
Analyzing Oppression in Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*

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Society is characterized by huge diversity such as class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, culture and language. No doubt, the root of oppression is ingrained in this diversity especially people's reaction towards this diversity yet the dominant social group never accepts the fact that the various stages of authority and subjugation survive beneath their way of systematizing society, particularly the minority groups that are inseparable part of society. According to Oxford Dictionary oppression means, "Prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority or the state of being subject to oppressive treatment".

Oppression is one of the various types of injustices in the world. It harasses people on the basis of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender and social status. It means to make others less human, to dehumanize them and above all to keep them down in every possible way. The powerful people oppress less powerful people in brutal and inequitable ways. It gives rise to injustice in all walks of life for the oppressed class. It confines the subjugated group in such a way that it seems as if all roads are blocked for them. Paulo Frier in Pedagogy of the oppressed says, "Dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (ch-1). It is clear that oppression is not an outcome of one factor. Most importantly it has many faces as it operates on many levels like individual, institutional and cultural level.

Beatrice Culleton in her novel, "In Search of April Raintree" has brought forth all these forms of oppression. The story of the novel revolves around two sisters i.e. April Raintree and Cheryl Raintree and how they are oppressed in a multi-cultural country Canada. The novel starts when Raintree sisters are still kids. They are living with their parents in Winnipeg. Raintrees' mother Alice is victim of refusal by the Whites and she like Henry (father of April and Cheryl) accepts her community's inferiority. April says, "Mom didn't like going shopping. I guess it was because sometimes people were rude to her. When that happened, Mom would get a hurt look in her eyes and act apologetic" (13). The entire family was dealing with the negative impact of their poverty and their loss of culture. Their parents internalized racism to such an extent that they ultimately started drinking heavily to find some solace in life. But in this quest they neglected their daughters. So April being the elder one took the responsibility of Cheryl and she tried her best to make it sure that Cheryl has pleasant reminiscences. But she could not save herself and Cheryl from the racist behavior of society. Whenever they went out to play in the park they were made to realize their inferiority, "They called us names and bullied us" (16). From here comes the internalization of inferiority and adherence to White norms. For them White were pure, clean and superior. April herself says, "I used to envy them, especially the girls with blond hair and blue eyes. They seemed so clean and fresh and reminded me of one of the flowers I had seen ...to me I had imagined they were very rich and lived in big, beautiful... houses" (16). This acceptance and adherence in April's attitude can be seen throughout the novel. April internalizes racial inferiority while growing up and feels rejected by the White society. Cheryl does not feel so oppressed in her growing years but her suicide at the end highlights the agony of being discriminated.

Beatrice Culleton has successfully depicted the seclusion, despair, emotional turmoil and oppression faced by these kids. The Children's Aid Society visits Raintree family and makes them realize that they are not good enough to take care of their kids. The institutional oppression plays a vital role here. Rather than providing some

help to their parents to take care of their kids, the kids April and Cheryl are taken away from the family. When her daughters were taken away, Alice was made to feel ashamed of her inability to rear up her own kids in a proper manner. In the presence of superior Whites she feels intimidated to utter even a single word. She could not even request them to be nice with her daughter rather she advises April and Cheryl to be good enough to please the dominant class, "April, I want you and Cheryl to go with these people...you'll be alright. You be good girls, for me." After being uprooted from their families they are put into foster care homes where they are abused in every possible manner. They are ridiculed. April suffers more in these homes than Cheryl. She lives in constant fear of being abused either mentally or physically. Her foster family used physical punishment, abusive language and callous behavior to control her. She was even told to mend her ways of eating food just to make her realize her inferior position, "Don't gulp your food down like a little animal." (20). It was made sure by the authorities that April and Cheryl were not visiting each other frequently, they were not even allowed to see their parents. The dominant institutions ensured that these kids did not have any connection with their own families, culture and language. What an irony of situation! Later on when April and Cheryl were shifted from one foster care home to another they met some good people but even those could not help them to come out of the deep darkness of racial inferiority and oppression. Unfortunately the negative images were deeply ingrained in the psyche of Raintree sisters. Mrs. Sample, a member of Children's Aid Society demoralized them the most.

April Raintree clearly understood the gravity of the situation. She realized that if she wanted acceptance in White society, she would have to give up her entire family. When she got out of her foster home, she married a rich man. April even avoided her own sister Cheryl. However Cheryl got good foster parents who allowed her to retain her aboriginal identity and to feel good about her language, culture and people. Paulo Freire's views in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be used here to understand the stand which Cheryl has taken, "The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, and to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side." Cheryl wanted to help her people. She was very enthusiastic about her work and was proud of her aboriginal heritage. She continued helping other native girls who were facing the same trauma like them and handled things confidently. Cheryl had good memories of her family and the positive self-image enthused by her foster parents i.e. Steindalls. But to keep herself stabilized she used aggression. When Cheryl used violent behavior as a tool to assert her self-worth and the dignity of her race she was labelled as violent and wild not only by Whites but even by her own sister. But she felt dismayed when April rejected her and tried to cut off her relationship with her. She finally ended up in skid row; she was devastated by the oppressive racial attitude of April and others. The internalized oppression escorted her towards self-hatred and self-alienation. She became a victim of self-hatred, dejection, alcoholism, anger, penury, domestic violence, and took to prostitution. April was shocked to learn about Cheryl's being a prostitute. This hurt Cheryl the more because she could not explain to April the reason behind her working as a whore. In fact she did this to support her father and boyfriend Mark. As a result she became a mental wreck and committed suicide in order to put an end to her suffering.

To conclude, one can say that this novel brings forth the idea that people should create an oppression free society based on equality, humanity and brotherhood. The marginalized communities should change with the times because, "Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are, so that they can wisely build the future".

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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