

A Subaltern Study of Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed*

K.Swathi

Assistant Professor

Pachamuthu College of Arts and Science for Women, Dharmapuri

OPEN ACCESS

Volume : 6

Special Issue : 1

Month : September

Year: 2018

ISSN: 2320-2645

Impact Factor: 4.110

Citation:

Swathi, K. "A Subaltern Study of Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 6, no. S1, 2018, pp. 17–20.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1421113>

The terms Subaltern and Subaltern Studies entered Post Colonial studies through the works of a group of South Asian scholars who were interested in the Post Colonial societies and it was started in the University of Sussex. The group was called as Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective Group. The Subaltern Studies focused on the lower level people in the society. The term 'Subaltern' was coined by an Italian Marxist Philosopher and Politician named Antonio Francesco Gramsci, whose works were focused mainly on the linguistics, sociology and political theory. Subaltern mainly focused on the people who were politically, socially and geographically outside of the cultural hegemony.

The term Subaltern literature prominently concentrated on the Dalits, underprivileged, oppressed people, suppressed people, marginalized people and neglected people's life in the society. As a critical movement, Subaltern literature was started in the 1970s. The chief motive of the Subaltern Movement was to ease up the suppressed voices by challenging authoritative voices. A group of Indian Scholars wanted to retake the history for the lower class people, because the voices of base people had not been heard by the elites group in the society previously. The term Subaltern refers to any person or group who were inferior based on the race, class, caste, religion, gender, sex and ethnicity. Many scholars like Eric Stokes, Ranajit Guha, David Arnold, Ajay Skaria, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, etc. were associated with Subaltern Studies.

Maria Campbell is born on April 26, 1940 in Park Valley, northwestern Saskatchewan. She is a famous Metis author, playwright, broadcaster, film maker and English Professor. Campbell is the eldest daughter of eight children in the family, who had to drop out from the school in order to take care of her siblings when her mother was died. Her family is a combination of five different races: French, Cree, English, Scottish and Irish. They were belonged to Metis community and they were called as Half-Breeds. She completed her M.A degree in the Native studies from the University of Saskatchewan. She received many honorary doctorates from the University of Regina (1995), York University (1992) and Athabasca University in 2000. She taught Metis history and the study of Oral traditions in the

University of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta, when she served as an English Professor. As they were half whites and half natives, so they were ignored by both the communities.

Maria Campbell's important works are *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation*, *People of the Buffalo: How the Plain Indians Lived*, *Riel's People: How the Metis Lived*, *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit*, *Khloe Koala and the Red Impala* and *Christmas Activities with Khloe Koala*. In 1969 she published a hand book *Many Laws* which explained the laws and problems faced by native people who moved into the cities. Campbell's first book was very famous memoir named *Half-Breed* (1973) which deals with her own experience as a Metis woman in Canada. The book focused on Campbell's common experience as a Metis Woman. Campbell's angry autobiography *Half-Breed* is the main reason for the rebirth of Aboriginal Literature in Canada. Campbell has to come across so many difficulties and sufferings in order to take control of her own life and to help her own community. This book became the fast selling and most important book written by a Native person from Canada.

Of all the autobiographies written and published by Native individuals in Canada Campbell's is probably internationally the best-known and it has served as a model for later Native authors who are encouraged to follow the example set by the Metis women from Saskatchewan. (Lutz 116)

Maria Campbell's journey of self-discovery is traced in the memoir *Half-Breed* and in this book she described about a woman who struggled with poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual abuse and prostitution to reach thirty three years of age. Metis people's miseries were discussed in this book. She discussed how Metis people suffer for their poverty, how their life became unrecognized and unacceptable as laborers, how the Metis people were abandoned by the society, government and relatives. These kinds of problems were argued in this memoir. She expressed her personal agony and also she exposed the White oppressive tendencies which have undervalued so many conventions, traditions, institutions and damaged so many people's lives. Maria Campbell explained everything in the proper historical perspective and she described that the half-breeds came from Ontario and Manitoba. The Metis people settled in the places like Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Laurent and St. Louis and they do not have any law or government for the administration.

Maria, a halfbreed lives near the Spring River which is situated in north-west of Prince Albert. Her father has a European blood and her mother is Indian but a Native American. So, Maria is neither a native woman of European nor an Indian but she is a halfbreed, who lead her life with the halfbreeds and also white people who were mostly come from Germany or Sweden. In her childhood itself she understood that her community people cannot live with the White people because of their identity and race. In order to save her siblings, at the age of fifteen she married a white man who is an irresponsible husband and he left her in Vancouver where she started to drink alcohol. In the beginning of the book itself Maria Campbell makes her intention very clear and she addresses the White Euro-Canadian people: "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a half-breed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and dreams" (*Half-Breed* 2).

Maria's social life and social behavior have changed by the racism, class and gender discrimination. In the nineteenth century Metis community people were not recognized and not protected and they faced lot of struggles by the white men and racism. The Metis people were treated as refugees by the United States. Maria recalls her early childhood and she remembers that she never saw her father "talk back to a white man unless he was drunk" (17). The Metis people never had their head up in front of the white people. In the vacation times her relatives very rarely go to the town for purchase because the white owners used to make fun of them or staring at them as they are thieves. The White people teased them by saying that, "Half-breeds are in town, hid

your valuables” (36). During her schooling also Maria feels ashamed because of the food. In the residential school Maria and her friends’ lunch was monotonously blubber turnips and bannock.

Maria Campbell made differentiation between the Metis people and Indians by saying, “had land and security, but the half-breed had nothing” (25). The next prominent factor which affected Maria’s life is class discrimination. Because mostly the half-breeds had very poor living conditions and they are very lower in the work position. They are low class farmers, hunters, trappers and workers for farmers. Like Maria, many other children were drop out from the school in their early age because of the poverty, financial conditions and racial attitudes of the White people. The words half-breed and half-people ironically suggests the half status of the marginalized people in the multicultural Canadian Society. The Metis people also called as Road Allowance People. Metis is very important minority group in the Canada. Because of the racial attitude and cultural degeneration, Metis women were ill treated and used as sexual objects by the White men. Maria Campbell says that Metis people have unique qualities. “Half-breeds are “quick-tempered, quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget” (25). “Half-breeds are very superstitious people. They believe in ghosts, spirits and any other kind of spook” (35). At funerals, Half-Breeds grieve, “but in a different way. The women cry, but they accept death meeting it with great strength and keeping their grief inside as they do with so many other things” (67).

The Metis community people were those who born through the inter marriages of French Canadian males and Native females which resulted in the birth of a new ethnic group called Metis people. The predecessors of this group played a prominent role in the history of Canada and they passed an act named the Metis Population Betterment Act in 1938.

The fear of the Halfbreeds that their rights would not be respected by the Canadian Government when it acquired the land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, along with the prejudice of the protestant settlers, led to the Red River Rebellion of 1869. Louis Riel established a provisional government at Fort Garry, Manitoba, but escaped to the United States in 1870 when troops arrived from eastern Canada. So with their leaders and their lands gone, the Half-breeds fled to the areas South of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and established the settlements of Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Louis and St. Laurent. They elected Gabriel Dumont as their President and with him eight councilors. (Half-Breed 9)

The Metis leaders fought for a decade to gain the control of their own destiny. Through the constant efforts of the leaders, the settlements have increased their control of their own affairs. The leaders’ goal is to create a secure and prosperous community. Maria feels lucky to have Cheechum as her childhood companion and she recalls some happy moments in her family and community events. In the beginning she hated the Christian children for their better clothes, eatable things and standard of living and through that Maria questioned the perspective of the Christians of their own religion, because the Christians were aggressive and unfriendly towards the religious perspective of Halfbreeds. During the Christmas, the White people used to leave their already worn clothes and eatable things in front of the Halfbreed houses. Maria finds that the White’s Literature was also full of racism.

Maria was arranged to stay in a residential school in Beauval where she felt lonely and frightened. She experienced mistreatment in the school where she was asked to pray and clean the hall and dormitories. There was a severe punishment if she speaks in her native language and the White children ridiculed the native people for their financial condition and poverty. Even there was a partiality in food because the whites had cakes, cookies, jam and eggs but for the native people there was only gophers and bannock which make her to feel frustrated and deprived. She experienced

the betrayal by the whites in her home itself. A White man and his wife were customers of Maria's father for meat and whiskey. The white man won the elections, and he started to instruct about the evils of drinking and he refused to drink when Maria's father invited him for drinks party. The white man accompanied with a policeman to Maria's house in search of the whiskey. Cheechum had a power of foretelling the events, so she made them to hide their meat and whiskey. So, the police searched and they find nothing in Maria's home.

At the age of fifteen Maria forced to take an important decision and she married a white man named Darrel. She believed that Darrel would look after her young brothers and sisters. But her father and her friend Cheechum strongly opposed her decision to marry Darrel but Maria decided to marry him. He was proved to be a cheater because before marriage he pretended to be a rich man who owned a house but later he took Maria to a rented apartment. He started to hit Maria for his bad mood but she depended upon him because of her family situation. She realized her mistake for trusting such a cheater Darrel and she left him. She decided to live her life with her earnings and her dreams made her to enter the ugly world of prostitution. Then she shifted her job as a keep for one political leader and she met Ray in her life with whose help she came out from drug addiction. But she was not out from the ugly world of prostitution entirely. With Ray's help she earned lot of money through the smuggling. She decided to live a clean life and she was not able to find a job because she has no education and job experience. So, she became very depressed and again she started to use drugs.

Maria revealed many details about the settlers who were suffered by racial attitude and how Metis community sunk in poverty. The factors like racism, poverty, lack of education, lack of opportunities which made the Metis community people to suffer a lot. Through her personal life she made the readers to understand the sufferings and difficulties of native people and the Metis community. The White people tendencies controlled the native poverty and money became the main weapon to dissolve the Indians and the halfbreeds as well as it breaks the unity of Metis community. The government failed to fulfill the need and welfare of the native people. These factors led to the marginality of the native people in Canada.

References

- Campbell, Maria. (1983). *Half-Breed*. Nova Scotia, Halifax: Good Read Biographies.
- Lutz, Hartmut. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*.
- Moss, John. (1990). *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*. McClelland and Stewart: The Canadian Oxford aUniversity Press.
- Petrone, Penny. (1987). *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Publishers, 1987.
- Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1991.

Halfbreed [Maria Campbell] on Amazon.com. *FREE* shipping on qualifying offers. 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.Â Half-Breed is a story of triumph over racial oppression. After reading this book, one can feel this woman's willingness to continue the fight that her great-grandmother's people began long ago in Riel country. Read more.

For the transnational postcolonial study of subalterns, I have taken two autobiographies-Karukku by Bama and Half-breed by Maria Campbell. The former is a dalit writer while the latter is a Metis author. Both Dalits of India and Metis or Half-breeds of Canada are underprivileged people. Bama and Maria have taken the help of autobiography to â€œmediate messages and experiences across cultural boundaries.â€ Both Karukku and Half-breed can be considered as classics of subaltern writing. They revolve around the main theme of oppression of subalterns within the Catholic Church as well as in the commun Subaltern according to Spivak is those who belong to third world countries. It is impossible for them to speak up as they are divided by gender, class, caste, region, religion and other narratives. These divisions do not allow them to stand up in unity.Â 3. The subalterns become dependent on the Western intellectuals to speak for their condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. The Suicide of Bhubaneswari. In the end, Spivak brings to light the suicide of an ordinary woman to explain how outside effects the subaltern. According to her, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri ended her life because she did not want to participate in an association that she was assigned to commit. Citation: Swathi, K. â€œA Subaltern Study of Maria Campbellâ€™s Half-Breed.â€ Shanlax International Journal of English, vol. 6, no. S1, 2018, pp. 17â€20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1421113>. The terms Subaltern and Subaltern Studies entered Post Colonial studies through the works of a group of South Asian scholars who were interested in the Post Colonial societies and it was started in the University of Sussex. The group was called as Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective Group. The Subaltern Studies focused on the lower level people in the society.