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Web Contribution: Native Women in Literature

In much of literature, including Canadian fiction, native women are often misinterpreted. They are represented in a very stereotypical way that tends to perpetuate racist and sexist images. Often, these authors who include native characters omit important details such as the social, political and economic context that the character is living in. By doing this, the author is making it seem as if the simple fact of being a native is what causes all the character's misery.

Furthermore, in a great deal of literature, native women and the images of native women are very negative. The representation of the treatment of Native women throughout history has been from a one-sided view. In literature, a native woman is usually represented as either an

Indian princess or an easy squaw. Basically, this all started a long time ago when the European explorers arrived in America and started describing and comprehending everything they encountered in terms of their “familiar conceptual categories and values” (Acoose, 41). These concepts were constructed from a patriarchal and Christian view of the world. Therefore, what was first written about native people, and in this case native women, is somewhat inaccurate because of a certain cultural difference.

One of the first writings about native women comes from Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus*. In his writings, Vespucci maintains that when they “had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves” (Acoose, 42). This is

one of the first writings the Europeans had received about women in the New World. As time went on, indigenous women continued to be described from a "male-centered white-european-christian ideology" (Acoose, 41). The representation of native women as squaws and sluts is predominant throughout history and seems to have in part justified the European imperialistic expansion.

However, native women are not always represented so negatively because another aspect of the representation of native women is that they were always described as bad or good. Historically, a native woman was considered good when a connection to her could further the interests of the Europeans. Before a white man could have a relationship with a native woman, the woman needed to be considered especially important within the native community. Her status needed to be higher than that of a normal native woman. That is why, in most literature, if a white man has a relationship

with a native woman she is always a princess or some other type of royalty. For example, Pocahontas who had a special liaison with John Smith is described as "Princess

Pocahontas".

Although this is not a negative

representation, it is

still unfair to native women that they must be of elevated status in order to be considered respectable.

To be fair, it is correct to say that there are not only negative representations of native women in literature. In a lot of literature, authors are sympathetic towards natives and native women and actually attempt to understand their situation. Furthermore, there are many native authors such as Emma Larocque, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier and Lee Maracle that use their voices and writing to speak for native women.



Work Cited

Acoose, Janice. IskwewakKah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press, 1995.

Walker, Cheryl. Indian nation: Native American literature and nineteenth-century nationalisms. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997