

The Significance of Familial bond in Alaska Native Novelist Eowyn Ivey's "The Snow Child"

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ABSTRACT

Various renderings of experts demonstrate that the Native Alaskans reached the northwestern part of the North American continent from Asia across the Bering. Their forefathers built diverse and intricate native societies over the ages in the Arctic. Fishing, mining, and hunting, braced by the Alaska Railroad in the 1920s, have remained the means of subsistence for the natives. Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child*, the 2013 Pulitzer Prize finalist, was praised for its magnificent, meticulous descriptions of Alaskan ambiance, terrain, and connection to Alaskan people and sentiments. The novel, set in the 1920s inspired by a Russian folktale *Snegurochka (The Snow Maiden)*, uses magical realism to portray the story of Faina, who fetches bliss in the life of an old twosome surviving in an arduous condition. This paper highlights homesteading in Alaska and its social-economic repercussions on people while bringing out the lonesomeness, hardships, and grief in the lives of Jack and Mabel.

Keywords: Alaskan Literature, Eowyn Ivey, *The Snow Child*, Homesteading, familial bond.

I. INTRODUCTION

Eowyn Ivey, born in 1973, grew up in Alaska, surrounded by both nature's splendor and stark truth. "The novel draws on Ivey's own experiences of living in Alaska, where she and her family grow their own food and hunt caribou, moose, and bear for meat"(Masters). In one of her interviews in 2016, she mentioned: "I know and love Alaska- I grew up here and still live here with my family. It's where I start as a writer, and for now, I can't imagine writing about any other place" ("Author Interview: Eowyn Ivey: Wonderfully Bookish").

Her debut novel, *The Snow Child*, is a tale of middle-aged Jack and Mabel, who move to a remote homestead in Alaska. Mabel and Jack travelled to Alaska when Mabel looked at a brochure about homesteading in 1918. Alaska permitted homesteading in the same year. "The federal government was looking for farmers to homestead along the territory's new train route. The Alaska Railroad and a steamship company offered discounted rates for those brave enough to make the journey"(35). Homesteading had an impact on the life of Alaska's native people. They lost most of their customary territory to homesteaders. Natives were commended to use the Homestead Act for land entitlements. Fishing, trapping for food, and trade were significant for the Alaskan economy then, and today Oil and Tourism industries supply revenue. The construction of the railroad in Alaska was completed in 1923. The railroad facilitated movement but did not boost the economy due to elevated maintenance costs and marginal passenger use. *The Snow Child*, published in 2012, was set in the foresaid socio-economic context of the 1920s.

II. JACK AND MABEL IN ALPINE

The relationship between Jack and Mabel remains the basis of this tale. After losing her baby, Mabel requested Jack to homestead since she couldn't stand being around other people's children: "They left all that behind to start a new life with just the two of them? I need peace and quiet, she'd told him more than once. She had withered and shrunk in on herself, and it began when they lost that baby. She said she couldn't bear to attend another family gathering with all the silly banter and gossip"(23). They moved to live in Alpine, Alaska, which is described thus in the novel:

Back home, Alpine wouldn't have been called a town at all. It was nothing more than a few dusty, false-fronted buildings perched between the train tracks and the Wolverine River. Nearby, several homesteaders had stripped the land clear of trees before abandoning it. Some went off to pan gold or work for the railroad, but most had hightailed it home with no plans of ever returning to Alaska(18).

Jack holds himself responsible for their difficulties in Alaska:

The truth squirmed in the pit of his stomach like a thing done wrong. This was too much work for a man of his age. He wasn't making headway, even working every day as long and hard as he could. After a long summer and snowless autumn, he was still nowhere near done clearing enough land to earn a living. He got a pitiful little potato harvest off one small field this year, and it scarcely did more than buy flour for the winter. He figured he had enough money left from selling his share in the farm Back East to last them one more year, but only if Mabel kept selling pies in town(16).

Soon, Betty at the restaurant also tells Jack, "I'm afraid we won't be needing any more pies after today"(17). Betty told him about employment at the mine. When Jack killed a moose, he was jubilant: "He'd done it. They had food for the winter. He would not go to the mine. He wanted to jump up and whoop and holler. He wanted to kiss Mabel hard on the lips. He wanted someone like George to smack him on the back and tell him, well-done"(66).

Initially, Jack's relationship with Mabel remains wobbly in Alaska. Mabel chooses to attempt suicide to escape the dull life of another lonely winter. When Faina enters their lives, everything changes. Faina is a mysterious character who first appears on the night Mabel and Jack create a snow girl. Mabel becomes fixated by the mystery girl after recalling a childhood Russian fairy tale about a childless couple and a snow maiden. Mabel believes that such a miracle happened. "Not only was the child a miracle, but she was their creation. One does not create a life and then abandon it to the wilderness" (87). Faina grows to trust Jack and seeks his assistance in burying her father:

Jack went to one knee beside the corpse and caught the strong smell of liquor. A green glass bottle was clenched in a frozen claw of a hand. Jack's stomach turned. How could a man do this, drink himself to death in front of his child?(106).

Jack understands the child is not some fairy creature but rather a feral child struggling to live alone in the wilderness. But he does not tell Mabel. Although Mabel and Jack behave like her parents, she refuses to leave her mountain home. She has an affinity for snow and travels further north in the summer, but she returns to Jack and Mabel in the winter. The pattern continues for eight years.

Faina changes when she meets Garrett. She decides to spend the summer with Garrett. Faina's life is drastically changed when she falls pregnant and marries Garrett. Jack felt that:

Faina would never again be the little girl he had seen darting through the winter trees, her feet light on the snow and her eyes like river ice. She had been magic in their lives, coming and going with the seasons, bringing treasures from the wilderness in her small hands. That child was gone, and Jack found himself mourning her(324).

Faina also tells Mabel on her wedding day, "I desire to be the mother you are to me"(341). She is an unorthodox wife who spends days in the forest. Faina's labor is hard and exhausting. After giving birth, she suffers an illness and a high fever. Mabel and Garrett accompany her outside to cool off in the snow. Mabel sleeps next to Faina. As Garrett and Jack wake her up, they discover Faina's attire but no sign of her. Eowyn Ivey employs exceptional literary devices such as foreshadowing and magical realism in her story. Faina's vanishing, in the end, remains enigmatic in the novel.

III. THE BOND WITH THE BENSONS

George Benson, a generous and helpful neighbor, befriends Jack and gives him the advice to shoot a moose to survive a lean winter and avoid working in the mine:

Well, see here—that's all you need to do. Hang some meat in the barn, and you and the wife will be set till spring. It won't be cake and caviar, but you won't starve... That's how it goes for a lot of us. Those first years are lean. I'm telling you, you might get sick of moose and potatoes, but you'll keep your neck safe(22).

In exchange for Jack's assistance with their farm, George and his elder sons work on Jack's farm alongside him. He is a friendly and giving neighbor. Esther is an independent, strong woman who doesn't conform to stereotypical gender roles. She is George's wife and the mother of three boys, including Garrett. Esther, George's wife, develops into Mabel's closest companion and ally. When Jack is hurt and unable to perform the labor alone, she accompanies Garrett to assist in the work on Jack and Mabel's farm. She also assists Mabel in taking care of Jay, the child of Faina and Garrett, after Faina vanishes.

Once Faina departs, Mabel and Jack are inconsolable. Nevertheless, contrary to when their baby tragically died, they now comfort one another. Over time, they develop a close relationship with Garrett, their grandson, and the Bensons, and Mabel and Jack embrace both the joys and the tragedies of their shared life. The *Snow Child* explores how our yearnings may lead us to a place of loss and provide us with healing by examining grief, family, and change themes. Faina's presence in Mabel and Jack's lives enables them to get past their anguish and into a new phase. Despite the peculiar makeup of their family, the Bensons, Jack, Mabel, and Fiana, have a close relationship.

IV. THE SISTERS

Mabel communicates through letters with her sister, Ada, throughout the novel. Their fondness for each other is revealed when Ada writes:

What a joy to read your letter, to see your lovely handwriting once again, and know you are alive and well. It must sound terribly outlandish to you, but to all of us here, it is as if you have been banished to the North Pole. It was a relief to know you are warm and safe and even have welcoming neighbors. They must be a rare blessing in that wilderness. I am pleased, too, to know you will once again pick up your sketchpad. I have always known you to be a talented artist. Won't you send us some little drawings of your new homeland? We are anxious to share in your adventures(383-384)

Ada is a grandmother. She regrets making fun of Mabel for being creative. Because the fairytale book is in Russian, she also sends a summary to Mabel. Ada informs Mabel that her whole family is fascinated by her and Jack's trips and that she appreciates the write ups and sketches about Alaska. Mabel responds with warmth thus:

We are well here, and I truly mean it. I know you thought us mad to move to Alaska, and for some time I wondered that myself. This past year, however, has made up for it all. I have begun to help more with the farm work. Imagine me—the one they always called “timid” and “delicate”—in the fields digging up potatoes and shoveling dirt. But it is wonderful feeling, to do work that really seems like work. Jack has transformed this untamed stretch of land that we call home into a flourishing farm, and now I can claim a small hand in it as well. Our pantry shelves are stocked with wild berry jams and jars of meat from the moose Jack shot this fall. Oh, I do sometimes miss “Back East,” as they call it here, and certainly, my heart longs to see you and everyone else in the family, but we recently decided we are here to stay. It has become our home, and Jack and I have a new way of life here that suits us well (206).

CONCLUSION

The Snow Child, a gem in Alaskan Literature, is exquisite, other worldly, and simultaneously sad and inspirational. The novel is clearly of the Alaskan landscape and ecology, and the milieu is beautifully depicted. It is always a story about humankind and its battle to survive in the brutal region. The family remains the cornerstone of human well-being. The tale is rich in family subtleties and has numerous references that provide a clearer understanding of the nature of the interactions the characters establish between themselves.

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