Significance of Sisterhood and Lesbianism in Fiction of Women of Color

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Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1983) and Beatrice Culleton’s *April Raintree* (1984) were published in consecutive years and contend with issues of race, class and gender as their heroines embark on quests for selfhood on the North American continent. Each of these quests is hampered by marginalization that severely limits the female protagonist’s access to economic emancipation and class elevation.

Despite the thematic commonality of the protagonists’ quests, the authors’ treatment of race, gender and class differs. The heroine of *The Color Purple* is black or African American while the heroines of *April Raintree* are of mixed Aboriginal-European descent and reside in Canada (Métis). The authors, Alice Walker and Beatrice Culleton, have the same ethnicities as their characters. Managing and transcending the differences between the women in the novels require understanding; by examining the similarities and dissimilarities of these novels, a dialogue of discussion in transformative politics emerges. As Indian feminist Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan writes in her book titled *Signposts—Gender Issues in Post Independence India*, “in the interest of a transformative politics, differences must be managed, if not transcended” (3).

Critic Linda Abbandonato, in her essay “A View From ‘Elsewhere’: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of Heroine’s Story in *The Color Purple,*” writes that *The Color Purple* is significant because the novel is an act of “conscious rewriting of canonical male texts” (1106). In the novel, Alice Walker foregrounds hitherto marginalized versions of black womanhood aspiring towards a sense of self in the American continent.
Similarly, the novel *April Raintree* is significant because it asserts the developing selfhood of Métis women. The novel was discussed by Sylvia Bowerbank and Dolores Nawagesic Wawia in their review essay “Literature and Criticism by Native and Métis Women in Canada.” They write about “a remarkable resurgence of the power and the culture of the First Nations in Canada” (565). Furthermore they impart canonical status to the novel by asserting that “since the publication of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1979) and Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, Native and Métis women have been leaders in this cultural resurgence” (566).

**April Raintree-A Brief Summary**

*April Raintree* is about two Métis sisters, April who has pale skin and Cheryl Raintree who is brown-skinned. Since the parents of these sisters are alcoholics, the child welfare system separates and places the girls in non-Métis foster homes. At the DeRosiers’s home, April is made to clean the family dishes and perform sundry tasks. Her only source of companionship is the family dog. Cheryl, on the other hand, grows up with the Steindalls who April describes as “nice enough” (66). Cheryl demonstrates potential in school and, unlike April, actively seeks authentic information about the Métis history.

As the girls grow older, April attempts to hide her Métis origins. She is embarrassed to be seen with natives (even her sister Cheryl). On the other hand, Cheryl seeks to assert her Métis identity. However, as Cheryl grows to be an adult, she finds herself unable to deal with April’s rejection of their heritage and the knowledge of her parent’s alcoholism. Cheryl is soon drawn into the cycle of prostitution and alcohol by her lover Mark who seeks to exploit her in his attempt to earn money. Near the end of the novel, Cheryl is so despondent about her life that she commits suicide. Cheryl’s story becomes a rendering of the relentless oppression that overwhelms the typical Métis women who as a result of the inferior treatment by society often succumb to the cycle of rape-prostitution-pregnancies-alcohol, etc. Meanwhile, April deals with a divorce from her white husband and is later raped when she is mistaken for Cheryl.

As the novel concludes, April enters into new relationships with a greater acceptance of her Métis heritage. April also discovers the existence of Cheryl’s son whom she decides to raise.

While showing April’s need for a greater acceptance of her Métis heritage, the novel explores the experience of Métis women. However, the novel concludes without positing a radical socio-