

## An Analysis of Self and Gender in Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*

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### Abstract

*The aim of this study is to inspect the elements of feminism in Maria Campbell's Halfbreed. The study explicates how patriarchal society is treating women by their race, culture, economic status and mainly in terms of their gender. Maria Campbell as a radical feminist writer has set a new climate in which she has revealed how women must handle suppression, discrimination and trauma very effectively. Maria has disclosed that the opportunity not only in education, but also equal rights in all grounds can grant liberation to women whereas all these opportunities for Metis women is far away. Moreover, women even after gaining these equalities are marginalized by the patriarchy. That, it finds way to suppress women by any means and it is becoming a continuous process day by day. Thus, the society keeps on influencing certain corrupt point of view and in return, feminism keeps reacting vehemently to it. Notably, such act of the patriarchal society completely annihilates women severely. Hence, the paper investigates on the treatment of gender difference in the memoir Halfbreed and Maria Campbell's purpose in finding the "Self" in spite of various challenges.*

**Keywords:** feminism, canadian literature, identity, gender, self

### Introduction

The Cree-Metis writer, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) is an outstanding autobiographical work that has become the foundation for the indigenous literature in Canada revealing the difficult experience of Indigenous people. The memoir brings to the readers the real struggle of a Metis woman in gaining a strong identity. Moreover, Campbell has clearly portrayed the loss of identity and the confused state of her people through her work. Also, she reveals how she has turned from a state of passivity to a state of positivity with the help of her burning spirit of feminism. Moreover, her psychological growing up has become the motivation for Canadian children that, her memoir is prescribed in the Canadian school syllabus. Moreover, she has made a lasting impact politically by taking part in many social movements advocating Aboriginal rights for Metis women.

One of the daring writers of Canada is Maria Campbell, born in April 26, 1940 in Park Valley, Saskatchewan. She is more than an author that she is highly an influential person in Canadian politics. She speaks four languages Cree, Michif, Saulteaux, and English. The traumatic incidents happened in her life has mooted her to express her painful experience with others in the form of writing. Notably, she

has chosen multiple genres of writing such as novel, plays, broadcast and filmmaking to publicise her revolutionary views. This versatile writer is actually a drop out of school because of poverty and death of her mother that she had to take care of her siblings at the age of 12 as she is the eldest of eight children. Maria belongs to Metis community which is seen as a socially out casted ethnic group because of its mixed origin. And, her family comes under the tribal titles "The Isbisters", "Campbells", and "Vandals" and they are mix of Scottish, French, Cree, English and Irish. Being a Metis woman, she had undergone suppression in multiple of ways. That, she is abused by her white husband Darrel, she couldn't take care of her sibling and her child and experienced conflicts internally and externally through the systematic racism prevailed in Canada during the time that has even pushed her to do sex work for the survival. In spite of all her troubles, she has bounced back as a socialist at the age of twenties that she organized her community in order to uplift them. In the year 1969, she published a law book *Many Laws* where she highlights the issues of indigenous people who moves to cities.

Her untiring social work has pictured her as one of the most influential person of Canada. Through her active

participation as political activist in several social movements, she fights for elevating Metis as a proud identity. She raises voice for Aboriginal rights and importantly for the rights of Aboriginal women. Her first book is *Halfbreed* (1973) in which she has mentioned about her journey of self-discovery amidst all the social hurdles. She has published three children's book *People of the Buffalo*, *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* and *Riel's People*, through which, she inculcates the heritage of Metiness to Aboriginal children. She has also written a short story *Blankets of Shame* which has attracted many readerships. Her play *Flight* is considered as the first Aboriginal theatre production in Canada through which she has showcased the tradition of Aboriginal art practices.

Maria's memoir mainly centres on the concept of "Self" because all her depictions in the work brings to the readers the dramatic change in her attitude towards life as a successful woman. The concept of self is nothing but a state of human development and growth. It focusses primarily on the development of a person's empathy towards others. It is the fundamental component in a person's growth. It is also understood that one's early or childhood life may have contributed to the formation of one's sense of self. Maria experience shame from her childhood days onwards. She has witnessed the white children's discrimination of Metis children in schools and the racist's treatment of Metis in public which have strongly settled in her subconscious. However, Maria has developed the spirit of empowerment from her childhood days onwards that makes her "Self" a stronger one. At that period of her life, she started constructing a strong "self" but it is also disturbed by racism and patriarchy continuously. The following lines are evident about Maria's attitude in her childhood days. Experiencing the humiliation in school Maria says, "no-good Halfbreeds." So it is clear that she has developed a strong aversion to her Metis identity and wanting to embrace white identity. But, her great grandmother Cheechum warns her saying, "The White man saw that that was a more powerful weapon that anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he uses and still doe today. Already they are using on you. They try to make you hate your people" (Maria 51)

Cheechum's role in upbringing Maria with nourishing the values of Aboriginal tradition and practices is immense. She tells stories about Riel and Dumont and about their

rebellious nature who were their brave ancestors. Her moral support has greatly shaped Maria's "Self". Maria says, "The years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me. Cheechum said, 'You'll find yourself, and you'll find brothers and sisters.' I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive" (*Halfbreed* 184) Cheechum always encourage her to be rebellious against self-humiliation.

Maria's defensive nature against humiliation is seen in her childhood days. She even dislikes her parent showing partiality among children. That, male children become father's favourite. By her parent's this kind of behaviour, the development of her "self" is slightly disturbed. It is clear that she could sense the gender discrimination starts right from her family. She says "At the age of seven I was kept home with momma and the old ladies while my brothers went with dad to the store and to the homes of his friends." However, after the death of her mother, when she was 12 years old, she has become more responsible that she learns her role as a backbone to the family.

After being drop out from school, Maria has left only with the spirit of empowerment. She had to take care of her siblings and her father. She believed marrying a rich white man would give her empowered, respectful and privileged life. And this shows, she thinks in a more traditional manner. Isam Shihada has stated in an essay about the patriarchal framework of marriage,

"Before the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were considered weak intellectually and physically. Such concept was consolidated by social conventions. According to that concept, society was divided into two worlds: private and public world. The private world implied that women should stay at home. They were not allowed to work or learn. They were educated only in a way that suited their claimed weak nature such as sewing, nursing and painting. The sole vocation for women was marriage."

By means of marriage, Maria wanted to change her identity. She had even rejected Smoky's marriage offer, saying, "Marry you? You've got to be joking! I'm going to do something with my life besides make more Halfbreeds" (*Halfbreed* 101). She wished to marry a white man but it is against the wish of Cheechum. She knows that it would result in dependence to a male sex. Also, this decision shows that she has yielded to the patriarchy by means of

marriage where she involuntarily accepts male leadership by depending on a husband character. She also sees such dependency as an extension of the male identity. In such context, the system of marriage itself creates inferiority complex among the women. Maria's desire, wish and wants are not respected by Darrel after their marriage. She wanted her sibling to be with her but Darrel puts them in Asylum. He took her to Vancouver. They always engaged in quarrel with each other which shows that she has not completely yielded to the male dominance. As a result, Darrel withdrew all the financial support to her and she is pushed in a position to take care of her livelihood alone. It leads her to move in to prostitution. It is the state she loses her "self". And, in order to forget the pain, she started using drugs and alcohol.

The negative consequences of discriminations and suppression in Maria's life is the feeling of insecure. Maria is made to feel insecure from the beginning till her age of 20 because of racial discrimination, poverty and unsuccessful marriage life. After the death of her mother and as an elder sister, she feels the responsibility to take care of her family with the insecure feeling. She marries Darrel at her young age in order to fight with her insecure feeling. She has consciously internalized the male leadership framework of the society in order to overcome insecure feeling. The dependency among husband and wife is explicitly expected by the social norms. In turn, Maria's dependency on Darrel has made her life a nightmare. She depends on him for physical and emotional reasons. She wanted physical protection and wished to fulfil her materialistic need but both has been absent in her marriage life. Also, she longed for an emotional dependency but Cheechum's words are alone her only moral support to fight insecure feeling. At this point of time, Maria becomes completely weak and has lost her "self". Thus, her dependency to men physically and financially has made her weak in the patriarchal society. Such dependency has degraded her "self". Hence the marriage hasn't brought a positive outcome in her life.

Maria Campbell has struggled to protect her live and Self in the survival pursuit. If she had submitted to death or continue to live in shame, her "self" would have been tarnished. She has endured the harsh humiliations. She says, "Many people have written many things about withdrawal, but writing it can't describe the pain, ugliness and terror you go through" (*Halfbreed* 120). She didn't

withdraw from her survival fight that she is overpowered by Cheechum's words. She says "because this time my Cheechum was with me the whole time, I could feel her presence in the room with me and I wasn't afraid" (*Halfbreed* 124).

There is a strong connection between self and identity that if anyone doesn't have "self" naturally they can't embrace a strong identity. Hence, when the self-become so weak, strong identity can't be exposed. Maria's "self" became very weak after been abandoned by her husband. Also, she suffered nervous breakdown because of her addiction to alcohol. She attempted suicide twice and she got admitted in hospital. This is the very pathetic state in her life that shows, she has lost her "self" and identity completely. However, she was revitalized by her great grandmother's words. She says, "I began to understand what Cheechum had been trying to say to me and to see how I had misinterpreted what she had taught me. ... I four way of life were to improve I would have to find other people like myself, and together try to find an alternative. (*Halfbreed* 143).

Lack of believing in oneself that comes from the patriarchal society is something imposed on women. Maria couldn't believe in her "Self" during the climax part of her life's story because she has been tightly held by the patriarchy. The society has negative and critical mind-set in viewing all the female counter parts and Maria has yielded to the patriarchal construct. The patriarchy has made her to feel alienated, humiliated and less confident. There have been two "self" that one is an internal one and other is an external one. Maria's internal "Self" is completely infected by the patriarchy. However, she has suppressed the first one to embrace the later to gain an identity for her community. If she didn't wear this social mask it would have paralyzed her ordinary life. Though, Maria belongs to the lower sections of the Canadian multicultural society, she has developed a vision and common sense about her world view. She started to pay attention to everyone in her family and also the members of her community. She feels sorry for the old women of her community suffers in hospitals. She started to care for women like her who are caught in situations like poverty, loneliness and suppression. She wanted good things to happen not only to her but also to the other women.

Her, this kind of act has created a strong external “self” to form an overpowering identity for her.

Maria started to sort out the prevailing issues in her community. First, she finds fault with the male member of her community saying that they didn't perform their gender role in order to uplift their people's life. She says, “I blamed them for what had happened to me... and for all the girls who were on the city streets. If they had only fought back, instead of giving up, these things would never have happened. It's hard to explain how I felt. I hated our men, and yet I love them” (*Halfbreed* 123). It is the time she has realized the need of her role irrespective of gender in gaining political support for her community. She started to believe in her “self” and to realize her internal and external self for the sake of other's benefit. She suppressed the internal self and organized her community through her external self that has become her identity in the later part of her life.

She has understood the philosophy of life and its importance that she finds perfections by scrutinizing the incidents and events happened around her. It makes her to contemplate about its reason and justification and if not, there will be no difference between an empowered women and an ordinary woman of the weaker section. She has surpassed beyond the activities of the male members of her community in order to gratify her “Self”. Hence, the problems in the life of Maria is a driving force for her to set a strong identity.

Maria takes control over her identity over her past and present. What she thinks as shame is no more a shame that she embraces Metis as a proud identity. She advocates it by involving in various social activities. She wanted to prove Metis identity as something noble. When she moved back to her hometown, she comes to know about the importance of tradition through the teaching of Cheechum. She says,

“When I came back from Saskatchewan, the horrible conditions of my people and my talk with Cheechum made me feel there was no time to waste” (*Halfbreed* 151) She decided to “speak to government with one voice... founded the Alberta Native Communications Society, which managed the Cree radio program and a monthly newspaper to keep the people informed and aware” (*Halfbreed* 155)

Thus Campbell has succeeded in breaking the stereotypes associated with Halbreeds. Her strong sense of

“Self” and Identity is the driving force in bring a positive change. And, Metis is now an honourable national identity which the people is proud of. They have gained cultural importance by their own language, art, music, anthem and flag which has further brought the people a strong sense of identity and heritage to cherish.

### Conclusion

Maria Campbell share with her readers how she embraced a positive “Self” and strong identity through the overpowering and energetic words of her great-grandmother. Moreover, all the traumatic incidents and suppressions she met in her life has set a strong survival environment. However, her struggle to take hold of white's identity has failed and she has never given up. She has felt it is her bound duty to fight against racism for which she surpasses suppression. Hence, she has reconstructed her identity with half breed as pride and honourable identity with the help of her strong “Self”.

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