

# ANTHROPOMORPHIC REPRESENTATION OF CANADIAN HISTORY IN THE BOOK SPIRIT OF THE WHITE BISON

<sup>1</sup>MALAVIKA.B. MENON, <sup>2</sup>DEVI K.

**ABSTRACT**--Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's book *Spirit of the White Bison* presents Canadian history from the perspective of an anthropomorphic animal and uses imagism, symbolism, and a simple narrative style. As a Métis woman as well as a writer, Mosionier tries to convey her views and thoughts to present the troubled history of Métis people, their sufferings, culture and tradition. She gives us vivid images of European colonization, buffalo hunting, fur trades and industrial development from the perspective of a white bison. The paper also delves into the author's choice of a medium like children's fiction to convey a topic with such gravity. The study uses anthropomorphic animal theory to understand the relationship between humans' and animals' ways of thinking and emotional state.

**Key Words**—Métis, Colonization, Children's fiction, Imagism, Anthropomorphism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The world of literature and visual arts are full of stories and movies featuring animals. *Zootopia*, *Animal farm*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Ratatouille*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Narnia*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid*, etc are a few among them. The animals talk, think, walk, understand and behave like humans. These stories and movies capture the attention of kids and transpose them in to a world of fantasy and joy.

Attributing human characteristics or behavior to animals is called anthropomorphism. An Anthropomorphic animal's character is similar to that of human beings and they connect with humans very well. White bison is one such anthropomorphic animal that tries to connect and understand human nature and its behavior. We see Canadian history from its viewpoint. Rather than carrying the readers to a fantasy world, the white bison takes them in to the reality of Canada's past and the feeling of losing one's homeland. The novel presents a world of pain, suffering, Hardships, poverty experienced by both animals and humans. There comes a later stage in which both animal and human become one in front of the weapons of the infiltrators. The story revolves around the peaceful coexistence between the Métis and bison and the disturbance caused by the arrival of Europeans demanding more fur. They colonize the land and kill the bison bringing the population to the verge of extinction.

## II. BEATRICE CULLETON MOSIONIER

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<sup>1</sup> Integrated MA English 2015 (Semester X), Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier is the author of *In Search of April Raintree*, first published in April 1983, and the revised edition, *April Raintree*, published in December 1984. She was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba, on August 27, 1949. She has authored several children's books including *Christopher's Folly* and *Unusual Friendships: A Little Black Cat and a Little White Rat*. Her second novel, *In the Shadow of Evil*, was published in 2000. In 2009 Mosionier wrote *Come Walk with Me: a Memoir*, which portrays all her life events and the emotional details of her experiences. She has penned a play and a film script apart from fiction.

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

To evaluate imagism, symbolisms, and anthropomorphic elements in *Spirit of The White Bison*, to analyze the presentation of Canadian history through children's fiction. Paper also attempts to study the choice of a female anthropomorphic animal as the protagonist over a male one and to discuss white supremacy over one's homeland.

### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper is an anthropomorphic analysis of *Spirit of the White Bison*. It concentrates on the central character, the white bison, and studies it in the light of the symbols and images used. The anthropomorphic traits are identified through the white bison's way of thinking, communication, understanding, and analysis through situations. This paper uses animal symbolism as a way of foretelling the future of the bison as well as the Métis civilization. The current analysis endeavors to illustrate the psychological aspect of colors and its effect on children.

### **V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Beatrice Culleton's book *Spirit of the White Bison* has been analyzed by various researches. One among them is entitled "Survival: Colonialism as a Discourse in Beatrice Culleton's *Spirit of the White Bison*" written by Debashree Dattaray from Jaipur University. Her paper deals with the impacts of colonization, native literature, and Métis culture.

### **VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS**

Children's fiction uses various bold colours to attract their young readers. Their emotions and thoughts are expressed through these bright hues and it helps them to differentiate one object to another. Children rely on colours to learn more about the world. As a contradiction to this trend seen in children's fiction, Beatrice Culleton uses black and white images to manifest a different and painful reality in front of her readers. All pictures in her book are in black and white. This contrasting colour imagery can be interpreted in many ways. Life is not as colourful as it seems outside. The outer cover may be colourful but the interior of the same book is full of black and white patches. The color black represents strong emotions and white represents purity and innocence. Beatrice Culleton uses black and white images to sensitize the readers towards the emotional aspect of the story. The white bison in the novel is alienated from its tribe due to its colour. But the same color gains her a spiritual significance among Métis and saves her from the hunters.

Through the distinctive colour patterns Mosionier wants her readers connected with the reality, emotions and lifestyle of the Métis. Children are tomorrow's leaders, historians and the carriers of knowledge. Thus, it is essential to accustom them to the realities and facts of life. History is narrated from the victor's perspective and leads to a distorted presentation of reality. A child should be aware of what happens in his surroundings, and across the world. This is the significance of Mosionier's narrative.

*Spirit of the White Bison* questions the colonization of Métis homeland by white people and the resultant destruction of whatever was sacred to the natives. The introduction of modern weapons and technologies devastates their natural habitat. The bison starve to death as their grazing areas are confined by the railway tracks and barbed wires. The whites successfully exert their power over the Métis and their land.

The bison move in groups. Among them the oldest and strongest lead and protect the rest of the group, especially its younger ones. In this story the great bison is the group leader. A grown bison never fights the two-legged hunters, as he knows that they hunt only for sustenance. The bison are very cautious and alert when the hunter approaches. They develop their skills through play fights against each other. They have good hearing skill and their meat gives nutrition. Pemican is a foodstuff made with their meat. The bison are hunted for their skin and fur. As a result of this they have to protect themselves from Métis hunters as well as the Europeans.

White bison is different from other bison in every way. The white fur helps the bison from her attackers and hunters as it makes her unimportant among the rest of the herd in the prairie. The unique sets the bison apart from other bison and gave her a spiritual significance among the Métis. Lone Wolf is a Métis man and he is one among the buffalo hunters who hunt them for their livelihood. The birth of a White Buffalo is a sign of hope, sacredness and good times. As the White Bison is born under the rainbow, she is also called the rainbow spirit. Rainbow Spirit has a spiritual significance as it is a bridge that connects earth with the spiritual world. The White Bison grows a special spiritual bond with the Métis hunter.

The bison in the novel is attributed human emotions and characteristics. In this book Beatrice Culleton gives an anthropomorphic character to the White Bison. The bison thinks and understands just like humans. The White Bison is the narrator of the story. The author uses a female white bison on purpose to represent the pangs of Métis women. The simplicity and purity of their mind are signified through color white.

The story begins with White Bison's narration of being bullied by her own herd. They refuse to let her play with them and their only entertainment is teasing and bullying both the White Bison and Bison Boy. Because of the White Bison's color, they neglect her considering she is different in every way. "The other youngsters in my group refused to let me play with them and the only time they paid attention to me was when they teased me and pushed me around." (Culleton, 1985, p.7). In a way the author tries to show the discrimination based on sex. Through teasing the White Bison, the other members of the herd dominate and exert control over her. "Big Ben and his friends were all older or bigger than Bison Boy and me. It was natural for them to want to bully us around." (Culleton, 1985, p.11). The situation could be equated with the European colonization of the aboriginals and their land. The mighty get upper hand and subdue the less privileged, unarmed natives. White Bison is very good at analyzing the situation, especially the hunting process. She knows how they hunt them, how to avoid danger and the precautions one should take to save their own lives. The heavy hoof beats of the hunters represent the heavy pounding of the Bison heartbeats.

Bison journey through the southern ranges that introduce them to two steel rails that cut their paths. Crossing Railroads represent the beginning of industrialization and colonization. The bison are unfamiliar with new technologies and it scared them. "But one day, when we were on the southern ranges, we came across double steel rails on the ground which cut across our path .The leader snorted and sniffed and pawed the ground, fearful of the strange change"(Culleton,1985, p.37). The railroad marks the arrival of more European settlers and the diminishing territory of both bison and the Métis people. The white Europeans settle in their land and use rifles and gun powder to hunt the buffalos. Then the White Bison realizes that they are not hunters. She tries to understand the difference between a hunter and a murderer. The anthropomorphic thinking and understanding of the White Bison is shown here through its capability to differentiate between a hunter and murder, not only by their carrying weapons such as bows and arrows to that of rifles and guns but rather how and in what way they kill them. This understanding and cautious analyzing make the White Bison different from others and give it an anthropomorphic character. This kind of killing make the White Bison distrust man and afraid of Lone Wolf. Even though the white bison knows that "his kinds of men were not the ones who hunted us mercilessly". The white bison says that murder among their herd is acceptable for many reasons such as during mating, killing one another when they are sick both mentally and physically ill, killing another for food, or for protecting their younger ones, etc. But she indirectly questions to the readers why should a rifle carrying men being animalistic and killing them ruthlessly for no definite reason should be considered. "All through that winter, we lost many of our own to the rifle-bearing hunters. It was at this time that I thought not to call them 'hunters' anymore. To me, hunters had been people or animals who hunted for food, who couldn't live without the hunt. Sport, murder, those were words we had never really known before. Once in a while an animal might become very, very sick in the mind. Sometimes in the body, and they might kill another animal and not for food. They would leave the food. Or an animal might kill another in the mating seasons. Or they might kill another animal over food, protection of their young or their possessions. Sometimes, an animal's murderous instincts were built into it and other animals knew this and expected it. There were enough legitimate reasons for killing. Men had hunted us for food and that was acceptable. But what some of the rifle-carrying men were doing, that was murder."(Culleton,1985, p.37).

So, the White Bison symbolically becomes human and the humans become animals in nature. Therefore, there is an element of both human and animalistic nature in all living beings. It is the circumstances and the surroundings that they live distinguish that make them different from one another.

The European settlers change the lives of both Métis and buffalos, not for better but for worse. The White Bison sees the rapid growth of her homeland. The land is cut into halves with railroads and barbed wires. Their feeding grounds are now owned by the strange hairless buffalo. All these make her understand that they have no future. This shows the development of new technologies like railways and barbed wires divide and restrict the bison and the Métis. The white settlers bring cows on the Prairies. "Times were changing, but not for the better. There would be no room for our kind in the changed world in the future."(Culleton, 1985, p.38).Beatrice Culleton tries to tell that their native land will soon be ruled by the whites and it will be the end of their tradition and culture.

The bison are accustomed now to the two steel lines that cut across their paths. But they are not familiar with the train. For them, the train is an animal as large as a grizzly bear. The arrival of the train shocks them and they are attacked by the whites. "By now, we had become accustomed to the two steel lines that cut across our circular path. The whole herd was on either side of the lines the day the beast came down and seperated us for our good.our

group was still on the north side. Never had we been so terrified as on that day. Not only was this beast hundreds of times larger than the biggest grizzly bear.”(Culleton,1985,p.42).It kills the White Bison’s mother. The next day White Bison finds out that the giant animal, i.e. the train, does not go beyond the two steel rails.“This land was no longer ours. Another kind of animal was taking it over.”- Colonization forces them to leave their land. The increasing number of European settlers and the fibred wires across their plains restrict the bison’s living. “I had lost my curiosity about life on the plains. Maybe my own time to die had come.”(Culleton,1985,p.53).Both the bison and the Métis people know that they are less in number as their families are killed.

Through symbolism, the fate of Bison and Métis people are foretold. The Birds have the power to know many things in advance. In one-way White Bison can be taken as the one who thinks and analyzes a situation before deciding in advance. The Prairie dogs are very aggressive in protecting its family and home. Both Métis and bison can be symbolized as prairie dogs because they fought to protect their family and home. The Wolves are a symbol of ritual, loyalty, spirit, and guardianship. They can make quick and strong emotional attachments, and often trust their own instincts. Relationship between White Bison and Lone Wolf – both of them are loyal and have a spiritual connection with each other .They tried to guard their homeland till their death. Both of them connected emotionally. Grizzly bears have undefeatable power and can be symbolized as the Europeans or whites. The Horse represents the symbol of freedom without restraint; according to Native Americans it also represents power which represents the white’s power over the Métis people. Cow’s symbolism assists us in understanding and embracing fertility and the relationships. It represents holiness and patience. Coyote symbolizes caution, death evilness, and upcoming danger.

The war between the Europeans and aboriginals take away their homeland. The whites are very careful in dealing with the aboriginals. They slowly earn their trust and later attack them. An owl is a spirit animal and announcer of death. It represents the arrival of the whites, the beginning of industrial developments, railroads and new equipment.

Squirrels are the symbol of socialization and energy focused on goals. The whites socialize with the Métis first in the form of a peace treaty and later start to disturb their territory using force .They wish to occupy their place because Canada is rich in its fields and animals.

Vultures represent purification and rebirth such as the rebirth of Lone Wolf and White Bison in the spiritual world after their death in their homeland. Bumblebee represents personal power, community. The power of European’s to take control of the community representing both Métis people and Bison.

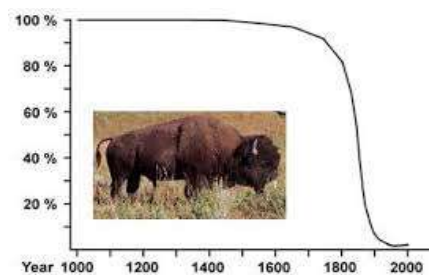
All these animal symbolism shows the white bison’s change in character and way of thinking and its upcoming fate of death .it also shows the White Bison spiritual connection that is, it is different from other animals not in case of white colour but in way of thinking, understanding, and spiritual connection with nature and people.

The Métis people are the first aboriginals in Canada and North America and had a mixed ancestry. They were colonized by Europeans and were treated differently. They had a spiritual connection with nature. They live their livelihood through buffalo hunting. Both Métis and Bison coexist by depending upon each other. The Métis hunt the bison only for their needs thus helps the bison from being extant and the bison provide life to the Indian people and later to the Métis people. Buffalo hunters hunted the bison on their horseback with their weapons such as bows and arrows. They respect the white bison compared to other bison because white was treated as something spiritual and as a sign of hope according to the belief and tradition of Métis people. It is because of that the White Bison

was rescued by Lone wolf and later introduces her to his brother's children so that the white bison's spirit would pass on down through them to their young ones because he felt a connection to the White Bison. He digs a large hole for the White Bison mom to lay her body rather than let it eaten by vultures. Métis people lived their life as buffalo hunters...they used bows and arrows to hunt the bison's they had a spiritual connection with their land as well as with the animals. Mostly lived in near red river and prairie fields

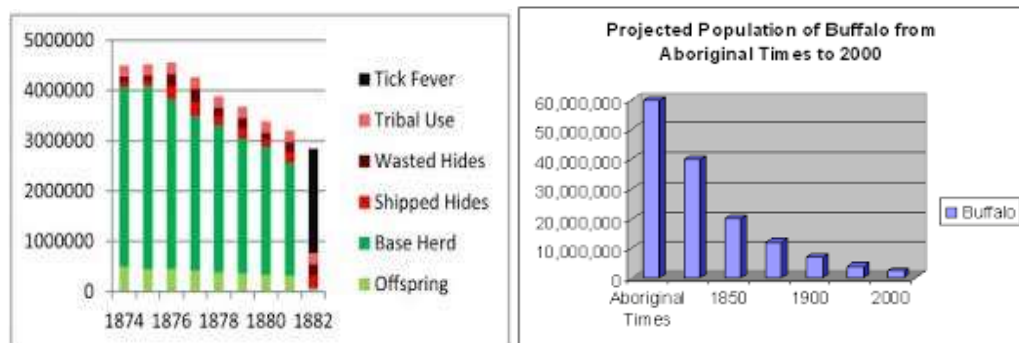
The "Great Spirit" also known as the "Creator is the one "who created the universe, the spirit world, the land, plants, animals, and humans. In this spiritual world, it is essential to share, give, and receive in order to keep the body, spirit, mind, and emotions stable. The traditional Métis were raised to live with the land, not exploiting it. All things have spirits and there is no such thing as inanimate objects. The flora, fauna, and humans have spirits, emotions, minds, and bodies. This make them equals and therefore worthy of respect. In aboriginal spiritual practice, the relationship between people and other living beings are described by spiritual connections. Maintaining and respecting this connection means continually renewing the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Those Métis who practice Aboriginal spiritualism make offerings and provide thanks to the animals and plants, which give themselves to feed or heal a family.

Both Lone Wolf and White Bison are going through the same experience of loss and pain. They lost their families and are forced to leave their homeland. One surrenders to the enemies when their basic needs are challenged, especially food that sustains them. Both Lone Wolf and White Bison's tribe and herd are dwindling because of the killings and their only option is to fight against them. Both of them have aged physically and cannot fight the young powerful strong whites. Lone Wolf's spirit was his youth, strength, and his tribe. But now he has lost everything like the white bison and the only strength both of them possess is their inner strength or inner spirit. Even though the bison cannot talk they mentally and spiritually understand each other and share their pains, sufferings, and emotions. The Europeans try to diminish their population to take more control over them and their land. Like the British who came to India and colonized us, the Europeans also colonized the Métis land through trade. First, they came to the red river area in Canada as settlers, later build a company there and come to know that the region is filled with bison. Agreements between the settlers and Indigenous Peoples assured the right of the latter to use and protect their land "as long as the sun shines, the river flows, and the grass grows"—a phrase expressed in a series of nation-to-nation associations and treaties.



Up to the 18th century the bison population has been estimated to around 60'000'000. Natives respected nature and took only what they wanted. The greed of the white man was followed by a drastic reduction of the bison population over a few decades. The modern weapons allowed them to destroy the bison population in huge numbers. They brought new technological inventions such as trains, weapons, industries, guns, etc. to kill and to

establish their supremacy over the region. Slowly the region of Métis started to get industrialized. The rules were broken. The Europeans created fear among both the Métis and the animals. They started to disturb and attack Métis homes by killing them brutally, raping their women and killing their children for fun making them leave. They obtained their land forcefully. Thus, they threw the Métis out of their homeland and lead to the extinction of bison.



The population of bison reduced due to diseases, hunting, killing for pleasure, and industrial exploitations.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Beatrice Culleton Masionier, through this work, points out that history is full of killings and conquests. The last chapter of the book brings together a white man and his Métis friend to cover the dead bodies of both the White Bison and Lone Wolf before the arrival of the Europeans. This shows a spiritual bond between them. The white man was once saved by the bison and now he saves her from the brutal attack of the Europeans. His friendship with the Métis man shows coexistence based on equality. Even though the Métis doesn't approve of the white man's decision in the beginning to bury them as a form of respect he later joins him. But after burying them the Métis man says to the former that "I don't know why we did that. But it makes me feel kind of good in a way."(Culleton,1985,p.59).

Beatrice Culleton becomes a voice for animal rights as well as human rights. In the movie *The Lion King*, Mufasa says to his son Simba "When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. And so, we are all connected in the great Circle of Life". Through animal symbolism she tries to give us a portrait gallery of the native culture of Canada. Nature symbolizes the culture and tradition of the Métis people. The invaders and industrialization uprooted them from their soil.

Human beings are not the sole owners of earth. Every being born here has the right to live and thrive. Everybody depends on everybody and everything for sustaining their lives. Maintaining equilibrium is essential for harmonious living. The world has witnessed extermination of species and genocides. The killing the bison in the novel lead to the dwindling and downfall of the Métis. Children who read this book get an insight into the workings of human mind and the importance of maintaining the balance. This is the significance of presenting history in the form of children's fiction because understanding history will prevent them from repeating it.

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