, being a Métis, has a lot of books on Indian tribes and Cheryl reads these books and acquires knowledge about native culture and history. But her public life is subject to taunts and nobody at school talks or plays with her. She tells her sister, "They call me names and things, or else they make like I'm not there at all" (Mosionier, 1999, p.43). She does not realize that she is facing racial persecution. The whites either abuse the natives or pretend as though they do not exist. A native is either an object of derision or he becomes invisible as he has no identity. She is certainly bemused, but her spirits are not dampened by it. Instead, she feeds on the information on the Métis culture and history she gets from the books and grows up to be proud of her Métis identity. Racial adversity makes her tough and ever more determined to proclaim that she is a Metis. She has high idealistic dreams and she wants to become a social worker to rebuild the native image, one that even April would be proud of. After she moves in with April, she is deeply hurt when she realizes that her first white boyfriend Garth is ashamed to be seen with her in the company of his white friends. Cheryl confides to her sister: "That goddamned hypocrite. He's ashamed of me" (Mosionier, 1999, p.94), unaware of the fact that even April, her own sister, resents her for her brown skin. She decides to keep a journal because she is sure she would encounter more such experiences and these journals become a repository of her private trials as a result of being a half-breed and identifying herself with other natives.

If the life of Cheryl is examined, she has not suffered any physical violence and abuse at her foster homes except at the hands of Mrs. DeRosier during her brief stay with April. Unlike April who adopted the tactics of observing, listening, adapting to whatever is required, or passively resisting. Cheryl has always been outspoken, fearless, and has a mind of her own. Even as a little girl, she engages in a debate with her history teacher about how the history books are a bunch of lies about the Indigenous people. Even the corporal punishment she experiences at the hands of the history teacher fails to deter her from her beliefs. However, she also does not realize that she is challenging the established system of the whites and she is no match for it. The worst abuse she suffers is after she is grown up. She goes out and finds out her family skeleton and what she discovers contradicts what she has always fantasized about. This sends her down a spiral of frustration leading her to alcohol addiction, a destructive relationship with Mark DeSoto, and prostitution. Under abject impoverished conditions, Mark forces her to trade her flesh in order to make some quick money.

Cheryl, before prostitution, is a genuine and pure soul who yearns for the love and support of her sister, April. The Cheryl that we see after she is revealed to the true life of a native woman is filled with nothing but alcohol and she feels empty, betrayed, and abandoned. She could not simply find the strength to face the realities of life anymore and thus decides to end her life. She fails to realize that the established system of the whites is destined to destroy her. Cheryl's character shows that even among the Indians, women were the more oppressed gender because she is pushed into prostitution by the man, she lives with believing they are in love. Cheryl's character can be comprehended through the following words:

She was so fearless...Cheryl never worried about what others thought about her. Only what she thought about them mattered. Cheryl was the stalk in the field of grain which never bent to the mighty winds of authority. At the same time, that stalk would bend to the gentle breezes of compassion. That was Cheryl. (Mosionier, 1999, p.111)

#### 4.2 Maria Campbell

The second character, Maria Campbell, is a Metis woman, who through her autobiography, gives voice to the oppressed while simultaneously recounting the first thirty-three years of her life on a personal level. As a halfbreed, she is forced to grow up between two conflicting worlds: the white and the native and is shunned by both worlds. The book reflects her rage and depression through her emphasis on "...what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country" (Campbell, 1973, p.2). The autobiography brings to light the existing problems regarding racial discrimination within the multicultural Canadian society. For example, when Maria and her family go to the town during summer, the townsfolk treat them in a very harsh way that hurts them. Maria writes:

The townspeople would stand on the sidewalks and hurl insults at us. Some would say, "Halfbreeds are in town, hide your valuables." If we walked into stores the white women and their children would leave and the shopkeepers' wives, sons and daughters would watch that we didn't steal anything. (Campbell, 1973, p.36)

This has been the treatment given to the M'áíis people though they believe in earning their bread in spite of their low economic status. Maria is twelve when her mother dies and the responsibilities of taking care of her family makes her quit school and marry a Caucasian at fifteen. This act is similar to that of April Raintree who shuns her identity and marries a white man. Communal connection and collective identity have been an integral part of the natives and colonisation has disrupted this connection making the natives become ashamed of their own identity.

Maria's desire to prevent her family from getting separated turns out to be unsuccessful because she finds her husband to be an alcoholic. Maria and her husband then move to Vancouver and she is later deserted by her husband. She ends up on the streets going through drugs, and prostitution and becomes yet another "gutter creature" (Mosionier, 1999, p.105). Her mental health is severely affected resulting in a mental breakdown. She also makes two futile attempts to commit suicide. Her futility in life unravels a determination in her to turn her life around and become an activist working with indigenous women who feel lost in their homeland.

Maria's great grandmother 'Cheechum' plays a vital role in her life because her words of hope and wisdom take Maria through the cruel adversities of her life. It is from Cheechum that Maria and her siblings inherit their native heritage, culture, and values. At one point when Maria loses hope that there would be any good thing happening to her people, Cheechum says,

...wait my girl. It will come. I've waited for ninety years and listened to many men. I have seen men quit and have felt as you do, but we have to keep waiting and as each man stands unafraid we have to believe he is the one and encourage him. You'll feel discouraged like this many times in your life but, like me, you'll wait. (Campbell, 1973, p.77)

However, the 'wait' seems to take longer than ever because as Maria points out, not much has changed for the halfbreeds over the years and the damage lasts forever.

When Maria goes to visit Cheechum after years of misery, she feels, "...I had come home again" (Campbell, 1973, p.174). The intensity of her love for Cheechum can be seen in her sense of belonging that arises when she meets her. She says, "We didn't have to talk – Cheechum understood my feelings" (Campbell, 1973, p.174). After years of sadness, Maria manages to accept what she is and with the help of her own people, she becomes an activist to aid other native women. For the sake of her people, she has publicized her entire life and thereby exposed her people's inexpressible situation. She is able to tell her story because of the position she has gained and because she is liberated from the clutches of racism. The autobiography has a happy ending but there still is no happiness for her people. At the end of the day, we have nothing but 'hope' for a change in the M'áíis people's livelihoods. Maria concludes her autobiography with the lines, "The years of searching, loneliness, and pain are over for me. . . You'll find yourself and you'll find brothers and sisters. I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive." (Campbell, 1973, p.184).

#### 4.3 Janice Fisher

The third character taken up for study is Janice Fisher, the protagonist of *In Care*, a play written by Kenneth. T Williams. Janice Fisher experiences the trauma of being pushed into prostitution, and drugs at the young age of thirteen, giving birth at fifteen, and immediately losing her baby, losing her three girls once again, and her struggle against the system. The subsequent investigations about the incident lead her to the truth about her first child, Dakota's death at the hands of Angel Carrie, a police officer. Janice's distressing history as a street worker at the age of thirteen, followed by early motherhood at fifteen, and her subsequent struggles with drug addiction during her teenage years are brought to light once more. Nevertheless, she successfully transforms her life and assumes a more proficient maternal role for her remaining three daughters, only to encounter an unjustified intervention by the authorities resulting in their removal.

The deplorable state of the Aboriginal women is looked down upon and taken advantage of by native officials like Holland, the executive director of Circle Fire Family Services, who have the power to make a difference but are filled with greed for money. Holland exemplifies a comprehensive framework that prioritizes self-preservation while disregarding the plight of indigenous women and children. The playwright uses Holland to accurately paint two sides of what the social services system stands for - the side that uses the harrowing plight of the native women to get more clients, thereby expanding the system, and the side where the system belittles the disturbing predicament of the natives:

Holland: "Aboriginal women are coping as best as they can with unbelievable trauma and pain. These injuries will not heal on their own. Not like bone. Not like skin. Your brain can't do that with psychological trauma...Just remember that these women, my clients at Circle Fire, are psychologically getting hit by a car. Every. Single. Day." (Williams, 2017, p. 40. 41)

Janice's life is a true representation of Native Girl Syndrome and the same has been the predicament of hundreds of indigenous women post-European contact. Her life takes on a more ambiguous tone toward the end because not only does she bounce back from prostitution and alcoholism to turn her life around but is also pushed into the same sort of agony all over again. The psychological trauma of this mother is as endless as her struggle to reunite with her children because the system, that promised the welfare of her community, only ends up breaking her fighting spirit:

JANICE: They won't even let me see them. I'm labelled "defiant", "Oppositional", "Unbalanced" because I got angry when they took my girls. Are you allowed to be angry? . . . Any questions, any actions show me to be unreasonable and incapable of caring for my own children. And I did nothing! I did nothing wrong. . . I did everything your agency and other agency told me to do to get my girls back. But it's not enough. It's never enough. (Williams, 2017, p. 48, 54)

## 5. Findings and Conclusion

Each of the three women chosen for this research triggers the empathetic bone in the human body through their lives that have been turned upside down by colonisation. One common element in these women is that they choose the path of prostitution, alcohol, and drugs for their survival and not by choice in the cruel world. The violence committed against them labels them as 'unfit', 'irresponsible', and 'unbalanced', resulting in the loss of their children, their family, and finally their fighting spirit.

Although the three characters face almost similar circumstances, each of their lives ends differently. Cheryl Raintree ends up losing her life trying to find herself. Maria Campbell is fortunate enough to resurge against all oppression and become an activist fighting for her people. Janice Fisher has a much ambiguous ending of whether she bounces back or falls off the wagon like the colonisers expect them to which leaves much to the imagination of the readers. In more ways than one, the characters are forced to compromise their identity, leave behind their values and nativity trying to fit in and alienate themselves in their own lands. Despite the colonisers' efforts to break the strong-willed spirit of the Aboriginal women, at which they have been partially successful like in Cheryl's case, their hard-earned position as 'life-givers' and 'careers of culture' is too powerful to be broken like in Maria's case. Although nativity is threatened to an extent due to new interventions that happened during colonisation, the bond between the natives and their land is not entirely destructible.

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