Salish Women versus Women in the New Testament
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Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga
Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/editor/submission/16295/
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“While it takes all the women to repopulate a village, it takes only one man.”¹ This quote from Lee Maracle’s *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style* resonates with me as it encapsulates Maracle’s depiction of women as necessary beings. In this collection of short stories that deal with Canadian Aboriginal women’s life stories, Maracle deals with issues such as female sexuality, empowerment, damaged relationships, and loss. She writes openly, honestly, and holds nothing back. For example Maracle explains her motivation to write these stores with the frank statement: “Western society’s values confuse me.”² Her stories challenge Western, Christian-based beliefs. Through a series of short stories, Maracle presents women as strong, empowered, resilient, sexual, and at times, mischievous creatures. The positive representations of Canadian Indigenous women in *First Wives Club* contrast the mostly negative or violent depictions of women in the New Testament. Though the New Testament contains some examples of active, well-respected women who are strong and faithful, more often, the New Testament ignores the presence of women and their perspectives and frequently suggests that women are inferior and subordinate to men. In this paper, I will argue that in her short stories, Maracle’s representations of women as strong, powerful, and necessary beings is directly opposed to the depiction of women in the New Testament. Unlike the message of the New Testament, Maracle's representation of female characters in *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style* serves to show the reader that female empowerment is not only acceptable, but necessary in society.

First, Coast Salish women, as depicted by Maracle, are strong, powerful, and resilient. Raven, the creator figure who is considered to be a female by some Salish people, is the main example of a powerful female. She has the power to shape people and situations. She is all-knowing and can take on different forms. This fascinating character is emblematic of how women are treated within the Salish community and how they are depicted in Maracle’s stories. The Flood story, a traditional story included in “Coast Salish Style”, presents women who are powerful and influential. It is the women who survive the flood, who create and provide for the community, and who are remembered by their community and their descendants as heroes. In this story, women use their sexuality as an instrument of power. They seduce a man in order to get him to build the women and children a shelter. Exercising their sexuality in this way ensures the women get what they want. Maracle provides another example of female strength in “Laundry Basket,” a story about a woman overcoming a divorce. Marla has left her unsupportive, abusive husband and their unhealthy marriage in order to lead a better life. Marla is resilient and refuses to let the voices and memories of her ex-husband haunt and control her. Marla serves as a role model to women in difficult marriages who feel there is no escape or alternative. In these stories, it is evident that Maracle believes that female strength lies in self-sufficiency and in exercising control of one’s life and especially one’s sexuality (as it can be a useful tool). A strong woman is a thinker, a decision-maker, and a role model and examples of such females are plentiful in Maracle’s stories.

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In comparison, the New Testament contains only a few stories of strong female characters. These include: Mary the mother of Jesus who initiated Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding at Cana,\(^8\) the Samaritan woman who convinced other Samaritans that Jesus was the Messiah,\(^9\) and Mary Magdalene who, among other women, was with Jesus at the hour of his death and was the first to see him after he resurrected.\(^10\) These women suggest that a strong woman is one who influences others in regards to religious matters and who is a faithful follower of Jesus no matter what the majority of others say or do. This is a very different definition than the one that Maracle presents. Women of the New Testament are not necessarily independent, nor do they hold power over others. Women are included in the New Testament because they support the existence of Jesus. In *First Wives Club*, it is evident that women are essential for a functioning community; this is something that the writers of the New Testament disregard. Not only are women essential because they are the creators of new life, they also are the providers of the community—a title women should be receiving by all societies, not just the Salish community. Maracle also suggests that men are not essential to the community (aside from their initial role in procreation). This message is completely opposite to the one that the New Testament conveys.

Maracle argues that women’s biological ability to give birth and populate their community makes them essential to the community. Their domestic duties such as cooking, laundry, parenting amongst others makes them irreplaceable.\(^11\) In both “Scarlet Requiem” and

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\(^8\) Jn.2:1-12, *New Revised Standard Version*.
\(^9\) Jn.4:39.
\(^11\) Maracle, 10, 47, 93.
“The Canoe” families struggle to deal with the loss of mothers who have passed away. In “Scarlet Requiem”, Paulie moves in with his grandmother who becomes his primary caregiver when his father stops visiting him following his mother’s death.\textsuperscript{12} Likewise, in “The Canoe”, Jordan’s father admits, “I am no good at this parenting stuff. Your momma always took care of that.”\textsuperscript{13} Similarly Jordan expresses the importance of his mother to his life, “I knew how to be a son to my mother but I do not know how to be a son to my father.”\textsuperscript{14} In Maracle’s stories, women are fundamental to the family; they shape the identity of their husband and children; in other words, men cannot exist without women. Maracle gets this message across perfectly in these stories by describing the dysfunctional father-son relationship and the confusion fathers undergo when they are left with a mother’s duties. The roles and responsibilities of women do not go unnoticed or unappreciated in Maracle’s depiction of the Salish culture.

The idea that women are essential to society, as presented in \textit{First Wives Club}, is not supported in the New Testament. Desjardins argues that women in the New Testament are purposely ignored. For example, in all four Gospel versions of the story “Feeding the Five Thousand,”\textsuperscript{15} it is said that Jesus feeds five thousand men. It is only in Matthew that this number is noted to be “besides women and children,”\textsuperscript{16} as if to suggest they do not count as human beings.\textsuperscript{17} Desjardins argues that because the New Testament was written by males, starred males (including Jesus and God), and addressed a male audience, women’s actions and presence go

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\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, 84. \\
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 93 \\
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 91. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Mt.14:13-21; Mk.6:30-44; Lk.9:10-17; Jn.6:1-15. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Mt.14:21. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Desjardins, 96. 
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Thus, questions concerning family matters arise such as, who feeds the male characters? Who raises the children? While Maracle’s text suggests Coast Salish people appreciate women’s roles in their society, the society described in the New Testament completely overlooks women’s roles.

Some characters in Maracle’s short stories cannot be described as powerful, essential, or influential. Rather, these women are often confused, weak, powerless, and inferior in their various situations. In “Goodbye Snauq”, the main character is miserable. She faints while starting a class tutorial because she is overwhelmed. She is confused with her identity; she does not feel fully Squamish nor fully Canadian. She feels weak and powerless in the face of a government issue in which the Squamish officially surrendered their land. In this story, she remembers her ancestors owning land and being forced from the land, watching while the new immigrants burned down their village. Wanting to turn to alcohol and depression, it is her students who help raise her confidence. In “Laundry Basket”, Marla reflects on her marriage. Marla dreads household chores, like the laundry, and dreams of becoming a writer. When she was married, Marla’s husband controlled and abused her physically and mentally (making fun of her writing dreams and burning her manuscripts). She feels powerless in this relationship and is treated as an inferior to her white husband; Marla realizes “he had fallen in love with her because

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18 Ibid., 95.
19 Ibid., 96.
20 Maracle, 22.
21 Ibid., 19.
22 Ibid., 20, 23.
23 Ibid., 17.
25 Ibid., 50, 52, 53.
he wanted someone to whom he could feel superior.”  

26 He is ashamed of his wife and her culture.  

27 So, Marla sneaks behind her husband’s back to write stories. Similarly, Shirley in “Erotica” is in an unsatisfying relationship and thus is unfaithful to her husband.  

28 Shirley describes how she feels used and unloved and uses these feelings as reasons to justify her actions to give into temptation.  

29 All three of these women feel powerless in their scenario; fortunately all are able to overcome these tough times and serve as inspiration to women in similar scenarios. By showing that these unpleasant situations turn around, Maracle provides even more examples of female empowerment.

The view that women are inferior or subordinate to men is one frequently found in the New Testament. Desjardins argues that many New Testament passages and Christian interpretations of those passages have given rise to a hierarchy of “women under men.”  

30 This belief originates from the creation story when God creates man before woman and creates woman from man.  

31 Paul comments on this natural hierarchy in the New Testament:

For a man ought not have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but a woman is the reflection of a man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.  

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In a letter to Timothy, Paul states that women should be silent and submissive to their husbands.  

33 These opinions are obviously not fitting with the twenty-first century Euro-North

26 Ibid., 53.  
27 Ibid., 55.  
28 Ibid., 37-38.  
29 Ibid., 36.  
30 Desjardins, 98.  
31 Gn.2:7, 22.  
32 1Cor.11:7-10.
American belief that men and women are equal. The New Testament reinforces gender biases against women. This is opposite to what I believe Maracle was trying to accomplish by portraying women in some of her stories as weak or inferior. Such stories serve as examples of women in unfortunate circumstances, how they struggle, and ultimately how they change their life around for the better so that they can become strong, independent women. These stories serve to inspire women to overcome adversity. There is no sense of this in the New Testament. Rather, the examples of female inferiority serve as guidelines for acceptable behaviour of how men should treat women and how women should act.34

First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style is a drastically different text from the New Testament. It promotes ideas regarding female sexuality and female empowerment that the New Testament deliberately ignores. Maracle includes stories about why females are necessary and how their domestic duties (especially parenting) are essential, while the New Testament disregards female concerns. Also, Maracle describes women in situations where they are forced to feel inferior and how they pull through hardships to become strong, independent women. Most examples of women in the New Testament, however, encourage women to be silent, submissive, and subordinate to men. Furthermore, there are differences in the way these texts define strength, necessity, and weakness. Maracle’s definitions serve to empower women; in the New Testament, these definitions serve to sanction Jesus. Ultimately, Maracle sheds new light on the importance of women in communities—a viewpoint that is often not evident in our Canadian society or in the New Testament. Women deserve to be recognized and praised for what they were created

33 1Tm.2:11-14.
34 Eph.5:21-24; Col.3:18; 1Tm.2:9-15; and Ti.2:3-5.
for—to procreate and to provide for their family and their neighbours—and that’s just what *First Wives Club* sets out to do.
Bibliography

