

Racism And Discrimination In Maria Campbell's Halfbreed

Dr. B. ABINAYA BHARATHI

Assistant Professor of English
A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College for Women
Tuticorin-2

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli

Abstract:

Maria Campbell is an outstanding Metis writer and known for her novel *Halfbreed* (1973). She recounts her experiences being subjected to discrimination from white dominated people and the government. She belongs to the group called Metis who are the mixed people in the society of Canada. They are the combination between the community and group of culture who are discriminated in everywhere in the society. Campbell shows the sorrows of such community through her words and writings. The article gives an idea about Metis people and the vulgarity they faced in the society and in particular, the life of Maria which devastated her dream.

Keywords: Culture, language, domination, bullying, and discrimination.

Discussion:

Throughout Maria Campbell's autobiography *Halfbreed*, Campbell depicted most of her life from the beginning of her childhood to the time where she grew up and becomes more concern with the Aboriginal community by educating herself with Aboriginal history. But throughout her journey, she is struggling to survive and to overcome her past and find ways to build a better future. Her childhood was relatively happy until the death of her mother, and everything went downhill after. Medicine has played an important role on the ups and downs of her life.

Campbell is well experienced to know about the life of Métis. As she is from Gabriel Dumont's family, she has heard many stories about her ancestors and follows many sequences of activities like knitting, sewing, storytelling, jigging, etc. As a family, they visit their relative Qua Chich's house once a year and have a great time there with cows. Pudding that is made using the cow's

first milking is toothsome and Maria's grannie Qua Chich would say a prayer in Cree, a dialect of halfbreed and then serve it to all.

After the World War II, the mixed-race of Métis have diversified with English, French, Irish, and Scottish, and formed three main clans like "The Arcand's, were a huge group of ten or twelve brothers. They are half French, half Cree" (HB 25). Next, St. Denys, Villeneuve, Morrisette and Cadieux speak more French and pretend like farmers with poor horses and cows. The final third clan is the Isbisters, Campbells, and Vandals, a Scottish, French, Cree, English, and Irish.

The language spoken by these people is entirely different from others like a combination of everything as hunters, trappers, and farmers. They have highly excessive pride about their clan and maintain its uniqueness. They carry unreasonable belief for their own language. Maria's father puts it in this manner "No pot to piss in or a window to throw it out" (HB 26) and she too gives the best example to differentiate Indians and Halfbreeds as "they were completely different from us-quiet when we were noisy, dignified even at dances and get-togethers. Indians were passive-they would get angry at things done to them but would never fight back, whereas Halfbreeds were quick tempered, quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget" (26).

Campbell uses her simple and elegant language in an incredible manner to describe poverty, racism, violence and desperateness. She picturises the life of many young Métis and Aboriginal people in the society. Moreover, this novel gives many open descriptions about their community's beauty of culture. Campbell says,

When we reached the house everyone crowded around to kiss us and shake our hands. The home was very small with a packed dirt floor and a fireplace made of clay or mud and willow sticks. There was a table but we all ate outside. I loved fish and ate until I burst. An old man sitting across from me was eating so quickly that it was hard to keep up with him, and as fast as he ate the bones flew out of the side of his mouth. We visited there until late at night, then watch the people pow-wow until almost morning. (HB 42)

The familial concerns of Maria in Halfbreed make her elope and marry Darrell at the age of fifteen. She believes that if she gets married, she can take care of her young siblings and be free from foster care, orphanage, or the mud shack. This becomes a false belief when Darrell reports of her siblings to the Welfare Authority. She obeys to the words of Cheechum always but fails once when she marries Darrell, who is white. "Cheechum was heart-broken; She refused to come when she heard that Darrell was white, saying that nothing good ever comes from a mixed

marriage. She had hoped that Smoky and (I) would marry” (HB 105). She is driven by cruel fate and oppression in every stage of life. Maria says that “The Halfbreeds came here from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the prejudice and hatred that comes with the opening of a new land” (HB 9). Her studies in school go down when she realizes the treatment of half-breeds as a punishment that demotivates her to stay out of school. The unhealthy and unhygienic environment around her pushes her into depression. She shares her bitter experiences at a residential school where they are not allowed to speak in their own language. She has not forgotten the punishment that she receives because of that violation and a striking picture is given:

I do recall most vividly a punishment I once received. We weren’t allowed to speak Cree, only French and English, and for disobeying this, I was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light, and locked in for what seemed like hours. I was almost paralyzed with fright when they came to let me out. I remember the last day of school, and the sense of freedom I felt when Dad came for me. (HB 44)

Maria encounters the first insulting situation when her parents walk into the stores. The people in town treat the halfbreeds as thieves and doubt their genuineness while purchasing things in the shops. Even whites insult them as someone says, “Halfbreeds are in town, hide your valuables” (HB 36). Then, the usual discrimination happens in the shop when the men move forward and their wives put their heads down. When Maria notices this discrimination, she orders her brothers and sisters not to walk like them.

The domination over the halfbreeds exists wherever they go in the novel. To make the situation more miserable, white men enjoy beating and yelling at women. Women started drinking slowly but surely. Gradually, the same is seen in Maria’s life when she realises Darrell’s husband is ditching her. She starts roaming in the streets with little Lisa in her hand. Due to severe mental stress and depression, Maria’s life is affected profoundly, and loneliness surrounds her. In order to escape from such a gloomy situation, she takes pills and drinks a lot. Women enter business as sex workers when they could not encounter and balance their lives full of poverty, domestic violence, racism, etc. Maria puts it in her own words as,

To live in that dream world meant I had to have enough money to pay for it. Heroin meant money and lots of it. That kind of money meant I had to keep the man who was keeping me happy. To keep him happy meant I had to keep my beauty and sex appeal. Heroin, unfortunately, doesn’t improve either one. I soon started to go

downhill. I sold my clothes and jewellery just as fast as I got them and became more desperate as each day went by, worrying about tomorrow and my next fix. By this time my sole obsession was dope. I didn't care anymore about anything, not even my baby. I didn't hate, love, or care. Nothing mattered. I was like a block of ice - I had no feelings. (HB 119)

By receiving remuneration from the sex industry, Aboriginal women have survived until they decide to commit suicide at one point in time. Substantial impoverishment flood in the life of Maria and the unstable everyday life result in extensive deprivation. The joint tenderness and warmth towards her domestic life vanish when Darrell complaints to the welfare society. Maria plans to sacrifice her entire life only for her siblings. Darrell breaks her idea and her siblings are taken away permanently. Wherever Maria steps forward, fate surrounds her and leads her towards its way. However, she tries to live as one among her people in society. The sufferings and loneliness that she faces drive her away from connecting her life with Aboriginal women's normal stereotyped behaviour. As the British sociologist and writer Ann Oakley put it in *Sex, Gender and Society*, "Sex" is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. "Gender", however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into "masculine" and "feminine". (16)

In such social situations, they are deliberately excluded from groups and are shamed because of their reputation. They harass the victim intentionally through text messages including sexual jokes and comments through electronic mails. It is to be noted that both the perpetrators and the victims experience harassment in parallel. It automatically causes the victims to harm themselves at one point and increases suicidal attempts at a very young age. This is due to their discrimination of the socio-cultural background. A strong cultural identity is shown in this phase which enhances the optimistic thoughts of the Métis towards their community. Maria does not understand the ironic life of the whites. She remembers Cheechum's advice given about the white people who engage in such works to just ignore such activities.

The works of Campbell have influenced the academic sphere of the Canadian Aboriginals. She uses literature to change the prejudices that prevail in the society and the devastating consequences that the people face. Following her path, many Aboriginal writers have started writing their own stories to share their sufferings as well. They all try to expose the truth based on their own story and that of their siblings, parents, and friends. In

Women, Culture & Politics, Angela Davis advocates for the oppressed and exploited women,

The roots of sexism and homophobia are found in the same economic and political institutions that serve as the foundation of racism in this country and, more often than not, the same extremist circles that inflict violence on people of colour are responsible for the eruptions of violence inspired by sexist and homophobic biases. Our political activism must clearly manifest our understanding of these connections. (12)

It is essential to know how literature transforms a life history into a literary piece of work. Every reader starts experiencing the hardships that the authors undergo. Margaret Atwood discusses the short stories of Thomas King, who is a mixed-blood writer. In her review, she argues that “the comfortable thing about a people who do not have a literary voice, or at least not one you can hear or understand, is that you never have to listen to what they are saying about you” (297).

Domination never stops in many places. Campbell ironically explains a situation that even God does not like Métis presence in the church. Campbell’s mother is a Catholic and she once longed to attend the Sunday mass in the church. It is then she realizes that, the moment she entered the church, the priest stopped his preaching. He wanted the Métis to leave the place right then and so, keeping their head bowed down they left the church. Cheechum stands as a standing example for Maria, who is educating her about the discrimination and perception that whites hold in their society.

Maria says that it is not easy to understand the catastrophic effects that Christianity has on her culture. As per her statement, Christianity has the ruling power to construct and design the environment. She views this with the perception of Métis while recalling her past life. The system of patriarchy plays a predominant role in showing its leadership qualities and moral authority over Métis. Campbell realizes the superstitious belief their people have in God and how that they never vocalize anything “against the church or the priest regardless of how bad they were” (HB 32). But Cheechum clearly perceives the natural scheme of the white people and she does not like to follow the laws of the Catholic God. She gives many opinions on the determination of men and women of the other community.

However, Maria Campbell starts to escape her identity at the end of the novel to seek a better life, following it she steps forward into the world of whites. She recovers and finds herself successfully and helps her people build life. From her, many Metis

have built their ethnic spirit by walking out from the influence of whites and find themselves to be united.

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