



MARIA CAMPBELL'S *HALF BREED*: A DISSENTING STATEMENT OF NATIVE CANADIAN WOMANHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Native Canadian Literature is essentially an embodiment of socio-political statement addressing the profound ideological moorings of resistance and consolidation. It is very much a resultant output of persecutions and betrayals. It is the literary medium that serves as a testimony to their deeply felt painful urge for expression of identity as Natives or Aboriginals. It is a concomitant picture of the realistic representation of inherent personal problems like alcoholism, suicides, poverty and domestic violence. There are other social issues that demand attention are holocaust as perpetrated by Colonialism. It is attendant with all its maladies of atrocities impinged upon the third world nations. Their writings strike a wonderful balance between native culture and contemporary society and cultural amalgamation. Maria Campbell's *Half Breed* is a restatement of Canadian multiculturalism. She ardently embraces Metishness as a rightful identity. With a sense of equanimity, she perceives the traumatic experiences as transformative forces. In a note of autobiographical tone, *Half Breed* embodies how an individual faces the throes as an individual and takes collective survival in the winds of power transformation.

Key words: socio-political statement, Natives/Aboriginals, Colonialism, multiculturalism, Metishness.

Literature of every generation negates with the claims of earlier generation and the prevalent set of values perpetuated and authenticated by the social milieu of that time. Unlike the traditional set of convictions, Native Canadian Literature proves to be the authentic voice of the struggle and strife for identity and emergence of a cultural statement. Among the Native Canadian writers Maria Campbell stands apart in rekindling the fire of Native Identity. Her autobiographical statement *Half Breed* is an overt representation of success, that has withstood against the stigma of Native Identity.

Maria Campbell addresses the parochial mindset of racial thinking and its consequences in a multicultural society in which non-status Natives or half-breed are an integral part. She holds that multiculturalism is a force to be recon with, in the context of racial thinking. She faithfully depicts the oppressing conditions and the shame shared by Natives. As a warrior against discrimination based on race, Maria Campbell envisages the mortifying experiences of Natives as transformative forces. *Half Breed* testifies the strife of Native women, who are subjected to racial oppression and violence.

Maria Campbell encompasses the struggle of the Native women for survival and their hope of evolving an optimistic future in the face of repressive and hostile conditions. She undertakes to present an autobiographical account of herself who is in favour of remonstrative attitude. The juxtaposition of the strata of whites with natives and with Metis, who are non-status Native people is awe inspiring. The 'Metis' as designated are the half-breed, who are non-categorized. Mari Campbell identifies the Metis as the ones who deserve to be defined in the multicultural setting of Canadian society. Emphatically, she argues that 'Metis' are to be defined by themselves but not by the colonial yardsticks. She fervently advocates the empowerment of Metis, by way of winning consent of the majority in the multicultural Canada. From being a state of existential nothingness in terms of identity, Maria Campbell gains the consent of Canadians in redefining Metis as an ethnic cultural category.

Campbell espouses the medium of autobiography to relate her encounters with the sordid saga of realities. This literary tool is mended to weave her experiences across cultural boundaries. Thus her autobiography attains the status of an active statement of political activism. Her body of presentation is abound in gruesome realities laced with the conditions of Metis, and women as well. The impelling circumstances of expressing herself in writing becomes an existential necessity.

Like me the land changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search with in myself. That is when I decided to write about my life...write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams. (Half Breed. 2)

Campbell traces her life growing through Metis community at Saskatchewan in a poverty ridden family. The death of her mother left a terrible blow to her young self, hitherto been happily spent sharing the affection of her mother. The separation of siblings and mother left her desolate in a hostile

society afflicted with racial indifference. Her desperate attempt to get out of misery by marrying an abusive white turns out to be a failed dream. It further worsened her misery by leading to drug addiction and alcoholism. Her condition slid down when she had become a victim of prostitution and resolved to end her miserable life by committing suicide.

Life offers her a second choice through her strong willed great grand mother Cree. Her suffering is mitigated when she realizes the greater social stigma than her personal misery. Campbell's grand mother, whom she dearly addresses as Cheechum instilled the much needed faith in her. She recollects:

Great Grandma, whom I always called 'Cheechum'... often told me stories of the Rebellion and of the Half breed people...never accepted defeat at Batoche and she would always say, " Because they killed Riel they think they have killed us too, but some day, my girl, it will be different." (H.B.11)

Campbell's revolutionary activism is seen when she reminisces the gloomy experiences during the Metis Rebellion, the Battle of Batoche of 1885. The awakening call is the breaking of the collective silence of Metis. Her documentation of the historical events is an act of substantiating her stance for the struggle mode she has undertaken. She records the ramifications of the execution of Metis legendary Louis Riel, on the apparent alibi of treason. Campbell musters strength and exploits every opportunity to transform her ignominy into faith to wage battle against racism and insolence. It makes her utter a poignant statement:

I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: this is what it was like; this what it is still like. I know that poverty is not still ours alone. (H.B. 9)

The inclusiveness of the idea, "...not still our alone" resonates the war cry of a drawn battle with circumstances.

The thin line between biography and autobiography lies in the inclusion of emotions. Campbell's autobiography can be viewed as an alternative history. While portraying her intense pent up emotions, she projects the parallel contemporary

events that account for the recording of social events. It also establishes Campbell's perspective of history of Canada in a multicultural perspective. More over autobiography serves the role of self exploration or self discovery. This process of self actualization in a given context helps form individual version of history. It also challenges the Colonial representation of Natives, and pitches a counter narrative to the hegemonic claims of the accepted history. Thus alternative history provide the needed space for projecting the identity of the ignored, such as Halfbreed Metins. Julia V. Emberley opines that *Half Breed* is an important example of how Metis women writers reclaim the revoking of cultural positions. In tune with these ideas Campbell recreates the ways that explore the identity of Metis by exercising iconoclastic tendencies against the assumptions of the hegemony.

The sole debasing self- abnegation finds candid illustration from the recounting of Maria Campbell. In order to receive the benefits of the welfare schemes she has to hide her identity. In one such incident of humiliation, Campbell recalls how her friend advised her: "If you want help, never tell them the truth. Act ignorant, timid and grateful" (H.B. 153). In a way it accentuates the need for imitating by self effacing the Metin identity. "I went to the office in a ten year old threadbare red coat, with old boots and a scarf. I looked like whitefist Lake Squaw and that's exactly what the social worker thought. He insisted that I go the Department of Indian Affairs" (H.B. 155). Such gruesome incidents remind the people of how deep rooted the racial discrimination has percolated into the life of Natives in Canada. Campbell bitterly comments it as "blankets of shame." The self-respect embodied in the character of her grand mother, Cheechum is testified as: "My Cheechum used to tell me when the government gives you something, they take all you have in return—your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul." (H.B. 159)

Half Breed is perceived as an ethnic statement and a trail of self-discovery. In fulfilling the objective, it promotes therapeutic influence and reframes the emotions into the narration of the author. Campbell extends the tenet as a tool to objectively analyse oneself; and in the process eschews shame and guilt

associated with her origin of being an Halfbreed in social status and the stigma she carries painfully. The overarching growth from the state of self-conscious to social-conscious leads her to be a part of AA group which accommodates other Natives. The Native movement in Alberta provides for an opportunity to fight for political and cultural rights. The sense of self actualization which is reinforced by the knowledge of native history instills in her the much needed confidence and sharpens her potentialities. In a state of introspection Campbell juxtaposes her experiences of other Metis people with that of hers. The progress and the spirit of rejuvenation is tangible as she perseveres to master her new found identity. With a few hopeful events, she mustered confidence in her acts of working for transformation. She remarks:

For these past couple of years, I have stopped being the idealistically shiny-eyed young women once I was, I realize that an armed revolution of Native people will never come about... we would only end up oppressing some one else. (H.B. 184)

Being an Halfbreed for Campbell is a group identity, unlike the individuals who long for secluded identity. "It is my story, I'm telling; it is the story of people" (H.B. 85). The long hibernation and sluggishness in the process of striving for the rights of the Natives, she remarks hopefully that her people may sleep for one hundred years, but when they wake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back. Halfbreed's identity is strengthened by the Native scholars who advocated for the Native nationalism. Taking cue from Campbell's notion of identity of Metis people, it has been critically viewed from the postmodern critical representations. Instead of assigning them the binary definition as pure or Native the postmodern representation takes into account the hybrid identity. Campbell's *Half Breed* espouses language as a tool of resistance. She has a range of usage of English to Mitchief to Cree, making her an essentially hybrid author. The critical view of Jodi Lundgren is apt, "Hybrid by definition, Metis identity is predicted upon what is an inescapable and characteristic feature of all all post colonial societies". (Canadian Literature. 144)

Campbell's *Half Breed* is an autobiography that lends the perspective of post colonial political resistance. She seems to have projected herself identified with historical subjectivity, thus dismantling the stereotypical constructs that are popular about the Natives. It is an act of resistance to the colonial imposition by a Native, more so by a woman. She herself remarks " I write this all for you, to tell you what it is like to be a Half Breed woman in our country (H.B. 8). In the post colonial critique 'writing' is seen as resistance, where as for the colonizers it is a way of preserving the past. Thus recollection and writing of the past is an act of narrative resistance. *Half Breed* yields to many critical interpretations. In its significant contribution, it primarily stands as an act of consolidating Native identity and literature. Since it undertakes to transmit the sensibilities of a victim of racial discrimination it is an authentic text of suffering and literary resistance by a woman author of Metis community.

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