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AN ECO-CRITICAL INTERPRETATION ON THE TRAGETY OF PIQUETTE IN *THE LOONS*

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ABSTRACT

The proposal of eco-criticism in the end of 20th century makes people think deeply about the culture of human beings and explore how the human culture and social environment have resulted in the ecological crisis. This paper examines Piquette's survival under the circumstance of marginalization in *The Loons*. Piquette, the representative of Indian women, has been marginalized in the social and family environment. Though she wants to integrate herself into the white-dominated society, she is distorted by terrible sociability and her frustrated marriage with a white man. Finally, with her dream shattered, she is hopeless and died in the modern civilization and white-dominated society. The paper attempts to employ eco-criticism theory to explore the ecological consciousness in *The Loons*, and awake people's awareness to seek the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

Key words: eco-criticism; Piquette; marginalization; distortion; destruction.

Introduction

Margaret Laurence is a famous Canadian novelist and short story writer in the 20th century. She has won many honors including the Governor General's Awards---the highest Canadian literary honor and a lot of honorary degrees. In 1982, Margaret Laurence was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. Many prestigious literary critics speak highly of her, addressing her as "the most significant creative writer in Canadian literature" and "the best known and the most successful Canadian novelist of her generation". Her period is regarded as "the decade of Malcolm Lowry and of Margaret Laurence". Her early novels are influenced by her experience in Africa. They show a strong sense of Christian symbolism and ethical concern for being a white person in a colonial state.

As a matter of fact, her greatest achievement in writing is Manawaka Cycle, consisting of five interrelated novels and stories set in the fictional Manitoba town of Manawaka. Only *Bird in the House* is a cycle composed of eight short stories, of which the fifth one is *The Loons*. The protagonist Piquette Tonnerre, a half-breed Indian girl, grows up under harsh circumstance in a white-dominated society. At last, Piquette cannot integrate herself into the society and she is burnt to death together with her two children. At the same time, the loons also disappear in the Diamond Lake. The story illustrates the conflicts between white Canadians and native Indians, and the racial discrimination the Indians has been imposed upon.

Previous studies on *The Loons* mainly focus on the analysis of her Manawaka Cycle from the

perspective of feminism, ethics, theme, characterization and symbolism, etc. In China, Margaret Laurence's works have not received much attention as among Canadians. Zhao (2006) provides introductions to both the life and literary creation of Margaret Laurence and analyzes the female images, texts, and structures of the Manawaka Cycle in detail. At present, many postgraduates' theses in China conduct researches on Canadian nationalism, narrative techniques, and feminism reflected in her works. Besides, Cai Huan (2008) advocates the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and the establishment of a new type of ecological and ethical society where differences and classes, men and women can enjoy equality in development; Lei (2016) fixes on the plight of the heroine Piquette and her personal fight against the cold-blooded society, exposing the social injustice of that particular period of time and calls on a mental campaign on maintaining cultural diversity. However, few researches have been done from point of view of eco-criticism to explore how human interacts with nature in *The Loons*.

Eco-criticism is a new and unique literary critical approach burgeoning in late 20th century in the situation of serious environmental destruction. American critic William Rueckert (1978) first uses the term eco-criticism in his essay "*Literature and Ecology : An Experiment in Eco-criticism*" which considers eco-criticism is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Rueckert emphasizes the use of ecological angle to study the literature. According to Glotfelty (1996), ecological critic Harold Fromm organizes a special session which was entitled "*Eco-criticism: The Greening of Literary Studies*," in 1991, and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, ASLE, is founded in 1992. It believes that eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment and encourages new approaches to environmental literature. American ecological critic Scott Slovic (2015) emphasizes any kind of cultural and textual works can be analyzed from the green angle in the literary studies, which defines eco-criticism more broadly. He also devoted himself to representing diverse and innovative ecocritical voices throughout

the world, particularly from developing nations. As can be seen, the basic task for eco-criticism is to re-examine human culture, exploring how the social environment affects the natural environment so as to find the root of ecological crisis. This paper will mainly employ anti-anthropocentrism, eco-feminism and deep ecology theory, which are major parts of eco-criticism, to analyze the survival of Piquette.

This paper will analyze the plight of Piquette in *The Loons* from three aspects: marginalized Piquette, distorted Piquette and destroyed Piquette. It reflects the miserable life of Canadian Indians whose traditional life has been destroyed and they are marginalized in the white-dominated society. With the influence of the modern civilization and industrial revolution, Canadian Indians cannot escape the destiny of death just like the loons. Through the analysis of the novel, it can be better known the ecological consciousness in *The Loons*.

Marginalized Piquette

Anthropocentrism regards human beings as the central element of the universe and the most important factor on the planet. Besides it views humans as rulers that can dominate nature. Anti-anthropocentrism is an important part of eco-criticism theory. Because of the invasion of people, both the loons and Piquette are marginalized. In Piquette's life, she is a mystery and always keeps distance with others, even with the society. She cannot get herself involved into the social life and always keeps indifference. Piquette suffers from the hierarchical discrimination and cultural assimilation.

The Canadian Indians inhabit earlier in the north America continent. As a matter of fact, they are the true masters of Canada and they live a harmonious and original life. But since the European people immigrates to Canada in sixteenth century and the Canadian Indians have had strong conflicts with the white people. Finally, the war between the two races ends with the failure of Canadian Indians because of the weak power, which is a disaster for Indians. Consequently, the Europeans become the conqueror while the Metis have to be oppressed in the society. The identity status of the Indians is from the center of the mainstream discourse to the edge.

Piquette's family, a Canadian Indian family, is also injured and suppressed after the war. As the loser of the war, Metis are depressed and cannot cheer up, doing nothing all daylong. Piquette feels self-abased deeply and the strong psychological defense makes her more lonely. Though Piquette and Vanessa are classmates, they scarcely communicate with each other and know each other well. As the winner, Vanessa, including her mother and grandmother, has a sense of superiority and she has the prejudice against the half-breed Indian girl, Piquette. In fact, it is the hierarchical discrimination against the seemingly lower class, the Indians that makes them look down upon the half-breed Indian girl. Piquette is seriously marginalized. The disharmonious relationship between Europeans and Metis is caused by autism of the oppressor. The autism breaks the balance between people. More exactly, the autism breaks the balance between human and nature, that is to say, the Indians live a more natural life and they have more similarities to nature. And their lifestyles as well as personalities are much like nature's character. The confrontation between Europeans and Metis is seemly like the conflict of human and nature. Piquette is an epitome of the Indians, who have no choice but compromise to the upper class because the Indians are defeated in the war. As for loons, their piteous crying makes no sense. The despaired loons are the same as the Metis who struggle for survival but get nothing.

In *The Loons*, the Europeans greatly influence Metis' language. Before the discovery of the new continent in Europe, Canadian indigenous peoples have their own tribal clan and the tribal alliance and they exist in the original state of the autonomous government. Under the impact of the white culture, the Canadian Indians gradually lose their cultural identity. They do not have their distinctive culture, in addition, as a minor culture in the society, they are somewhat quite strange among the white-dominated society:

The Tonnerres were French half breeds, and among themselves they spoke a patois that was neither Cree nor French. They were, as my Grandmother MacLeod would have put it, neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring. (p. 205)

Language is a major part of culture and a significant means in the social communication. The language that Metis say has lost its identity, neither Cree, nor French. When they even do not have their own language, they certainly lose their identity among the white people. In the process of culture fusion, the Metis have been assimilated by the white. The Metis, which is represented by Piquette Tonnerre, lose their own culture and the white culture comes into their life. However, the cultural assimilation is not so thorough. Metis' language becomes neither fish nor fowl during the process of cultural assimilation. The white people blindly put their culture into the Indian's society, which destroys the make-up of Indian culture. As a result, the cultural ecology cannot keep its balance, making the Indians' culture lose its identity. Eventually, anthropocentrism illusion makes the cultural alienation of Indians.

Piquette is at the state of marginalization, which is not only caused by the social environment, that is, the hierarchical discrimination and cultural assimilation, but also relates to her terrible family environment, both her born household and her marriage.

The clearing at the foot of the town hill was a chaos of lean-tos, wooden packing cases, warped lumber, discarded car types, ramshackle chicken coops, tangled strands of barbed wire and rusty tin cans.(p.205)

Piqueete's home is in a mess, more exactly, it cannot even be a "home". The living space provides human beings the basis for the life. When the basic living condition cannot be satisfactory, it will have negative effects on her psychological state. When she does not get the sense of belonging, Piquette becomes self-contempt and indifferent to everything. This is one of the reasons why Vanessa regards Piquette as a vaguely embarrassing presence.

Furthermore, Piquette's father and brother are not able to supply her with the sense of safety, which she is eager to have. Finally, they even do not work at all and live on relief. Sometimes, they get mixed up in a Saturday-night brawl and hit out at whoever is nearest or howl drunkenly among the

offended shoppers on the Mainstreet. In her born household, Piquette fails to feel any warmth, and no one takes care of her even when she has tuberculosis of the bone.

Female is on behalf of the weak power in human society under the patriarchal oppression. The oppression they have suffered makes them keep silent for a long time. At the same time, nature is regarded as "the other" and the conquered object in the history of western civilization and is forced to meet human's need.

Distorted Piquette

The survival instinct makes Piquette desperate to accept white culture to seek recognition in the society and she is longing to get acceptance of the mainstream of society. However, she does not get a happier life as she has imagined. During the process, she is actually distorted.

Piquette is the offspring of half-breds and her language is neither French, nor Patois. She cannot talk fluently and her language is full of indecent and dirty words. In *The Loons*, there are many examples: when Vanessa invites Piquette to play around the Diamond Lake, she looks at Vanessa with a sullen flash of scorn and says, "I'aint a kid." (p.218) ; When Vanessa wants to invite her to have a walk around the flat, she shakes her head, and said "Your dad said I ain't supposed to do no more walking when I got to" (p.210); It seems to Vanessa that Piquette can be in some way a daughter of the forest. Therefore, she also wants to know something about the forest, but Piquette often says, "I don't know what in hell you're talkin' about" (p.210). Besides, her slang and obscenities can be seen everywhere, such as "What in hell you're talkin' about", "You nuts or somethin' ?"; "Who gives a good goddamn?" (p.212). These slang words or dirty words reflect that the marginalized people are very angry at their situation and they are indifferent.

However, when Vanessa sees her again, her language has changed a lot.

Oh, I been around," she said, "I been away almost two years now. Been all over the place---Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Jesus,

what I could tell you! I come back this summer, but I ain't stayin'. You kids goin' to the dance?(p.218)

The dirty words and slang words have nearly disappeared, which is the reflection of her trying hard to integrate herself into the white-dominated society. And she even wants to give up her identity of Indians to pursue the lifestyle and value of the white. However, her language cannot be compared with the white people. She is trying to speak the standard English, but the nonstandard English can also be heard: in "I been around.", the auxiliary verb "have" disappears; in "I come back this summer, but I ain't stayin'. You kids goin' to the dance?", the "ain't", "stayin'" and "goin'" are all nonstandard English. She pretends herself to speak the language the white people speak. Undoubtedly, her trying to speak standard English is not so successful. Furthermore, Piquette becomes more talkative and expressive than before. And she is even active to communicate with Vanessa to tell her something about her "colorful" social life, for which she has ever shown her contempt.

Her change of language is in fact a reflection of her change of value which is difficult to be converted. Her acceptance of the white's value can be seen from her "beauty" words. Finally, the natural view of Indians which Piquette holds is replaced by the white's value that is thought to be anti-natural. Although the superficial change of Piquette's language makes her more sociable, she can not totally integrate herself into white-dominated society, let alone the Metis society.

According to the eco-feminism, human society is one of the most important subsystem of the ecological system. The harmonious relationship of the internal subsystem, the protection of human rights and the realization of social justice is to ensure the ecological balance, which is the important condition to realize the justice.

However, the relation between Piquette and Vanessa is not so harmonious and the transformation of their relation shows that human beings have limitations on consciousness. Piquette is a Canadian Indians while Vanessa is a white person. Although they are classmates, they rarely

communicate with each other sincerely. As a white girl, Vanessa has the prejudice against Piquette from the very beginning. When they spend their summer holiday together, Vanessa even pretends ignorance of the existence of Piquette; and when they spend their days in the Diamond Lake, they have a little communication just because Vanessa's curiosity about Piquette's experience of forest makes her interested in the Indians' culture. In fact, all she has done to approach Piquette is simply to satisfy her curiosity with no care about Piquette at all. When Piquette becomes indifferent to her, Vanessa loses her interest in Piquette. At the time Piquette has changed so much and becomes much fashionable and confident, Vanessa cannot accept it and is disgusted with her trying to integrate herself into the white-dominated society by marrying to a white man. After all, Vanessa's sense of superiority as a white man disappears, and she is disappointed. The transformation of the relations between Piquette and Vanessa shows the change of Vanessa's way of understanding the world, or more exactly, understanding the nature. During the process, Piquette always plays a passive role and she does not have the ability to change anything, just as the loons do not have the ability to defend themselves from people's invasion.

For Piquette, in her born household, she lives a terrible and painstaking life. Under such circumstance, she begins to seek to change her living state and life style. However, by marrying a white man, Piquette does not get a happy marriage and her efforts fail with her divorce. In fact, it is the negative impact of patriarchy dominance, in which the identity of women is neglected by men. In *The Loons*, Piquette tries hard to adapt herself to the white-dominated society and marries to a white man, which is a marginalized woman's compromise. And the loons lose their shelter and can only live in the Diamond Lake during the process of industrial revolution. All this suggests that human makes women and nature at the stage of marginalization under the patriarchal culture's dominance, which is the core of eco-feminism.

Destroyed Piquette

Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inone (1995) considers that deep ecology connects humans and everything else with natural environment. It views the world as a network in which all the things are interrelated and interdependent, all living beings have their intrinsic value, and human beings are just one special strand in the web of life. It calls for people's attention to how humans threat other forms of life on earth. The ignorant people has violated the natural law to exploit the nature without limitation.

After the Europeans enter into the North American continent, they begin to reclaim the land excessively. Just like the Indians who have lived in the North American continent from generation to generation, the loons also inhabit in the continent of the North America for many centuries. When Vanessa is eleven, her whole family, taking Piquette together, go to the Diamond Lake to spend the summer holiday. At that time, the Diamond district is in a natural state and everything there is peaceful, harmonious and beautiful. The natural life represents the harmonious relation between nature and human. But eight years later, when Vanessa returns to the Diamond Lake, the whole area has been vigorously developed as a new tourist attraction and landscape have greatly changed. The small pier which Vanessa's father built is gone, and in its place there is a large and solid pier set by the government. This area possesses all the characteristics of a booming resort---hotels, ballrooms, coffee shops with neon lights flashing everywhere. There appears prosperity and comfortable atmosphere of modern society, resulting from the exploitation of the land. Under such circumstance, Piquette, the representative of Meits, has no other places to live and she becomes a member of such a society without other choices.

Besides, under the influence of the industrialization, great changes have taken place in the town where Piquette lives:

The one store had all the attributes of a flourishing resort---hotels, a dance-hall, cafe with neon signs, the penetrating odours of potato chips and hot dogs.(p. 219)

It describes that Piquette's town is a chaos of lean-tos, wooden packing cases, warped lumber, discarded car tyres, ramshackle chicken coops, tangled strands of barbed wire and rusty tin cans. The industrialization actually makes the town in a mess and the natural life has been destroyed. During the process, the nature is being dominated and conquered by humans. The living environment of the loons and Piquette is in harsh situation. As a result, the loons disappear at the Diamond Lake and Piquette dies in the fire. The crying and extinction of the loons, the deterioration of the environment around the Diamond Lake and the death of Piquette all result from the invasion of the modern civilization.

What is more, white-dominated society plays a significant role in their destruction. According to demography, at present, Canadians total more than 31 million people, with just 4% native Canadians, of which Indians account for two-thirds. The Indians believe in the primitive religion which originated in the 15th century. They highly worship the nature---"Circle of Life", believing that every animal has a soul, having faith in God. The Indians believe in the interdependent relationship of all things in nature, take animals as their friends, advocate that humans should live peacefully and harmoniously with nature. On the arrival of the European whites, they bring the modern industrialization and civilization. And they arrogantly think that they are superior to the Indians and oppress the lower class from nearly every aspect. Gradually, the Indians become the minor race in the society.

Piquette is also looked down upon by the white people. Vanessa and Piquette are in the same class, but Vanessa ignores the presence of Piquette and refuses to communicate with Piquette except for her own benefit. Furthermore, by marrying a white man, Piquette does not get love, respect, equality and sense of belonging and she is finally abandoned by her husband. At the end of the story, the disappearing crying of the loons actually echoes the fate of Piquette:

It seemed to me now that in some unconscious and totally unrecognized way,

Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons. (p. 219)

The invasion of the European whites breaks the harmonious society and ecological environment. The fortune of the Indians is just like the sad wailing of the loons. They have no other choices but migrate to other places or simply die out. They can hardly survive in the society which is dominated by the white people. The racial discrimination against Indians makes Piquette marginalized and fails to have the respect as an individual in the society.

Conclusion

In nineteenth century Canada, the traditional life of Metis is destroyed and they begin to have strong confrontations with the white people. The Metis are in such a dilemma where their rustic life has been threatened and they are marginalized in the society. Having lived in the social environment, Margaret Laurence has a better understanding of the social condition there. As a female writer, she challenges the male-centered literary tradition perspective in *Manawaka Cycle* and speaks for women and nature in *The Loons*.

The paper analyzes Piquette's struggle during her life from the perspective of eco-criticism, showing her miserable life and her difficulty in integrating herself into the white society. Because of racial discrimination and cultural assimilation, Piquette is discarded by the social environment and family environment. Under the circumstance, she is really marginalized. By marrying a white man and changing her language and dressing, she cannot even integrate herself into the white culture. As a result, Piquette is distorted. Finally, she dies in fire. The destruction of Piquette is caused by modern civilization and the merciless white society.

It can be perceived that the marginalized people live a miserable life, desiring to get the self-recognition to integrate themselves into the society. Through the interpretation of the novel, the author attempts to employ the newly developed theory---eco-criticism, to explore the ecological consciousness in *The Loons*, and awake people's

awareness to seek the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Ecological balance is of great importance to all human beings at any time. Piquette's struggle and strive for freeing from the marginalized identity and integrating herself into the white-dominated society is an obvious example.

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