

Adversities of the Canadian Aborigines in Lee Maracle's Writings

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Lee Maracle

Courtesy: <https://twitter.com/maraclelee>

Abstract

Lee Maracle is a native Canadian writer, whose work deals with distress, sufferings and dominances. She represents stories from her personal life and history. She expresses the opinion of the troubled native Canadian's subjugation in her works. The colonizer's administration horribly affected the Canadian native people in several ways. The native children, men and women confronted innumerable problems. They led a vulnerable life. Gradually it affected the mental and physical state of the native Canadian's. This terrible existence sustained for many years. Maracle as a personal target of colonialism brings out the unsuccessful life of the aboriginal people.

The trespassers thought their religion would enlighten the simple innocent native people. The harmless natives were considered as a social nuisance in their own land. Maracle calls upon the indigenous people to come to the forefront and talk. They should end up with invaders supremacy and drive out them from their land. Maracle asserts that the Canadian aboriginals should no longer be a passive listener and summons them to come to the main stream to give out their opinions.

Keywords: Lee Maracle, Canadian aborigines, Invader, subjugation, supremacy, suffering and drive out

Introduction

The word adversity means an experience which assesses one's tolerance and belief. Human suffering is worldwide which befalls in every human being. In particular, the unlucky, racial and spiritual minorities and women are generally observed as the ones to have undergone the greatest pain.

The present study focuses on the Canadian native woman writer Lee Maracle. Maracle was born in 1950 in North Vancouver to her Salish father and Metis mother. She is a creative essayist, poet, novelist and political analyst. She brings the life of native Canadians through her works. Her writings convey the centuries old tales and tradition for new generation and replicate her hatred towards sexism, racial discrimination and white cultural supremacy.

Maracle spent her childhood in a very poor neighborhood in North Vancouver. She dropped out of her school and felt alienated from her own culture as well as an outsider in foreign culture. Later she graduated from Simon Fraser University. She is an award-winning poet, a story teller and guardian of many charity works. She was one of the first aboriginal writers to be printed in the beginning of 1970s. She was honoured with many awards, and currently the Professor of English at the University of Toronto.

Advent of Trespassers

The arrival of European people marked a major revolution in the native's life. These blameless people were considered as a communal trouble in their own land. They were involuntarily got in cooperated in the English main stream society. Millions of aboriginal people died and were murdered at large. The native's spirituality was looked upon as worthless and superstitious. Native spiritual leaders were put in prison for practicing religious ceremonies.

The Canadian native Indians were always considered as slaves by the English people. They were exposed to all kinds of cruelty and unfairness which led to the heavy loss of native's tradition. The native people were looked upon as wild creatures. The invaders thought that it was their duty to civilize these simple innocent people.

The native Canadians who are in distraught condition get comfort through Maracle's work. She sets up of fictional and historic references which are fully understood only by a traditionalist who has a wide knowledge on several Coast Salish cultures. Through her writings she attempts to integrate European literary style and indigenous oral story telling methods.

Consequences of Subjugation

The most unpleasant thing the colonizers did was isolating the natives from their homeland. They were transported to unproductive regions reserved by the whites. Consequently, the Canadian aboriginals were starved to death. Darek Hunt in his article BIA's "Impact on Indian Education" says the method is like "Making apples" (4). It means altering the culture and faith of the natives to become that of whites. But paradoxically the skin of native Indians always remains red.

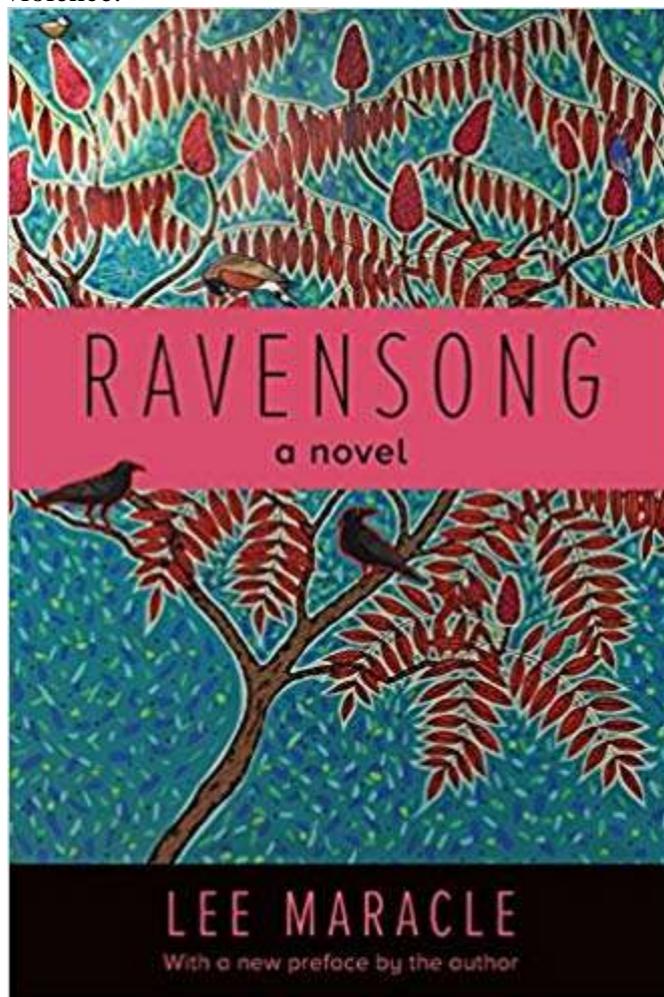
Integration destroyed the intellectual and emotional health of the First Nation people. Many young native Indians lost their jobs and committed suicide. Residential school children were ill-treated and physically abused. Native women were raped at large. Their men became drunkards and lazy. Aged people were not respected and thrown out of their houses.

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Native Indians and animals died of sickness. Nature got poisoned. Margret Atwood's *Survival* shares parallel theme of subjugation. Native people in *Survival* were denied doing farming and fishing and thereby ensuring that the reserves would be "denied entry into the main stream of the agricultural economy" (39). Europeans advance worsened the fertile land of the native people. The forest was logged, and many buffalos were burnt. There were terrific amounts of death, famine, unemployment, increase of diseases and violence.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Ravensong-Novel-Lee-Maracle/dp/0889615977/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_14_img_0?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=ZFAQX8M8APC1NVM80NVR

Native Population Diminished

Maracle in her novel *Ravensong* states many of her family members died due to unknown dreadful diseases. The native people lost their administrative powers. Maracle's great grandfather endured ban of native languages, their natural medicine and spiritual rituals. They belonged to the Wolf clan, who had a very specific role to play. Although they were considered to be backward and forward visionaries of people they lost power when the intruders landed on their soil.

Many native Canadians were brutally punished for questioning the new government. They led the life of aliens in their own land. Lee Maracle was too young when these radical changes took place. She experienced the racial discrimination at the age of five. In her autobiographical works *Bobbie Lee*:

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Indian Rebel, she says that the whites distorted their innocence and victimized them as slaves. “I also began wondering why most people- white people didn’t like Indians and treated us badly... we seemed to be caught in the same rut all the time...I was still far too young and inexperienced to understand the social class nature of our oppression” (32).

Moreover, Indian people were paid very little and their products were not sold in the market. People led a very miserable life. Maracle herself had to undertake many menial jobs when she was hardly in the eighth grade. In *I Am Woman*, Maracle says “...there was also a time when people were discouraged . . . from buying Indian fish. We were also outlawed from catching fish to eat” (3). In Maracle’s *Sojourners Truth and Short Stories*, almost all the characters suffer from poverty. They were oppressed physically and spiritually.

Maracle represents herself as a rebel who refuses to accept the inevitability of her family’s poverty. She complains it as a personal failure in her parent’s side. In her autobiographical works Maracle utters that she had a very poor childhood. Her father’s negligence and abuse of the family, her encounters with racism both at school and on jobs, her hanging out with prostitutes, alcohol and drug addiction are portrayed in her work *I Am Woman*. Maracle’s mother worked very hard to bring up her children. She recalls in her essay for Vancouver’s *Step Magazine* entitled *Good Bye Coloumbus* that her mother worked sixteen hours a day to feed her seven children.

Poverty among Aboriginal People

In the 1950s, there was scarcity of food among the natives. Many of them did not have anything to eat. Unemployment and poor quality of life made them have an excessive use of alcohol. Though, in general, Indians are known for their compassion and bounteousness, they became very aggressive after drinking liquor. Alcohol symbolised a wicked and ultimately unproductive loss of memory to many. This resulted in further dysfunction for the next generation under pressure to move forward without healthy role models.

As a result, suicide rates had turned to the highest level. Native people got separated from their traditional faith. They often felt displaced and found it hard to adjust with the city life. Maracle claims that the trespassers do not consider them as human beings. They viewed the natives as objects to be kept in museum and to be viewed by everyone.

Racial Discrimination as the Main Focus

In her short story *Uptown Indians, White Folks and Polka Partners*, Maracle brings out the complicated life of the native people. The central character Sis tells, “White people cannot deal with the beauty in some of us... difference among us and our silence, frightens them. They run around the world collecting as like artifacts” (93).

European’s advent had a radical effect on the indigenous people in all the fields. People were discriminated based on their colour. Racial discrimination felt by the native Canadians have become a common theme of Maracle’s stories. In her work *Bobbie Lee: Indian Rebel*, she says “For us racism is not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives” (4). For a long time, the Metis people were represented as breeds, half –breeds and by many other derogatory names.

Maracle herself became a personal victim to racial discrimination at her home and school. As her father is white he thought two of his children (Maracle and her brother) were not born to him. He always felt suspicious and ill-treated them. Slowly Maracle started to reject everything related to white culture.

Stacey in *Ravensong*

Maracle's protagonist Stacey in *Ravensong* experiences discrimination everywhere. She struggles to live in the white dominated world. She finds inequality in public places, hospitals, schools and even at home. She spends years of her youth in insults, alienation and strange look of her white counterparts. Admitted in white school, Stacey feels very awkward. She is the only native girl in her class. She experiences how her white school mates immediately spaced her out through the insults, the loneliness, the silence of others who preferred the pretence of her non-existence "and the decisive laughter" (*Ravensong* 26). The novel *Ravensong* also explores the sentiments of guiltiness and disgrace suffered by the natives.

Sundogs

The heroine of *Sundogs* too experiences similar situation in class. The teachers show different attitude to native children. The impartial attitudes of the white school teachers are depicted in her other works like *Will's Garden* and *Sojourner's Truth and Short Stories*.

Pathetic Condition of Residential School Children

The residential school children were suffered at the most. They were targeted to severe punishments. They never sympathized with the native pupils. Instead of educating these children, they made them to do all dirty jobs. They were never allowed to speak in their native language. They were not supposed to use the school toilets. Meager food of poor quality was given to them. They were not properly dressed. Children died of starving and cold. Electric shocks were given to children who disobeyed them.

The Europeans behaved like machines with no feelings. Small children were answerable to all the crimes. They were maligned and scoffed at. They called the small pupils with racist remark as hippies, young punks, comics and troublemakers. Maracle shares that she does not even have a single day with a good memory of school days. "Schools haven't left me with many fond memories. So it was fine to think of never going back" (*Bobbie Lee: Indian Rebel* 41).

The school authorities were heartless people who brutally slaughtered more than 40% of school children. St. Anne's Residential School in Fort Albany run by Roman Catholic diocese had not only been charged with hundreds of cases of corporeal and common cruelty but was also known for its use of a home-made electric chair with which electrocuted its students.

The English people adopted native children in their homes. But the foster parents did not consider them as the part of their family. They were exploited and undergone physical and psychological abuses. Those children grew up in identity crisis. Children who are either in residential schools or under the guidance of foster parents develop a type of mental disorder. Maracle brought out such characters' suffering from rational disparity due to heavy dejection.

Related situations are found in one of Maracles short stories, *Sojourner's Truth* where the central character Bertha undergoes a very pathetic situation. Bertha even at her old age is made to work and feed herself. She is made to forget her past days and could not cope up with the present situation. The miserable condition of the native cannery workers is depicted in this story. The native workers are demoralized physically and spiritually. They are forced to stay in small dungeon like rooms. The foreign officials are not worried about the condition of the native workers. No proper facilities are provided, and their requests are unheard of. Bertha, the oldest inmate is much vulnerable to those elements. Maracle calls it ". . . the colonized land and the impoverished people capitalism naturally creates" (*Sojourner's Truth* 18).

In addition to that the white's school education misdirected the history of the aboriginal people. The native people were portrayed as lazy and drunkard. They were mentioned as barbarians and uncivilized people. In her novel *Daughters are Forever*, Maracle states that native Canadians especially native mother's experienced institutionalized racism. The character Elsie was forced to give up her children and found herself comfort in alcohol. Not only Elsie, almost all native mother had horrible days during the foreign rule. The children were forcibly snatched and abducted and kept in residential schools. Native parents could not communicate with their children. They lost their child forever in the brutal clutches of the English people.

Deprived of Basic Rights

Like Stacey of *Ravensong*, Maria Campbell, the Canadian playwright's *Halfbreed* speaks about her great effort to survive in the white's domain. She struggles to come to terms with the past and to find a method of creating a good future in an environment of racial domination and hostility. "The white man saw that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Half-breeds, and he used it and still do today. Already they are using on you. They try to make you to hate your people" (51).

Native people were not allowed to deposit money in the bank. Government institutions doors were closed to native people. In *Will's Garden*, Wills' brother has a conversation with Jimmy where he says "... they don't let Indians money in a bank. ... We are children in the eyes of the law, Jimmy ... but not grown up enough in the eyes of your law to be men" (51).

The whites always suspected the natives. They had disgraceful look at native people when they go for shopping. They often ask the natives whether they have enough money to pay for the things they buy. The natives are made to feel embarrassed in front of others. It is not a negotiation they have to make. But it is allowance. In the chapter "Normal vs Natural" of *I Am Woman*, an innocent native woman comes across a similar situation in a shop, where she is insulted by a white lady for no reasons.

Besides Native people were denied work. They were given allowances which many natives disagreed to accept. Maracle hates concessions. Many thought of committing suicide, rather than begging concessions. English people thought the blacks do not have feelings. They should not weep or grumble. The dictators implemented stringent policies against the First Nation people.

Introduction of Dreadful Diseases

The Europeans brought many incurable diseases along with them. Diseases like Tuberculosis, Malaria and Chicken pox took the life of many native people. The English doctors did not treat the native people. They were left to die. They thought that the native village was outside their jurisdiction. Aboriginal people's life had no value. The English newspapers gave importance to the death of an English dog whereas the murder of natives was hidden out.

The native people did not get a chance to speak during a meeting or political gathering. The native men had to stand out if an English woman passes by. The native writers were not left free to write. They had to cater to the taste of the English people. Moreover, they should not write in the native language. No publishers came forward to publish the work of native writers. Rita Joe, a contemporary writer in the prologue to her memoir *Song of Rita Joe* (1996) states, "that our history would be different if it had been expressed by us" (15). She is widely known to everyone, but the newly formed Canadian government did not encourage her. As days passed, the native people lost self-respect and humanity in them.

Further, the settlers forced the native people to follow their religion. They want the natives' spirituality and ceremonies to get extinct. They believed that native people worship Satan. They cut the long hair which is one of the main identities of the native people. The White's main intention was to disconnect the native people from their tradition and custom.

The natives are described to be dull and fool. The white considered the natives birth itself is as a burden to the earth and they possess an image of animals. They are portrayed as uncivilized and ignorant of morals. The white children are given intelligent quotient test and achievement tests. The native children are not admitted writing such tests, thereby insulting them.

After colonization, the Indians always felt that they do not belong to the imposed religion of the foreigners. People who belonged to the post-colonial days did not know which language and custom to follow. The native youth were not familiar with any of the traditional belief and always felt they do not belong to anywhere. They had a feeling of disconnection and isolation. They started to involve in violence and self-destruction. They tried to keep a safe distance from their tradition and culture because they were taught that the English society is refined one. They were misled that the native culture will reproduce them as slave.

Maracle's Autobiographical Work

Maracle's autobiographical work *Bobbie Lee: Indian Rebel* accounts her effort to search out the cultural identity which she never had. The story highlights the complicity of city mixed bloods and native Indians under pressure to achieve a sense of identity. In one of her short stories Bertha, a native old woman who is ragged away from her community. Bertha worries about her loss of her original background. The whites promised them of attractive world and made them get detached from originality.

Maracle's yet another autobiographical work, *I Am Woman* speaks about how natives lost their inner strength to overcome the adversities of the English people. Almost all the central characters in Maracle's work are in search of their lost identity. Marianne in *Sundogs* has been separated from her community and is unable to find herself in the white society. She could neither speak her mother's language nor could understand the affecting politics of foreigners.

The social segregation and estrangement of the native's from the English world is made clear in Maracle's work. Though both communities share the neighborhood, they still live in complete isolation. Some of the native parents hide their aboriginal descent from their children as they believed that by denying their roots they get a good future.

Atrocities against Native Women

Traditional indigenous women were highly respected and held high position in society. They were the decision makers. Maracle describes about a black lady Sojourner Truth in one of her short stories. She was a true legendary hero who fought for the emancipation of the native Canadian. Even today she is referred as the highly respected woman among the black ladies. A brave lady Sojourner voiced against the atrocities of the English people. She suffered brutalities till her death. Maracle dedicated a separate chapter for this patriotic and philanthropic lady. She was the first black woman to file case against the Englishmen.

European people expected native woman must be passive and submissive. An enveloping negative impact of colonialism of the native society has been the gender partiality. Gradually the native

men adopted the dictatorial tendencies of the whites. The White people's injustice and ferocity had built up hurt and pain within the native men, which later blow up in the form of physical violence against their own wives and children. Domestic violence among the native families is the direct outcome of subjugation. In the novel *Ravensong*, Maracle pictures domestic violence among Madeline and her husband.

Maracle says that majority of the native women were considered to be an object of lust. They led a loveless life and were forced to earn their daily bread to raise their children. Sometimes in order to get the attention of their men; the native ladies were required to imitate the traits and dress code of the white ladies. Maracle comments in her work *I Am Woman*, "It is nearly impossible for native men to cherish the feminist of the native women . . . there is no such thing as darkened femininity. There is only dark-skinned sensuality" (56).

In spite of watching all male cruelties, Maracle did not grow up as a pessimist. Rather, she developed a balanced and impartial opinion regarding men in common. Maracle believed that the malice against woman as a whole happened because men do not love women. They do not trust love. Statistics of Canada (2005) has reported that the indigenous women are three times more likely to be target of spousal violence.

Another horrifying incident which took place during the English rule is the murder of many indigenous women. Native women are reduced to sub human level. The patriarchy demands the native men come under white women and native women are non – sensuous beings. They are unwelcomed in this world. Their wombs bear fruit but not sweet. Smiley, the Canadian writer in his *A History of Oppression: Canada, Colonialism and Prostitution*, says that the native women's condition was so pathetic that they were not even regarded as human beings worthy of living. They were considered as prostitutes. "Prostitution is just another form of colonialism" (2006, 106).

The incursion of foreign people affected the peaceful life of the natives. The domestic violence and traumas showed a way of complex life style of the natives. Many indigenous women lost their husbands and children lost their fathers. The war against the whites completely changed the normal life of the innocent. They blame their fate to lead a miserable life under the supervision of heartless people. The English people considered themselves as majestic organizers.

Conclusion

In the novel *Ravensong*, Maracle speaks about the introduction of disasters with the alien's arrival. These disasters can be prevented only when the whites and the black share their concerns for the land and people. It is evident that the native people face great cultural disasters in terms of their identity and survival.

The English people are expected to do business in the land of Blacks but gradually manipulated them. The Indian people's friendliness was considered as their inefficiency. They were sidelined. As the white people do not experience anything in a systematic and individual way as persons of colors do, they are unaware of the impact. They do not realize the intensity of the sufferings. As a solution to the children's suffering, Maracle says in one of her lectures that native women must raise their children. Otherwise their generation will be dead by the coming years.

The black men and women must come forward for a revolutionary change. Maracle's *Bobbie Lee: Indian Rebel* speaks on why one must talk. It narrates about the freedom to speak one's mind. It discloses the native Indians right to talk. Indigenous people must come out with their opinions. They

should put an end to the trespassers dominance and drive them out from their land. Maracle also calls the nation to fight against the atrocities meted out with the indigenous women. She calls the entire nation to support her venture for the emancipation of black women.

Maracle gives a universal call to every native Canadian to participate in the rally to fight back. Finally, Maracle insists that her people should no longer to be passive listener and invites them to come to the main stream to give out their views.

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