

Role of Mothers and Grandmothers as Strong Cultural Binders in Canadian Aboriginal Societies

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Abstract

Since the birth of mankind on Planet Earth, women are the primary caretakers of children and elders in every society of each nation. Their role become more significant when rich experiences of life are added as a woman matures into 'mother' and later promotes to 'grand-motherhood'. Mothers and grandmothers are the most affectionate but disciplined teachers who prepare next generation to carry forward cultural values and civic ethics. We celebrate Mother's Day to commemorate this spirit of motherhood as well as grand-motherhood. But, many tribal societies across the world celebrate motherhood, grand-motherhood and especially womanhood every passing day. The aboriginal or native societies of Canada grace this category. This paper presents the phenomenal role played by these women in nurturing bodies as well as souls of young natives, in a postcolonial world, dwindling between roots of golden past and promises of bright future. It also presents how the maternal elders have struggled to keep alive their culture, customs and spiritual beliefs and prevent them from becoming obsolete.

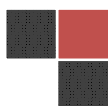
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From time immemorial, women have played a central and diverse role when it comes to loving and caring someone, reproduction, meal-planning, maintaining the well-being of a family, serving the perennial duty of educating next generation ethical and cultural values. In every society or community, mothers and grandmothers are the most revered familial and social entities; they are indispensable as they are angels who nurture young ones and raise them as good, humane and positive beings for the benefit of societies as well as nations. Canadian Native culture perceives the world with a reverence for all living as well as non-living beings as they consider it is mandatory for a harmonious existence, so it cannot fail to respect its women. In many tribes, the source of creation is believed to be 'Thought', which is female. Women are considered the 'Centre' of the circle of life because of the sacredness of their reproductive powers, and are even believed to have an access to spiritual power, thus placing them at a highly respectable position in their communities. Canadian Native societies are egalitarian ones and many tribes like Okanagan, Métis, Mi'kmaq, Huron, Iroquois, etc. are matrilineal where women share power in their communities. The transmission of cultural values and beliefs has been the prime responsibility of women. Renowned Native Canadian writer Jeannette Armstrong has emphasized:

The role of Aboriginal women in the health of family systems from one generation to the next one was one of immense power. . . In traditional Aboriginal society, it was woman who shaped the thinking of all its members, in a loving, nurturing atmosphere within the base family unit. In such societies, the earliest instruments of governance and law to ensure social order came from quality mothering of children. (quoted in Chuchryk and Miller ix)

In a number of North American Indian tribes, women traditionally selected male chiefs as political leaders and could also remove them. The eldest woman, the tribal matriarch, chose a male sachem to represent her decisions in the Great Council as she herself was indispensable to the settlement. The male sachem was accountable to the matriarch, and was replaced by her in the case of disobedience. Even the Father Lafitau of 'The Society of Jesus' recorded that the Iroquois form of government was a gynocracy. Also, in many tribes, women owned substantial property interests, including the marital house, and exercised dominion over the means of production and the products of major subsistence activities such as farming. Women in many tribes held the power to initiate or call off war.

In pre-contact times, aboriginal women enjoyed great social, political and personal privileges. The Mohawk women in eastern Canada had a vote on council. E. Pauline Johnson, an Iroquois poetess, refers to matrilineality in *Women of Canada* (1975) that Iroquois women had voted and participated in government. This harmonious social framework got disturbed when the Europeans landed on the Atlantic coast. The ethnocentric and patriarchal biases casted dark shadows on native societies. The Europeans were keen enough to judge native societies through Judeo/Christian religious doctrines of Original sin and its particular emphasis on female chastity and evil; and, they had strict reservations for Native women. The ancient native belief— "A woman is master of her own body, and by her natural right and liberty is free to do what she pleases" (O'Meara 130) — baffled the sexist white rulers and the Catholic missionaries who racially labelled these pagan women as "Squaws" (licentious creatures who are



always eager to satisfy their carnal desires). White historians documented falsified, derogatory, stereotypical stories to belittle indigenous matrilineal, gynocratic communal set-up. Somer Brodribb records such a statement:

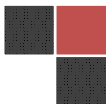
Some girls spend their youth in [such] way, having had more than twenty husbands, and these twenty husbands are not the only ones who enjoy these creatures, however much married they be; for after nightfall the young women run from one lodge to another, as do the young men for their part, who possess them wherever it seems good to them ... such being the custom of the country ... (“Traditional Roles” 87)

There is no doubt that women occupied a more degraded position in the settlements of Christians than among the wandering pagans. In contrast with the Indigenous freedom of contract which generally allowed divorce at the request of either spouse, Christian marriage ceremonies sanctified irrevocable unions. The Jesuits vigorously enforced compliance, even to the extent of imprisoning women who left their husbands.

Canada’s colonization is an epitome of Settler Colonialism where the colonizers aim to eliminate the Indigenous population in a slow genocide in order to steal their land. The genocide is ‘matricidal’ insofar as the primary target is Native women who reproduce the culture. The white rulers cunningly devised policies to usurp matrilineal society: the Indian Act (1876) reduced Native women from high status to lowest status by imposing patriarchal governance systems on the Indian tribes. Patriarchalization of family and governance normalized wife abuse, child abuse, incest and sexual assault. The mother-child emotional relationship and cultural training were disturbed as young children were taken away from affectionate lap of their biological mothers and placed them into residential schools where they were forced to learn white ways.

Further, to erase matriculture from Canadian Imaginary, certain tactics were devised. The school and university curricula were deliberately kept silent on matriculture in general and Canadian tribal societies in particular to propagate the notion that patriarchal way of society was the only available order and Indigenous societies are no exception. Anthropologists identified only three matrilineal cultures, i.e. Haudenosaunee, Tsimshian and Tlingit and then stopped studying matricultures. Native men were hired by the whites to work on their farms and factories, and also in white households as servants who closely watched how white women were treated as men’s subordinates with very little rights and respect. They started imitating the whites’ behaviour and oppressing their women which eventually ended up in violence and abuse. To facilitate their purpose of disrupting communal peace and emotions of compassion, the colonisers provided free alcohol to Native men that stole their reason and respect for community ethics and values, and made them extremely violent and abusive towards their women and children. The media sexualized Indigenous women using epithets such as ‘slut’ and ‘squaw’ and portrayed Indigenous women as incompetent mothers. Christianity reinforced patriarchy on reserves. God the Father, represented by missionaries and priests, normalized sexual abuse and physical abuse of women.

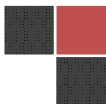
Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008) asserts that ‘the genocide practiced against the tribes’ is intent on erasing Indigenous matricultures by stealing land, criminalizing ceremonial practices, Christianization, imposing English language, re-education using government



curricula, incarceration, and “degradation of the status of women as central to the spiritual and ritual life of the tribes” (*The Sacred Hoop* 195). For five hundred years, Canadian Native societies suffered much trauma and misery under the colonial rule. And as Canada is a settler colony, colonization has never been a thing of past for the original inhabitants. Natives are still subjected to racial shame and abuse, discrimination at different public platforms, violence and sexual abuse are still their destiny, especially native women. After 1960s, Native intelligentsia realized the need to counter the falsified, derogatory, stereotypical projections by the white print and motion media. Native writers started penning down works that presented the richness of their ethnic cultures, significance and beauty of their cultural practices, and profoundness of their spiritual beliefs. In addition, their works aim to inspire Natives to shed off alien ideologies which act as a catalyst to dismantle their culture and society. They ask Native women to resume their roles as cultural nurturers and muse of spiritual wisdom as they had been prior to European contact. Native mothers and grandmothers indeed play a very significant role in inspiring distracted postcolonial youth to find answers of their anxieties and hope for future in their communal education. With the help of few Native texts, the paper presents how immensely native mothers and grandmothers have contributed in positive character-building of magnificent, memorable protagonists like Stacey in *Ravensong*, Marianne in *Sundogs*, Penny in *Whispering in Shadows*, and Owl in *Honour the Sun*. The authors of these texts— Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle and Ruby Slipperjack— have been traditionally trained and spiritually enriched by their matriarchs.

Indigenous matriarchs have always emphasized the idea of celebrating traditional values and community-companionship in the upbringing of children. In Native culture, the significance of childhood cannot be overemphasized. As future of the tribe, they are always to be provided for so that they do not suffer from want. Native lifestyle is based on this sense of communal and collective responsibility. In Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun* (1987), Owl’s mother takes care not only of her own children but has also adopted three other disowned children. Thereby she is carrying out her duty towards her tribal community too so that the orphan children are not subjected to any abuse. They would not be misled and would take the rich legacy of cultural values ahead in life. Slipperjack’s other work, *Silent Words* (1992), narrates an incident in which the hero, Danny Lynx, runs away from home in search of his mother and meets an old unknown Ojibway grandmother who feeds and shelters him unconditionally: “... without question, she handed me a bowl with a smile” (31). Danny wonders, “How had she known there would be an extra kid?” (31). A strong emotion overwhelms Danny when the old lady tries to ease his discomfort by saying: “No matter, every child is my grandchild” (31). The cultural message dawns upon him that all members have an important role and a responsibility in their culture.

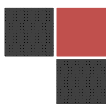
Everybody acknowledges the fact that children imitate their elders and their actions contribute in building up their characters. Young Indians watch their elders closely and learn the importance of hard work and preservation of cultural practices. In Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun*, Owl’s mother acts as the foundation-rock upon which her identity is strongly built and groomed. The novel shows how Owl’s mother and her hard work all day long play an important part in building the identity of the ten-year old little girl. Living in a small cabin and having no steady income, Owl’s mother is



more or less dependent on the traditional ways of living and earning. She sets up snares to catch little animals and birds for meat; she sets up fishing nets across the lake to get fishes for supper. Along with her children, she rows across the lakes and rivers to collect berries and other edible foods on different coastal areas. She sells these commodities at the only departmental store in the village. In exchange of them, she buys necessary domestic commodities. She wakes up before the sunrise and prepares the fire and food, keeps her family warm and fed, attends her children in sickness, and other endless duties. A substantial amount of time is spent on hunting, fishing and gathering food. But at the end of the day, Owl's mother manages to produce, over an open fire, a hearty meal for all. Even visitors who happen to come at meal times are fed. The mother even feeds the rogue intruder, John Bull, who once shot dead the family dog in his drunken state and threatened to kill the whole family.

The novel is also a strong statement about violence against women and children, committed by First Nations men who have long been dehumanised by internalised racism and consumption of alcohol, two colonial mechanisms, to disintegrate Native pride and cultural values. In the narrative Owl registers her countless experiences to run out of her cabin with rest of the family members in dark hours whenever any drunkard intrudes their house. And one day the inevitable tragedy takes place as the protagonist's mother is raped but the little girl is unaware of the grave situation. The author paints a poignant picture when she shows the traumatic mother's concern for her children: "Mom's back is towards us, her shoulders heaving. She turns from the lamp, pushes back her tangled hair from her face, and begins to tidy up. Then her eyes seem to focus on us standing together by the door. She squares her shoulders and says in a low voice, 'Come on, get back into bed before you freeze to death!'" (*Honour* 100). The last words are no less heroic. Owl's mother, who is victimized a little while ago, suppresses her humiliation, pain and anger under the concern for her children. In fact, she temporarily repairs the broken door so that her children would not freeze from snow-winds outside the cabin. The next morning, she heats the water, washes her children and puts on clean clothes, combs their hair, with them sees the rising sun and advises them: "When the sun comes over the horizon, he will see you and be very pleased that you're all ready to greet him and he will bless you" (101).

Owl's mother recovers from the night's tragic experience and heals her family with the help of traditional spirituality and cultural values. Owl's identity is shaped by such a strong, soulful lady. Owl struggles against every odd and confusion of her life but overcomes them with the help of the guiding principle of 'honouring the sun', taught by her mother: "Smiling, I imagine being a blackbird. The warm air gently lifts my breast, filling me, through me, and I become one with the night, only to emerge again as Me, to honour the Sun, in the early morning light" (39). Even the novel ends with reference to the spiritual motto of 'honouring the sun' and Owl finds her hope to have a better future. Her mother's spiritually-charged counsel— "Always listen to the silence" (184) — guides her in moments of acute dilemma when as a marginalised entity of settler colony; she oscillates between the glitz and glamour of the white society and the familiar serenity of her mother culture. Slipperjack has created in Owl a realistic figure, representing millions of naive young Indians on the reserves who dream a promising future in mainstream society but the dominants never treat them as their equals.

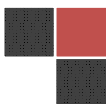


Lee Maracle is one of the most revolutionary writers whose works showcase powerful mothers and enlightened grandmothers paving the path of cultural affirmation in face of survival threats posed by the white domination. In Maracle's life, her mother, her grandmother and her great grandmother are the role models to follow. Maracle recounts a history of oppression from the stories she has heard from her great-grandmother, Ta'ah, who had never seen a white person till the age of fourteen. The whites brought with them the danger of numerous epidemics and major catastrophes in her community which also caused death to all of Ta'ah's siblings and she was the only survivor. She single-handedly maintained the lineage from 1835 to 1923 and saved the total eradication of the matrilineal "Wolf Clan" who are known for their tremendous responsibility. Maracle says: "We are Wolf, and we play a very specific role in our community. We're the backward and forward visionaries for people. We're the pack cutters. We're the ones that help people adjust to whatever change occur" (Fee and Gunew 209).

Carrying her 'wolf' instinct, Maracle serves her people to come forward and retaliate against all injustices committed against them due to racism, sexism and socio-economic oppression. Her grandparents taught her to live life with 'never-say-die' spirit and motto: "Never take what you think, you don't deserve" (*Bobbi Lee* 130). Maracle recalls memories when her grandmother inspired her to become well-versed in English Language so that she could affirm her Native identity and demand respect for her as a fellow human being: "You are fortunate. How else will we ever master the language and keep our ways unless we can learn among them and still live with our mothers and grandmothers? . . . Better to teach them to treat you as a human being ought to be treated ..." (*I Am Woman* 66).

In Indigenous literary world, Maracle is seen as a very radical personality but behind her greatness her mother's hardship contributes a lot. Her racist, irresponsible, white father deserted the family. Her mother survived amidst all social and financial difficulties. Maracle recalls her mother's refusal to take help of the white welfare system (a small amount of money is handed over to Natives to support their basic needs which ultimately turned them lazy and incompetent to work for their livelihood) and instructed her children, "you have to think for yourself" (*Bobbi Lee* 107). Her mother's bedtime stories dealt with Native wisdom and doctrines of life: "... she recounted what stories she knew about people that would help us get through life; stories of courage and humanism, ... of sharing and collective thinking, stories of strong-spirited people surmounting great obstacles, stories that taught us about our own philosophy" (201-202). Her mother's words paved foundation of her moral courage to analyse herself and correct accordingly, assert her beliefs and ultimately expands her vision beyond herself and her people to serve the whole humanity.

Marianne's Momma in *Sundogs* is a replica of Maracle's mother who helps the protagonist in her search for self. Marianne is a victim of internalised racism and the white education has created division in her psyche and she feels ashamed to identify herself with her people so much so that even her mother is an embarrassment to her. She never understands her mother's constant reference to cultural genocide on the part of the whites. Marianne's Eurocentric patriarchal outlook surfaces when she sides with her brother, Rudy who brutally beats his wife, Paula, and throws her out of their house. After

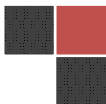


assaulted by Rudy, Paula and her kids take refuge in Marianne's apartment and the whole family acts as a healthy and responsible Native society and sides with Paula and closes door on Rudy. Marianne learns her lesson that Native societies are egalitarian in nature and never digest anything wrong committed against their most respected ones—children, elders and women. Momma holds Ruby responsible of cultural betrayal as he has inflicted physical violence on his wife and children. Marianne's Momma accelerates her daughter's search for identity and dignified acceptance in the white world but simultaneously teaches her to keep herself rooted in Native Métis culture. Mothers like Momma equip Native youth with cultural values and Native ethics to carry forward as a legacy for their next generation.

Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993) sketches the culture-building guidance of Native women. The work is set against the background of the 1954 Flu epidemic which the Native community faced without any medical help from the Whites and how it survived due to the medicinal wisdom and cares of grandmothers and mothers of the community. The text outreaches the cultural message of respecting Nature and her rich resources for the medical care of the needy ones and respecting their culture, customs and people, especially children.

Penny in Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows* (2000) is a great follower of the Okanagan cultural and spiritual teachings, passed on by her great grandmother, Tupa, and lives a contended life. Tupa teaches her to talk to beautiful colours of Okanagan landscape, grooming her as a painter. Tupa is the symbolic figure which is identical to mother land and mother language as she only speaks Okanagan. When she arrives in city to pursue university degree which eventually disappoints her as its orientation is towards materialism which stands in sharp contrast to her traditional education designed to inculcate respect and compassion for community's well-being. In Penny's times of crisis, Tupa's memories visit her to hold her up and guide towards the right path. The horrors of city life and gruesome reality of ecological degradation in white cities suffocate Penny who decides to move back to the cosy lap of her motherland to take her final sleep and gets reunited with her Tupa, lying in the Okanagan soil.

Native writers reinforce the value of a traditional upbringing through powerful matriarch figures that bring peace and spiritual health to anxious young souls who desperately find their place and worth in the mainstream white world of Canada. Mothers and grandmothers open the Pandora-box of cultural values and spiritual ideology, strengthening emotional ties of next generation with their roots. They take steps towards 'cultural decolonization' and stress the need for cultural revitalization. They pinpoint that cultural affirmation is the only alternative for survival in the modern postcolonial world, though western education is also necessary to equip the Indigenous youth to find opportunities for prosperity. 'Nativeness' should not be excluded only to get included in the mainstream society. Indigenous intellectuals and activists, in recent times, advocate "rematriation" which is the contemporary movement by Indigenous cultures to reclaim and reconstruct their matricultures; it aims to reclaim ancestral remains, spirituality, culture, knowledge, and resources and replace the notion of repatriation.



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