

Looking Forward Or Backward: Canadian Stereotypes And Representation Of The Indigenous Concept Of Gender

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Abstract

The concept of Sex pertains to the biological divergence as anatomy, character and hormones. The concept of Gender depicts the culturally constructed ideas as role, personal trait and societal place. The concept of gender and sex are two different aspects that are interlinked. In spite of the predominance of no sex discrimination amidst the ethnic and Indigenous groups of Canada, inequality prevails. This paper investigates the Historiographic reason behind it by focusing on the re-silience and the verve of girls, women and gender conscious people and explores the concept of gender in relation to the Indigenous culture.

Keywords: gender discrimination, gender socialization, historiography, queer, sexuality, social status, law, colonialization.

Introduction

A Cheyenne Proverb states, “A Nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their weapons.” (Native American Netroots) Prevailing assurances and statements mentioned above recognize that the Indigenous women were the backbone of their respective communities. However state policies like Indian Act, Residential schools and Sexiest policies worked up to the officials pushing these Indigenous women live in an oppressed and of extreme marginalization.

Universally Sex is a binary concept of male and female but research has recognized that gender and sex are not that easy to constrain and categorize because of its fluidity, yet this has been understood by the Indigenous people long back. A number of genders and

many variants of gender roles prevailed within many tribal communities.

Roles performed by gender or gender roles are culturally defined. In Indigenous culture, it was vividly defined. The roles among them were fundamental and complimenting each other. As an individual's gender identity is in association with the societal gender role, the performance of hunting, smoking meat, conducting ceremonies or performing rituals were easy. These are possible because of their distinct cultural teaching within the community. For instance Inuit Women were responsible for sewing and food while Men hunted. Conversely, Barbara Bodenhorn in an article, “I’m not the great hunter, my wife is” describes how within Inupiat worldview, women are more influential in hunting than men. Lee states that within some tribe women were more successful hunters because “women were responsible for attracting the animals so

that men will be able to hunt them successfully” (“Gender in Inuit Society”17-27)

Speaking of the individuals of Cross-gender, their roles varied among their tribe. Many a times these Gender change were firmly occupational. For instance, individuals cross-dressed only to perform certain ceremonies because certain rituals were formulated to be performed by them. Lang states “Many tribal societies recognized individuals who took up opposite gender roles and responsibilities” (Men as Women, Women as Men 77-78). They come under the third and fourth category, neither male nor female. These roles bridge the genders.

Oral tradition describes the ways of conceptualizing gender by the Indigenous society. Children were brought up in flexible ways so that they can discover their gender identity by themselves. This system not only gives freedom of expression of personalities but also in contribution of the individuals most skills for the betterment of the society. These oral traditions pass on stories about women warriors who held up male status in the society. They also took part in various duties, to name a few Cheyenne, Choctaw, Crow, Ojibwa and Blackfoot. And many other stories where male dressed in female clothe to perform the duties of the woman. In spite of whatever they are they were respected for their contribution to the community.

Present day youth are involved in a moment to reclaim the lost ways of traditional understanding of Gender. Traditionally the cross-dressed people were denoted by term “two-spirits”. This term is from Northern Algonquin word “niizh manitoag” meaning two-spirit. William says that this two-spirit represents the presence of masculine and feminine traits within an individual. He also adds that most of the time any individual who cross dressed were encouraged to enter into a relationship of the opposite gender. For example, if in case a biological man is taken up a women’s role, then he would naturally be in relationship with a man who performs a man’s role and this is acceptable, because, among the Indigenous community sexuality and gender are often seen as a separate entity.

Colonialism has its share in interrupting the gender concepts among the

tribe. Settler colonialism in North America imposed European patriarchal system, where men hold powers in all Institutions. Simpson notes that “Mainstream North American society today can be seen as heteropatriarchy, where the superiority of the patriarchal beliefs and heterosexuality are seen as norms” (Queering Resurgence 2)

The balance between the complementary gender roles and shared power were disrupted by the process of colonisation. Kugel and Lucy states “Europeans introduced new values and ideas steeped in white male superiority and suppressed the leadership roles of women held in many Indigenous societies” (Native Women’s History in Eastern North America before 1900 76) This resulted in an imbalance and inequality within the communities and the gender fluidity.

Representations of Indigenous women were done in a prejudicial notion which created harmful beliefs and caused gender violence. For instance American Folklore portrayed Pocahontas as the Indian Princess who was in need of protection and very innocent in nature. The story was romanticized by Disney’s tragic love story of John Smith and Pocahontas. It was highly merchandised. The oversimplification of these double marginalised Indigenous women resulted in dehumanising them.

Ongoing process of the restoration process of these Indigenous women to honour their voices, traditional values and perspective is showing good results. Societal Organizations and Gathering create a safe space for them to voice out and make public realise. Now-a-days these women take up various societal roles like Grandmothers, mothers, community leaders, students at the expanded fields of study, Teachers and so many. It is up to every individual to help them move forward by understanding and appreciating the values the Indigenous society had.

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