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**The Seminal Visibility of Belonging(less)ness: Unravelling the
Hyphenated Identity in Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed***

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Abstract: The novel *Halfbreed* is a biographical sketch of Maria Campbell, who confronted many barriers in her life as a woman belongs to Métis community. She was born in a family that was a mixture of Scottish, French, Cree, English, and Irish in northern Saskatchewan. She is so affluent in depicting the story of the survival, and of overcoming a sense of shame related to ethnic identity of her community. In fact Half-breeds are mixed race people who are part Native and part White. These communities had set up their own system of governance, had their own economy, and had their own cultures and traditions. Later when Canada took over, the government displaced the Half-breeds, by taking away their land rights. Suddenly they became 'Road Allowance People' to face the other world that was not so kind for their existence. This kind of cultural, emotional and geographical background diminished the hope of Campbell to work for the welfare of her community. This paper highlights the extreme discrimination that the author met with due to her poverty as well as her aboriginal roots.

Key words: discrimination, culture, aborigines, paranoia, identity.

Introduction

Maria Campbell's illustration of her community is a picturesque presentation of joys and sorrows, the oppressing and suppressing poverty, and the presence of frustrations and dreams. These things continued to stay with her for long and even followed her as she grows. The main issues of this (her) community was overheard and never paid much attention to. Some of them were commonly seen and encircled within the half-breed community were health issues, education, housing, diet and low income. From the words of Maria, one can conclude that it was poverty that

connected her family, and also her community at large. These conditions of Métis community were because of the policy of Canadian government. It always provided them land and shelter, but not as a permanent solution to their demand. It used to relocate them again and again only as a temporary solution, in order to assure land for immigrants. This caused the undeniable and painful struggle of Métis community during 19th century in Canada. Even the law of the land never projected them to own land. It is because of this they were made familiar with the term that was synonymous with their community name as 'Road Allowance People'. To chose one between 'physical conditions' and 'social impact' is always difficult, as one of them greatly influenced Maria's life. Each has in its own way influenced the author not only in establishing her career but also consolidating her personal life. The focus of this paper is not to prioritize one but as a whole how these things tried to discourage her role in her personal life as well as her role in her community.

Who are they?

Maria Campbell's autobiography *Halfbreed* (first published in 1973) provides a classic account of a young Métis woman who is true Native in her own land. The author as a narrator reveals her struggle to survive, her relentless efforts to come to terms with the past and to pave herself a way for a bright future. This desire of her is seen in the context of social oppression and violence. Who does the author represents at large and to which community she acts as a voice? Well, Half-breeds are poor and powerless and as an example from this novel it is evident that they are houseless too. This lack of housing enabled to move to "road-allowance-houses" (which are like shacks).

This famous work of Campbell's uncovers the main cultural differences between whites and half-breeds. As both these communities carry forward their distinct family structures, traditions and concepts, the author tries to acknowledge the differences between them. These differences can be considered to be at the lower level where the structural elements contribute to the 'uniqueness of Indian's situation'. Firstly, whites are different from half-breeds in 'holding together' the members of their families. Unlike whites', half-breeds have extended families in which two or more generations of the family members live together. Secondly, whites have no similarity with the half-breed families and other Indians where half-breeds as a community practice various spiritual rituals, traditions and pass over

their distinct cultural practices to the next generation. It is zzzzzzzzzalso evident that in her own life the author has been part of an extended family and the Cheechum, her grandmother taught Maria and her brothers and sisters, cousins their heritage, the greats of her community, as well as cultural values and norms of her own community. Finally, the most important characteristic that differentiates the Indians/half-breeds from whites is acknowledgement of the spiritual conception of the world. As it is a known thing that the Indians are highly spiritual, they always believe that they are right in their interpretation of the ever alarming natural and the supernatural. On the other side the whites are also strong in their belief that in subduing and dominating nature, the only way to create as well as to provide a view of nature in men's image. The author as well as her community has a high regard for these differences, especially in family and community structures of Indians who always give preference to sustain their identity, distinct conception of the world and their distinct culture.

Campbell tries to project herself openly that her views and comments are political in nature, as she considers herself as a revisionist. Her style is provocative, but all she can do by clearly describing her own life, by telling her own story, is to show the significant image of her community, with which she was bonded herself. She highlights the contrastive elements of whites with Natives, and status Indians with *Métis* (“half-breeds,” or non-status Native people) in a way that everyone who attempts to discover the *Métis* identity as something real, something definable. This may go along with the suggestion of Bonita Lawrence on the communities of non-status Indians or Native people in western Canada.

“by arbitrarily externalizing from Indianness an entire category of Indigenous people, designated ‘half-breeds’ and now called ‘Métis’”.(Bonita,18)

What is their Identity?

We can learn from this that ‘half-breeds’ are created by arbitrary externalization in western Canada due to various factors. These factors let these communities to move sidetracks only because of the policies that were in favor of immigrants and not in favor of these. Some say that there were causes within and these causes are temporal in nature, multiple in character. In fact the reasons are not accorded a common view but enlightened many intellectuals to observe and consolidate their position.

For this we can even add how the literary critics looked at it. Some literary critics viewed it as an essential critical and political concept of aboriginal identity. It also tells us about how this identity contributed to the living conditions of this community. In the words of Moya that it “provide[s] modes of articulating and examining significant correlations between lived experience and social location”(Moya 4).

The debate on their cultural identity or any other identity, with which they are recognized, never changed their social status and social living. The conditions remained the same and no hope in whatsoever the way they rely on except an assurance for their relocation. After all this kind of commentary never improved their lives and one who presented this group’s identity is none other than the author herself. In fact, Campbell herself has commented that her work is aimed at portraying her group identity: “it’s not my story I’m telling; it’s the story of a people” (Balan 85). However, critics have made a variety of claims about the representation of this author on behalf of her group is not so convincing for the reason that this group also have some historical significance. This connection to history was not agreed upon either by Halfbreed or one of the important characters of this novel Cheechum.

When the author claims of her identity or her group’s identity, there were others to call her or identify her with the pan-tribal “Native people” and view her as part of the nationalist Métis community. This view again contrasts the opinion of some critics who worry that this kind of reference is against the essentialist conceptions of identity which do not agree “the instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories” (Moya 3). They only consider that Campbell is a person of mixed descent (her father is white), as an example of a ‘fluid, hybrid identity’. Some are there to deny this and say that the inherent identity is not to be focused much, as there is scope for addressing the identity which has been politically mobilized in this text. For many critics who are specialized in post-colonial theory, this process of knowing one’s identity is based on the resistance shown to non-Aboriginal society and government. But for the writers who are termed as Aboriginal writers, Halfbreed works primarily through the sense of shared identity. How the Aboriginal people have constantly strived for the whole community rather for the individual. This primary objective of this paper is to delimit the scope of acknowledging the identity and how this has been hyphenated from time to time. The role of the novel

Halfbreed in providing a better understanding of the community as well as its identity is remarkable.

“Now I know that you belong to me. Don’t let anyone tell you That anything is impossible, because if you believe honestly in Your heart that there’s something better for you, then it will all come true. Go out there and find what you want and take it, but always remember who you are and why you want it”. (P, 98)

These words from her great grandmother tells us more about the attitude one should possess in this community in order to surge forward in their lives. They are well guided to handle whatever that life offers to them. Campbell’s early life was educative on these lines which never diminished her hope to succeed in her life. The words of Cheechum influenced the author a lot and perfected al that she performed in her life with few ignorable exceptions. Apart from laying the hope in young mind Cheechum also emphasizes the fact that the author belongs to a particular community whose identity should not be forgotten for any cause that may inflict them with non-belongingness.

Cheechum has never lost her hope in waiting for something to happen positively as she is always considered by many as well as the author as an optimist. Again this is not only owned by Cheechum alone as Cheechum too represents her community like her great granddaughter. She has a great command over worldly knowledge and has the ability to interpret anything in a righteous and exact way. But where do they get this knowledge? Are they provided with such an environment where they can pick up on these or allowed to learn on their own from their strugglesome life? The people of this breed are not discouraged so easily. They are full of positive spirits. Their role never ended in looking after their families but extended it to the political and Native organizations and their activities more enthusiastically than others.

“Wait my girl. It will come. I’ve waited for ninety years and listened to many men. I have seen men quit and have felt as you do, but we have to keep waiting and as each man stands unafraid we have to believe he is the one and encourage him. You’ll feel discouraged like this many times in your life but, like me, you’ll wait”. (P76-77)

The undying spirit to face challenges and encouraging those who stand by is one of the characteristic features of this community. The way one supports the other even when the reliable men deny theirs, never betrayed the women of this group from moving ahead to taste the success. This is very much true in the life of the author. Her father and many other men in her life disappointed her throughout in extending their care and trust. All of them are not so courageous to counter the developments, which enabled the dissent and non-belongingness of this community progress further. The author knows it better because she was taught by her grandmother that one who has to wait till one finds a right and suitable person in life who can bring peace and change fortunes for them. As it is a regular thing for these to feel discouraged by various factors but how determined and also patient they are to foresee a definite change is inexplicable and sounds awesome. There is number of such that we can collect from this work especially from this author for her emotional representation of everything.

Conclusion

Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is born from an oral tradition which is a legacy from her mother culture. Campbell has no difficulty in adopting from her mother culture and from mainstream culture to create her characters. All the heroics that she has learned/heard from the oral traditions of foremothers,(as we can't use forefathers here for a valid reason) are put together brilliantly and presented diligently. In fact the literary conventions of English are taken from the dominant culture such as autobiography, where they 'write selves who speak back to the mainstream communities' that have described all the heroics of the past to them. But in author's view of her 'past to present' the women use their 'mother culture's oral techniques of storytelling' as a form of resistance and denial to the colonizing forces which belongs to the mainstream communities.

However, both the mother culture and mainstream culture are similar in their artistic productions and whatever they inhabit, are 'implicated in their narrative constructions as well'. Here we find that some women have the passion to carve places for themselves in the mainstreams' discourses by constantly producing their autobiographies. Fortunately they have a rich traditional background and they just reproduced the oral traditions learned from their foremothers. Each of the women of this indigenous community,

considers writing as an effective tool to empower herself and to ‘provide evidence of and evidence for’ the oral traditions of her own culture.

There is always an attempt that allows one to speak back to racist and sexist mainstream discourses which actually narrow down the scope of presenting from this community, but the author has face it and responded to sexism in her own life in and out of her home communities. Campbell work is also addressed to a mainstream society that stereotypes "half-breeds," and to her own Métis culture that ‘believes in female passivity’. This novel *Halfbreed* discloses that women can fight back, only to declare war on the discourses that will ‘not allow them the freedom and opportunity to be complex’.

It is very unfortunate that these communities remain in poor light even after number of governments changed from the time of colonization of their homeland. It is not their struggle for survival alone helped them shed poverty; it is the people who extended their support emotionally to overcome these struggles. When we speak of seminal visibility, which never permitted this community to lay their strong foundation in their homeland, the much talked non-belongingness continued further and further without any argument/discourse. The impact of this kind social status is very much discouraging to any community that has lot to offer from its rich tradition to the society. Against all oddities, the community prefers to strengthen itself, as it always did, only to prove to the world that theirs is not to be considered as ‘hyphenated’. they are the true representatives of many good qualities, as we witnessed this, when they moved from place to place only to accommodate ‘others’ to settle down. They may carry this feeling of non-belongingness with them, as they have right to do so, but it is not expected from the mainstream culture or its representative to hold back the view that they are not ‘Half-breeds’.

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