

# Personal Narrative Emerges as the Voice of the Silenced – A Study of Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*

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## Abstract

Native Canadian Literature shows a mutual relationship based on respect, peace and co-existence. The later part of the twentieth century witnesses the decline of colonialism and the subdued and conquered societies strive to come into limelight. The Natives who experience the harsh realities of racial discrimination in their daily lives begin to question the Eurocentric version of their past by way of presenting their own first hand experiences. They attempt to recreate the past of the Native Indians. With a singular sense of purpose and commitment to make their people react to the injustice, the Indigenous writers begin their writings. They want to bring back their basic faith in their culture and religion. By rewriting and reconstituting their past, the Native writers try to induce the Native youth to rebel and ask for his due recognition in the world. So Native identity, its loss, distortion, its search, rebellion and retrieval of culture form the centre of Native writings. Maria Campbell juxtaposes her personal experiences with communal narratives along with anecdotes. Her personal narrative is a combination of history, traditions, beliefs and personal experience. Campbell’s reference to herself as a Halfbreed is disturbing. Through her novel, Maria Campbell tries to break generations of silence and has made a bold attempt to render a voice to those who are generally silent.

**Keywords:** Native Canadian literature – voice of the silenced – autobiography – social document – rewrites history – basic faith in culture – religion – simple life – association with nature – looks for native identity – collective identity.

Native Canadian Literature shows a mutual relationship based on respect, peace and co-existence. The vibrancy of their powerful voice can be heard in the works of Maria Campbell. History given by the Conquerors (colonists) has silenced the voice and suppressed or deleted the identities of the conquered (colonized). The later part of the twentieth century witnesses the decline of colonialism and the subdued and conquered societies strive to come into limelight. The Natives who experience the harsh realities of racial discrimination in their daily lives begin to question the Eurocentric version of their past by way of presenting their own firsthand experiences. They attempt to recreate the past of the Native Indians. Margaret Atwood has observed in her book **Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature**, there is “a distinct archeological motif in Canadian literature – unearthing the buried and forgotten past”. (112) **In Prison of Grass: Canada from Native Point of View**, Howard Adams provides a view to look at their history and their own society through the eyes of its

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outcast. The basic unit of the Indian society, according to Adams, is the class, kinship group claiming a common ancestor, where the ancestors are bound by strong bonds of solidarity and mutual assistance. The idea of individual profit making is unknown as sharing is a natural characteristic of their way of life and each member recognized his or her responsibility for contributing to the tribe's welfare.

The Indians fail to put up a major united resistance due to their weakened economic and political position. By 1964 the Natives are restless and ready to strike out against the hunger, oppression and brutality due to colonization. In Canada's centennial year, 1967, the raised voices of the Aboriginal people are heard everywhere, at conferences and seminars across the country. They recognize their need to reclaim their history. With a singular sense of purpose and commitment to make their people react to the injustice, the Indigenous writers begin their writings. They want to bring back their basic faith in their culture and religion. By rewriting and reconstituting their past, the Native writers try to induce the Native youth to rebel and ask for his due recognition in the world. So Native identity, its loss, distortion, its search, rebellion and retrieval of culture form the centre of Native writings.

For the Canadian Natives, racism is not an abstract, but a very real and practical part of their lives filled with shame. The Natives, who have been silenced for long, find their voice in the communal context. When the self is transcended and the collective gets represented, personal narratives become history. Jameela Begum points out in her essay "Personal Narratives as History in Process",

Autobiography becomes History when the self is transcended, and the collective gets represented. Autobiography in the western tradition had always been associated with an 'ego-centric individualism'... (and) was a means of exploring the innerself and bringing an ordering and intelligibility to an otherwise chaotic text.... the self became the subject of the text and the writing of it a subjective account of self-experience. (28)

The life experiences of the marginalized communities have turned autobiography into a strategy of representation and resistance. There is no desire for personal recognition, but there is an inherent longing for communal representation. The subalterns have used writing as a form of protest, self-assertion and identity formation. In the words of Dr. N. Kalamani,

Primarily biographical, this aboriginal literature was the pulse of the post-colonial phase in Canada, a revisionist perspective, which had brought the "outsider" inside, the peripheral to the centre-stage. (100)

The autobiographical and personal narratives of the subalterns throw light on the details of their daily lives in a language as simple and living as possible. Many critics agree

that writing from the margins – Black writing, women’s writing, writings by indigenous people – began in the autobiographical mode. Writers draw sustenance from their own real lives and so whatever is personal to them is at the same time social. The estranged souls, reliving their traumatic experience, pen down their pain in their creative writings. A reading of *Halfbreed* shows that the painful journey is not a lonely one but a shared experience. This pain and their hope for a bright future are some of the common things found in the writings of the First Nations’ Women writers.

While discussing the ‘Strategies of Empowerment’, Krishna Sarbadhikary states:

In order to voice protest and in the pursuit of power, the literature of the marginalized often follows the subversive historiographic path of personalizing history and resisting the process of negation prompted by the desire to set the record straight. The autobiographical narrative form thus becomes a potent weapon for both Native and Dalit women. (82)

These writings reveal a journey of exploration and like any journey the paths are uneven. Style and content vary. But the writers write forcefully, angrily, passionately, sadly and poignantly. The readers are caught in the whirlpool.

Feminist critic Patricia Mayor Spacks defines autobiography as a means to exorcise one’s past. In her famous book **Imagining a Self** she writes,

Autobiography assures the author of his (her) existence beyond all possibilities of Philosophical denial. Through it he (she) comes to terms with his past or exorcises it. (15)

In the hands of women writers, autobiographies spring from their awareness of their marginalized existence in the world dominated by male culture. Ranjana Harish sums up the salient features of women’s autobiography in her essay, “The Female Attempt to Exorcise the Cruel Patriarchy: A Comparative Study of Claire Martin and Sharan-Jeet Shan”:

In the hands of women autobiographers, it becomes a genre of the Collective identity...Woman’s identity is rooted in, if not limited to, a collective awareness... women’s autobiography does not construct an isolate self, on the contrary, it projects a self which is a representative and an extension of others. And thus, with women, autobiography becomes a means to fight back oppression in the patriarchal culture, in which they are constantly pushed to the fringes. Virginia Woolf has rightly called it “the genre of the oppressed” (34)

These personal narratives are stories told as straight as possible in a language as simple and living as possible and they draw readers with their earthy, raw language. The

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essence of autobiography and the personal narratives is given in the words of Malathi Mathur: The stories are,

... always real vignettes of everyday life told through a variety of narrative voices, revealing at the end the all too familiar face that looks back at us from the mirror everyday (188)

Maria Campbell juxtaposes her personal experiences with communal narratives along with anecdotes. Her personal narrative is a combination of history, traditions, beliefs and personal experience. While analyzing the synchronizing voices of the Native Canadian Women Writers, S. Armstrong points out:

Native autobiography is a new form comprising personal history, oral heritage, memory, photography, poetry, communal stories, anecdotes, short speeches, traditional beliefs and simple prose writings. This type of narratives places more emphasis on events and anecdotes than the rules of genre. Thus, the generic rules are collapsed and rewritten to create a new mode of autobiography. In describing their personal experiences, they try to assert both the Native heritage and their selves. (111)

Maria Campbell's quest for a self-identity motivates an exploration into the Native women's legitimate history. She addresses this narrative to White Euro-Canadian readership:

I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustration and dreams. (HB 2)

In the first part of the novel, Maria Campbell offers anecdotes about her people and places. She narrates her childhood, history and the folklore of the Metis. Maria's predicament from the beginning is that she is a halfbreed, a racially abused Native woman. Her narration about her great grandmother Cheechum, and her close association with other members of her community, makes the book a communal text and creates a racial identity. Maria Campbell gives a clear picture of her community which is crippled by poverty, racism, alcohol and violence. Campbell herself leads such a life of drug addiction and prostitution. She gives a short history of her people who have come to be known as Road Allowance people. Metis women have been ill-treated and seen as objects of sexual release because of their Halfbreed background, racial interbreeding, and cultural degeneration. In the later part of **Halfbreed**, Campbell talks about Alcoholic Anonymous through which she meets other Metis and gets involved in the Native Movement. Campbell begins to understand the pain and horrible experiences of the Native women. She ends the text with a note of optimism, self-confidence and self-consciousness. She finds a kindred soul in the other Metis people and affirms, "I have brothers and sisters. I no longer need my blanket to survive." (HB 184).

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A predominant commonality found in the narratives is the use of symbolism. Most of the titles of the novels are symbolic. They represent reformation, rejuvenation and new vegetation. The symbols have an association with the cultural bearings. Maria Campbell's suppressed anger is revealed in the title of her book **Halfbreed**, the very term which they shun. The critical derogative term stands as a symbol of resistance for Campbell. The title **Halfbreed** comes with a small description, "the life story of a woman whose courage and strength you will never forget". Campbell tries to break the stereotypical image of a halfbreed woman. She wants to replace the image with the story of a woman whose strength and courage will project a new image.

Campbell's reference to herself as a Halfbreed is disturbing. Janice Acoose points out in her essay "Campbell: An Indigenous Perspective":

Maria Campbell, and many other contemporary people, still use the term Halfbreed; some refer to themselves as Halfbreeds with a strong nationalistic pride, while others use the term as a kind of blatant reminder of Canadian society's racism towards them. (141)

Campbell refers metaphorically to "a blanket" (159):

My Cheechum used to tell me that when the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return-your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul. When they are sure they have something, they give you a blanket to cover your shame.... Someday though, people would throw them away and the whole world would change. (HB 159)

Campbell says that she herself is wearing one such blanket. She does not know when she starts wearing it and how she is going to throw it out. Campbell feels that 'the blanket' represents isolation and apathy which is really a hindrance to the self-determination of her people. She has no idea of how to throw it away, until she gets involved in the activities of Alcoholics Anonymous. She realizes the need for unity among the Metis in order to throw away 'the blanket'. She understands the words of Cheechum, "the blanket only destroys, it doesn't give warmth" (HB175) and agrees with her:

Each of us has to find himself in his own way and no one can do it for us. If we try to do more, we only take away the very thing that makes us a living soul. (HB 175)

And this understanding makes her say at the end, "I no longer need my blanket to survive". (HB184)

The literature of the subalterns has rejected traditional artistic standards and has attempted to develop a separate aesthetics of their own. It is not a pleasure-giving literature of fine sentiments, it is a purposive, revolutionary, transformational and protest literature. Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* rests on the artists' social commitment, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation and the ability to raise the readers' consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity. The protest literature or the literature of resistance has its own linguistic, grammatical, syntactic and rhetorical peculiarities and similarities. *Halfbreed* has unrefined, unpleasant, swear words, back biting, gossip, character assassination, rude nick names, obscene and abusive words and vulgar gestures. These are used as powerful weapons and these give realistic touch to the narrative technique. The novel becomes a social document wherein Maria Campbell gives importance to the rituals, traditions and folk tales and myths.

Maria Campbell has a happy childhood with family and relatives. Her experience with the Native traits can be seen in the novel. In *Halfbreed*, Campbell talks of pow-wows, sundances and Treaty days (26). She describes Christmas celebrated in the reserves.

After Mass we talked around the big heater in the church and friends and relatives all kissed each other... Jamie and I always woke everyone up at five o' clock. In the living room, our stocking were plumbfull and overflowing with nuts and candy canes, oranges and apples...Christmas dinner was the highlight of the day...All the families visited back and forth during the holidays...Each family held a dance each evening...The hostess baked a nickel inside her cake and whoever got it in his piece held the dance the next night. (HB 54-55)

Detailed marriage rituals add a flavor to the narrative technology. They give a realistic touch to the narratives. Campbell reminisces:

Next to the Christmas festivities, our people looked forward to weddings. Weddings are something special and were gay and gala affairs, in which everyone in our area and other communities participated. Flowers were made from bright crepe paper; yards and yards of decorations were made for houses and the horses. (HB-57)

They go in a procession to the church. And after the ceremony they go to the biggest house in the community where the women will have the food ready. They feast and dance.

There is a generous sprinkling of folk tales in *Halfbreed*. Again the folk tales are given for realistic touch and to reveal the superstitious beliefs of these people. Subject to the limitations of memory, folk literature is primarily dependent on the word of mouth stories. Cheechum tells stories about the little people who live near the water and 'travel mostly by



leaf boats' (HB 18). Story telling is a tradition which develops a close link and bond between the elders and the little ones. Cheechum tells this story to her grandchildren and

... All her life she would leave small pieces of food and tobacco near the water's edge for them, which were always gone by morning. Mom said it was a fairy tale but I would lie by the waters for hours hoping to see the little people. (HB 11-12)

Campbell recollects the times when she and the other children assemble together and an old grandpa and grannie will tell a story. She accepts that Halfbreeds are very superstitious people who believe in ghosts, spirits and any other kind of spook. She gives the story of Alex Vandal who finds a devil come out of the little drawer of the sewing machine:

...a devil, the size of his hand, stepped out and jumped to the floor. Alex said he froze in terror. As it landed on the floor, it got bigger and bigger until it was taller than him. The eyes were red like fire and the tail switched. It smiled and said to Alex, "I helped you win the games, Alex, now I've come for your spirit. Alex came to his senses and pulled out his Mosary and held it in front of the devil who then disappeared. (HB 35) Montreal Lake is known for its bad medicine.

Montreal Lake was renowned for its bad medicine. The men used it on their traplines so they would have good hauls... They could cast spells and even kill with it... and they could catch any man or woman they wanted with special love spells. (HB 44)

Halfbreed is not only the story of Maria Campbell, but also the disturbed past history of the Natives. She has tried to make the world get a glimpse of reality. Through her novel, Maria Campbell tries to break generations of silence and has made a bold attempt to render a voice to those who are generally silent. Memory plays an important role in the lives of the Natives. Retrospection provides more than exposition. The past plays a crucial role and becomes a motivation for the presentation. The past is ever present as folklore and attitudes perpetuated by the community are scars in the mind and the spirit.

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