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“I hated all of it (my people) as much as I loved it”: Indigenous Quest for Identity and Nomadic Existentialism in Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*.

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Abstract:

‘The term “indigenous” only make sense against a history of European colonization and a subaltern experience as a colonized people.’ (Kocoglu 69) History has witnessed a prolonged deprivation of people who are the true offspring of their own earth and of whom the world later was discovered recounting anecdotes. The Metis-Indian of the northern part of America, the halfbreeds of Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, faced and are still facing statelessness borne out of their ancestor’s kindness. The Canadian Metis, now-a-days known as the First Nation people, are the products of the union between the European and the North American natives.

This presence of double blood had given them the identity of ‘halfbreed’. What all they wanted were permanent lands to live in and an inclusion into the main race of the country. They struggled, rebelled, protested and left no possible stone unturned only to be heard. Consequently, they pined, mourned, cried, spread violence among their own people to cope with their frustration. With no life, no future, no hope of having any in coming time, they only hoarded and led a nomadic existence fighting sometimes with the capturers of their land, sometimes with their needs and sometimes with nature. This paper will focus on that nomadic existence with no land of their own in their own country which Campbell, being a Metis woman herself, has simply fabricated in her tale without impinging it in any deep political colour: Native writers are the combination of the old and the new. They speak storytelling and being authors in the same breath. (Grant 59)

Keywords: Metis, Whites, Statelessness, First Nation People, ‘Roadside Allowance People’

Introduction:

‘Halfbreed’ – the term was coined no doubt with an ultimate effort to cater those half whites and half natives an identity. But this identification as people belonging only ‘half’ to their own land eventually accrued their sense of deprivation. Still, Campbell retained the word and the sense throughout her novel, because: ‘Though it is laden with negative connotations, ... The negative image of Native people, including the Metis, is embedded in discourse and a simple substitution of words is not enough to effect a change in consciousness (though terminology can play a role in such change). Instead, Campbell takes on the challenging task of transforming the meaning of “Halfbreed” from within.’ (Lundgren 65) Hence Campbell’s first novel and above all the first sound novel in indigenous literature on this Metis identity *Halfbreed* is ‘directed towards the reinforcement of the Metis people’s cultural tradition in order to alter the Native’s sense of shame’ (Haikal 6). At the very beginning of her novel, Campbell has spent a few pages summarizing the identity and the history of their statelessness and the story of a resentful, failed rebellion followed by. The world knows America and Canada but it has a very little

acquaintance, which is again research based, with those Cree speaking population who happened to be the first original residents of the country. The natives offered the traders from Europe (Britain and France) homes and in return they displaced those indigenous people from their own settlement. They spent decades being unwanted savages settling around bushes, on the sides of the roads and thereby identified as the 'Roadside Allowance People': 'Gradually the homesteads were reclaimed by the authorities and offered to the immigrants. The halfbreeds then became squatters on their land and were eventually run off by the new owners. One by one they drifted back to the road lines and crown lands where they built cabins and barns and from then on were known as "Road Allowance people". (Campbell 13) Maria, being the first woman writing about the halfbreeds thus has appropriated her 'choice of the genre life-writing in her first book *Halfbreed* (1973) serves several ends. Encompassing both written and oral tradition, the genre life-writing allows Campbell to withhold her Great Grandmother's teachings (Cheechum's narrative) together with her own narrative in her attempt to use both narratives to alter or change Metis people's life. Campbell addresses her book to both Halfbreeds and Europeans.' (Haikal 4)

Maria as a child remembers their 'hewed log house' (Campbell 19) and the stories of their journey from their own land to these homes around the bushes recited by her Cheechum. What is oxymoronicly very pleasing and abhorring at the same time is that those people living in those inhuman circumstances never were distasteful to their lives. They grieved, pined, tried protesting but never neglected or cursed life. Their worries for a better future or at least hope for a better life away from the bushes, never subsided their present. A very detailed account of their merrymaking and enjoyment having almost nothing can make anybody fall in love with life.

Their celebration of marriage ceremonies undoubtedly shows their love for togetherness and love for community: 'Next to Christmas festivities, our people looked forward to weddings. Weddings were something special, and were gay and gala affairs, in which everyone in our area and other communities participated.' (52) Not only marriage but their funerals, too, were no less than the celebration of a marriage: 'Our funerals were never like the funerals here, where everyone cries and carries on, or goes into a state of shock... Funerals were like weddings as far as seeing old friends and relatives were concerned. People would come from miles and miles away to visit.' (60) Each and every occasion was a chance to be together and of celebrating life. Only members like Cheechum soured their hearts by waiting for the day to come when their oldworthfulness, validity and authority on their land will be attained: 'It will come, my girl, some day it will come.' (67)

Being the eldest of the 8 children, Maria from the very beginning has displayed a premature maturity and after the death of her mother she literally became the mother, the woman of the house. Her quest started with the insults and prejudices which she along with other Metis children faced in the school. Her Cheechum made her understood how to cope with their issues and wait for the right time when she will meet more people like her with the same quest and how then together they will be able to establish an identity of their own which will be free from any kind of derogatoriness: 'Campbell's struggle for positive identity through a reconstituted sense of racial identification is achieved mostly by internalizing her grandmother's teachings' (Rimstead 155) She dissuaded Maria from getting persuaded by the Whites' cliché policy of divide and rule when her child mind started demanding a life of luxury from her father like the Whites:

Cheechum's lessons found refuge in Maria Campbell. She listened carefully to her Great Grandmother's teachings which aroused in her the sense of rebellion necessary for change. Cheechum awakens the political activist in her and prepared Maria Campbell to anticipate the right leader and to be ready to follow.

Campbell's misinterpretation of Cheechum's teachings at first brought about her failure in life. Later, her disillusionment, reinterpretation of Cheechum's words, looking for her own people and her adherence to her cultural tradition saved her. (Haikal 9)

The role of her Cheechum in her life has thus been accomplished by Maria that it is Cheechum who has shaped her character and has taught her everything about living.

Maria's experiences of attending two schools are very crucial parts of her prolonged quest for identity as well as a prominent feature of their existentialism. Education for the Metis was both cherished and depressing. Her days in the first school which was a residential one, was no better than expected. There, too, she was considered to be what the world around considers their race as – hands for work. The second on the other hand taught them lessons of life's stark reality and the real attitudes of the Whites which her Cheechum had so long been teaching and still they liked it: 'School wasn't too bad-heaven compared to the Residential School.' (Campbell 46) Schooling was very desirable to both Maria and her father. The discrimination and abhorred feeling did not spare the classrooms even. Rows were divided and a line of inequality was announced: 'Because it was a mixed school, whites and Halfbreeds were gathered together officially for the first time, but the whites sat down on one side of the room while the Halfbreeds sat on the other.' (45) On this discrimination, S. Udhayakumar commented that, 'These Native people, who were not much informed about the Englishman and his law, were thoroughly subjected to three social evils all through their life. They are: Injustice, Discrimination and Poverty.' (56) Facing a good many hardships, Maria received very little education which happened to be the major impediment on her way of emancipation. This lack of education probed many of those Metis women to get into prostitution and Maria was no exception. With no proper education, no degree she worked in hotels, became smuggler and prostitute in the course of life to survive and to make her children survive: 'I never carried anything anywhere, except on the underclothes I was wearing – padded bras and girdles. Customs never paid any attention to my underclothes and never searched me. I never discussed my trips with Ray. I just did what he told me and kept my mouth shut.' (Campbell 121) This prostitution caused her to meet many men and thus in spite of having never a steady man in her life, Maria bore three children in her twenties.

Unrestrained childbirth was another frightening impediment in the lives of the Metis people. Maria's mother gave birth to 7 children and one last at the death bed. With having no proper food, home, no future, the Metis people even never thought to restrain the birth rates. Almost every family there in the community had nearly a dozen of children: 'One afternoon, a couple of wagonloads of people arrived, driven by one of Mom's uncles... They brought their wives and twenty-one children...' (56) The reason has always been discussed with buzz and also been referred to by author like Doris Lessings- the higher sexual capabilities of the natives over whites. Hence, having almost 10-20 children each, the families literally had no future and resembled cattle to whom hoarding and eating only mattered. The rebellion, the protest, the change, the justice people like Cheechum were waiting for never progressed and this was quite obvious. With such a huge population, both men and women were always busy with arranging food and living for their children; and as an usual and obvious result the women were the worst sufferers of all – both mental and physical: Campbell works through the way colonial power manifests in a form that is horrendously violent and predatory in the lives of Métis women. In *Halfbreed* Campbell describes how gendered colonial violence is perpetrated through domestic violence, racism, and the exploitative sex trade. She captures the complex way this violence intersects along racial, gendered, and psychological lines in the lived experiences of Indigenous women. (Voth 24)

Earning living was never easy for them. They had physical capabilities like the Negroes in Africa. Trying portraying their physical strength A. P. Reid said:

'These "halfbreeds" are, I suppose, the best horsemen in the world, take them as a class; being far superior to the Indian in pluck and energy. Their mode of capturing the buffalo is to approach as nearly as possible on horseback, and at a given signal to charge into the midst of the band, shooting right and left, and this is continued as long as the endurance of the horse lasts. The women and carts follow to dress the slaughtered animals.' (50)

But physical labour can never be well manifested for earning living unless directed well by intellect. Thus, they ended draining their labour for almost nothing and sometimes wasting for the Whites. They had their own set of trades which had no alignment with the Canadian government: 'In Canada *metis* became a separate occupational class and carried on an independent trading tradition, but in American territory they more often were absorbed into settler populations or Indian communities.' (Brown & et.al 183) While poring her focus on their modes of living, Maria has counted almost every way they had used. Animal hunting and fur were their main dependence: 'Daddy used to hunt a lot when he was home. The meat would be...sold to farmers around us...until the next time he had fur to sell.' (Campbell 54). They were, thus, involved into many illegal professions like hunting in reserved parks and selling the meat illegally as a supplementary source of income: 'Daddy hunted in the National Park which was illegal and was almost caught. I remember times when someone would ride to our house...and warn us that the game wardens were coming'. (54) They even used to sell homemade whiskey illegally to the farmers. During summer they even used to migrate with full family to places to collect berry and to store money for the rest of the year. This happened to be their vacation, too, except the bitter parts of such tour which were walking on the streets of town down head while 'The townspeople would stand on sidewalks and hurl insults' at them. (36) Seasonal migration was an inseparable part of their already migrated lives.

Apart from their personal problems which were caused by the discrimination policy the government followed, the government itself was a threat to their existence. The government doesn't bother to arrange living, suitable habitats or means to earn living for those indigenous first nation people, but they took a good care and an unmistakable scrutiny over the parents' ability to feed their own children. If a parent ever failed to take care of the children, the relief people would take them away from them. When Maria's family lost their mother, they somehow managed between work and school until the government interfered, a real hypocrisy: 'So our lives continued until our teacher reported us to the relief people and they said there was going to be an investigation into our situation.' (74) They were once again displaced. This fear of getting separated from the siblings, whom Maria have reared and loved like a mother, let her sacrifice so many things of her own. She sacrificed her childhood, her girlhood and attained womanhood when she herself was a child of 12. Her family left their house around their community and fled to a farmer's house to save the children from going to relief centers. Her father, a man always working and active, bereaved with her mother's death, failed to provide both ends meets to the family. The new house and the new job gave them a good life but endangered their schooling with none but only the elder children to take care of the younger ones. Though Maria's father brought a woman home to take care of the children so that Maria could continue with her school, but that, too, was intervened by the government relief centers. Someone reported of her staying unmarried in a home and she was out of the house immediately. Maria then having no other option, decided to marry a drunkard who had promised to take care of her brothers and sisters.

Later he himself reported the center to take the children away. Thus, Maria's greatest fear proved to be true leaving her with none but a drunkard husband and a daughter of her own. The worst of this intrusion by those centers was that they seldom let the family know where the children were taken to. Another search, thus, for the near and dear ones became an inseparable part of their existence as well.

A woman with a baby and no male relative, is always a good interest to the world. Her quest and her ruined life, after her weird husband left her, took her to prostitution first and then to a man who was a wanted smuggler. Though she was saved from going jail, was never saved from the dirt she had plunged into. She got appointed as a cook to a man in an unknown place but there, too, she was not spared from the eyes of the society who never leave a lonely woman alone: 'The guys at the ranch were good to me, treating me like a kid sister...But I was young and attractive, with a baby and no husband. I lived alone with fifteen or twenty men...soon the women were talking and men...became interested in me as a woman.' (128) However, life brought Shawn into her life whom she liked and made love and thus before knowing him and his criminal cases well, she found herself three months pregnant. Shawn was given a life sentenced later. Before meeting the next man and her future husband, David, a truck driver, Maria worked in a bus stop restaurant and other places to prevent her from going to the streets. It was the time when she decided to do something of her own and started learning a hairdressing course simultaneously. Later she gave birth to David's child and eventually got married to him. A woman with no future, no fortune of her own would have contended herself having been with a man like David. But Maria's fear of her gloomy past and its shadow to reappear anytime, never allowed her to live the pleasure of a happy married life. She confined herself within the house after she got to know of Lil's arrest, her prostitute friend. She finally got divorced from David when failed to escape. Back on her own, she was back on her quest, too. This is what has driven her life through all, her quest for establishing an identity. Campbell's *Halfbreed*, thus, became a model for the native narrative, a source for inspiration. The divorce cost her almost a suicide which ended finally in a hospital where she got to attend the AA meetings and eventually became a member of it. She then came in contact with people who were protesting against the Indians' conditions and fighting for their rights. There she discovered the right interpretations of her Cheechum's teachings and messages which she had so long misinterpreted. The women like Maria and their abandoned existences are thus, the proper portrayal of misery within misery. In Sunanda Pal's words:

'While white women have been struggling against the constricting patriarchal structures that oppress them, Black women of America have had an additional battle to wage. They have had to contend with not only the politics of sex but also the politics of race.' (12)

Time took her to the meetings of the Metis people which her father had once joined and which had directly or indirectly broken her family. She found people always worried and discussing the issues but what lacked was a genuine intention and a unity. She felt what her father had felt like when he tried bringing the change with a genuine intention ignoring his own family and was betrayed brutally by the leaders and was tricked by the government: 'It was the first time I'd ever heard my father cry...Daddy said some of the men had been hired by government, and that this had caused much fighting among our people, and had divided them.'(Campbell 67) The frustration followed by changed everything in her family and probably took the toll of her mother's life, too. Maria went through the same frustration when she tried pointing out the existential issues by bringing their attention on the Metis women abandoned by their frustrated husbands ending up in the streets having no other option but to sell their bodies. She was dashed away with the

blame of being a misandrist. There she got to know of the frustration and hopeless outcomes of those organizations, those meetings, those committees from depth and her illusion of those so-called leaders on whom the Metis people believed, broke and she experienced the truth that:

The word “leader” has been normalized as a masculine term, partially based on the historical practices of male leadership... Since the word ‘leader’ is already gendered as male, when a person who is recognized as a woman in a nation-state context, she is often labeled as ‘woman leader’. (Lockhart and Mollick chap 2)

Maria’s return to Saskatchewan only added to her age-old frustration and disliking for her own people. But this time the frustration did not call for a feeling of abhorrence, instead an utter sense of pity made her realize that there was no time to waste to complain or analyze: ‘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.’(Campbell 151) The determination to initiate the change by herself and not waiting for it to come by some imaginary rescuers, led her to betray some of her dear ones for the first time in her life: ‘Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed: A Proud and Bitter Canadian* provides insights into the politics of Canada's settlement from the Aboriginal people's point of view. She describes the distrust of government intentions that existed among many Aboriginal communities, and how, contrary common belief, many of them did not idly accept being displaced. Aboriginal people lobbied the government at the time but to no avail.’ (Christmas 7) Thus, she had to choose between her own good accordance and a chance to help the progress of their protest by producing a report of a research. She chose not to be herself but to be for her people and it showed results. She, too, was betrayed like her father and was separated from her people: ‘A report was compiled on the incomplete material...and when it was made public, the people...were very upset...That was first experience as a scab...Marie and I had been manipulated and divided just as my father and those leaders from my childhood had been.’(153) Her search for identity for her own became a universal search for the indigenous people where her message has the tone that ‘Contemporary formations of indigeneity cannot be viewed as a collecting tank for achievements of ‘one’ European modernity, nor can one indigenous modernity account for the inherent diversity of indigenous society. Rather indigenous perspectives forge multiple forms of modernity, modernities that imbue indigenous identity with fresh meaning.’ (Kocoglu 67)

Conclusion:

A girl, Maria felt the helplessness of her people and nurtured a mixed feeling towards them and always felt she never belonged to them. She had liking for them as well as a subdued hatred for their incapability to change situations even after so much time had passed. But the woman Maria, after experiencing a firsthand experience of the world, realized what her Cheechum had actually taught her. What she mistook as waiting for some messiah to come in rescue, was actually to awaken the rescuer within. When she could not support the so-called leaders of those organizations, she realised that unanimity is something foreign to attain in such cases. Hence, she herself had to step in to change things being the leader herself. Everyone from the community has to step in to change things for his or her life without expecting anyone else to do it. In Cheechum’s words: ‘Each of us has to find himself in his own way and no one can do it for us....The blanket only destroys, it doesn’t give warmth.’(Campbell 150) Thus, when all of them will be leading their own lives, all those brothers and sisters will get support of each other. While writing about the present status of those indigenous people, Baogang He has said: ‘Australia, Canada and New Zealand have recognised and negotiated the rights of indigenous people, including rights claims involving traditional lands for several decades. The new model of indigenous rights

is empowering indigenous peoples to help them to regain much of the land and autonomy they lost during the process of colonisation and settlement, and many governments are now actively seeking ways to facilitate this transition. It was a clear case that those native people who were living in areas that were then settled by Western colonists were indigenous.' (462) Maria's quest for identity and the quest of all the Metis people as well, thus, is never answered but she along with other halfbreeds has definitely found a positive channel to run their journey through, because a 'self-identification as halfbreed is paramount to proper psychological healing.' (Armstrong 150)

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