

Embracing who you are: Reconciliation of Cultural Heritage in Maria Campbell's Halfbreed

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Abstract

Maria Campbell's memoir, Halfbreed, is a powerful account of her journey from hardship to healing. Published in 1973, it was a groundbreaking work by a Métis woman that explored the injustices faced by her people. The book details Campbell's early life, marked by poverty, discrimination, and struggles with addiction and prostitution. Through her writing, she reclaims her story and challenges the negative stereotypes placed on the Métis, a distinct Indigenous group in Canada. Campbell's journey is a process of self-discovery and ethnic self-definition, where she turns shame and anger into a healing act of remembering. Her memoir sparked a conversation about Métis identity, which has often been shaped by outsiders and historical inaccuracies. By embracing her cultural background, Campbell rebuilds her identity, moving from marginality to self-acceptance.

Keywords: *Métis, cultural heritage, identity, liminality*

1. Introduction

Maria Campbell was born on 26 April 1940 near Park Valley, Saskatchewan in North America. Campbell says that her family members were a real mixture of Scottish, French, Cree, English, and Irish. “We spoke a language completely different from the others. We were a combination of everything: hunters, trappers and ak-ee-top farmers”. (Campbell 24) They were called Halfbreeds and they belonged to the Métis Community. Despite the ever-present poverty, Campbell's was a literate household. Her mother read to the children and they were familiar with the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

The novel begins with a historical explanation of the Canadian Halfbreeds and their ongoing struggles for land rights and

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identity, culminating with the Battle of Duck Lake and the Riel Rebellion, a rebellion in which the Métis people and their allies were eventually defeated. After the rebellion, Campbell's ancestors fled into a life of wandering and poverty and eventually settled down along the road lines where they built cabins. They were called "Road Allowance people." They remained poor and unable to establish their own social institutions such as churches and schools. Consequently, the Halfbreeds were subjugated and compelled to speak the dominant language, act the way whites did, and go to educational institutions and churches that were constructed by white society.

Beginning with her childhood, the book follows Maria through her early life as she comes to terms with her cultural identity and the racial differences between her Métis people and the white and Native American populations that surrounded her. It narrates the life of Campbell's family after the Riel Rebellion and the meeting of her father and mother and also the story of Maria's birth in 1940 and her especially close bond with her Great - Grandmother, Cheechum. Halfbreed speaks about Campbell's poverty-stricken childhood and early adulthood including her battles with drug and alcohol addiction, even her involvement in the drug trade until she found refuge in her cultural heritage.

Halfbreed focuses on the reinforcement of the Métis people's cultural tradition in order to transform the Natives' sense of shame. Maria Campbell's cultural mission is clear in her introduction, "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 the dreams... I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: this is what it was like, this is what it is still like" (Campbell 8).

Campbell demonstrates that the Halfbreeds are a unique group, distinct from white Canadians, and "completely different from" their "Indian relatives" (Campbell 25). "Halfbreeds [are] quick-tempered—quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget" (Campbell 25). "Treaty Indian women don't express their opinions, Halfbreed women do" (Campbell 26). "Halfbreeds are very superstitious people. They believe in ghosts, spirits, and any other kind of spook" (Campbell 35). Halfbreeds are "noisy, boisterous, and gay" (Campbell 111), and they "love weddings" (Campbell 120). "No one can play the fiddle and guitar like a Halfbreed. They can make these instruments come alive—laugh, cry and shout" (Campbell 115). At funerals, Halfbreeds grieve, "but in a different way. The women [cry], but the Métis Women they [accept] death," meeting it "with great strength" and keeping "their grief inside as they [do] with so many other things" (Campbell 67).

The young Campbell dreams of a better life. It is evident in her monologue, "Someday my brothers and sisters will each have a toothbrush and they'll brush their teeth every day and we'll have a bowl of fruit on the table all the time and, Cheechum, they'll be able to do anything they want and go anywhere, and every day we'll have a glass of milk and cookies and talk about what they want to do. There will be no more mud shacks and they'll walk with their heads high and not be afraid." (Campbell 83). At that moment, Cheechum just said sadly that Maria would have it. Her dream signifies her desire to escape the present scenario.

Campbell talks about metaphorical "blankets of shame," blankets that discriminate people, used to protect them from the judging eyes of society, to protect themselves from their own shame. "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 everything, they give you a blanket to cover your shame.” These metaphorical blankets preserve the shame they cover and prevent change. They cover shame, and while doing so, they keep people fearfully hiding, unable to take action towards change. Cheechum, as Campbell writes, “used to say that all our people wore blankets, each in his own way. [...] Someday though, people would throw them away and the whole world would change. I understood about the blanket now – I wore one too. I didn’t know where I started to wear it, but it was there and I didn’t know how to throw it away.” (Campbell 159).

Maria’s life is irrevocably changed when her mother dies. At the age of fifteen, she attempts to escape from the miserable environment by marrying Darrel, a white man, to keep her younger children from being sent to foster homes. “I found my man a couple of weeks later. He came into the store one evening and spent nearly an hour talking to me. I could tell by his expensive clothes and new car that he could afford to keep us all.”(Campbell 98) As she herself describes it, “I knew that if I wanted anything better for myself and family other than an orphanage, foster home, or mud shack, I had to go through with it. I was only concerned with getting married as fast as I could, before he changed his mind about the prospects of inheriting six children” (Campbell 98). Her plan does not work out since her husband reports the news of six younger children to welfare people. Moreover, he turns out to be abusive, and the chaotic space of marriage drives her to alcohol and drugs, prostitution and suicide attempts.

In an attempt to get past her personal issues, Campbell joins an AA group where, incidentally, she meets other Natives and Halfbreeds, and later on, she meets other political and cultural activists and reformers through a woman she befriends. Nonetheless, she continues to feel inferior and inadequate,

even in the company of these political activists, the pedagogic diction they use reinforces her sense of inferiority. Finally, she turns to her own books, books on the chronicles of Native people and, through these, gains confidence in her potential and abilities.

Finally, Campbell develops a sense of empowerment. Her inspiration partly comes from her iron-willed Cree great-grandmother Cheechum, who gave her a belief in herself and in her people, and partly from the 1960s civil rights and Native movements. Campbell gradually channels her feelings of anger, resentment and indignity into her subsequent work as a cultural and political activist. She articulates the Métis perspective and breaks their collective silence, the silence used for generations as a protective shield against the shame of being Métis. At the same time, she documents their oppression since 1885, the Métis rebellion and the subsequent capital punishment of the renowned Métis leader Louis Riel for treason. By documenting this suppression and exploitation, Campbell embraces the role of a civil rights activist.

The death of her mother, her futile attempts to fill the void thus created, and the eventual acceptance of her cultural heritage are the three phases that she goes through to restructure her identity. Arnold van Gennep, the German-born, French ethnographer introduced the concept of "liminality" to describe the time in which people are on the threshold of entering a new phase in their life, having left the previous one behind. In his book *The Rites of Passage*, he introduced the word *liminal*, which is derived from the Latin word *limen* for threshold. It refers to the critical periods in the lives of individuals when they undergo significant transitions, usually connected with a change of status in society. According to him, all rites of passage are characterised by three distinct phases: the pre-liminal, liminal and finally the post-liminal. The rites of

separation from the previous world (leaving the familiar) rites of the threshold stage (a time of testing, learning and growth) and rites of incorporation (reintegration) into the new world.

2. Discussions

The anthropologist Victor Turner, half a century later rediscovered van Gennep's ground-breaking work and recognized the importance of the liminal. He coined the term liminality and developed the concept further. In his 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner included an essay entitled "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage." Within the works of Turner, liminality, from its narrow application to ritual passages in small-scale societies expanded to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences. It delineated the way liminality shaped personality, how sudden foregrounding of agency occurred, and how thought and experience tied together.

According to Turner's perspective various minority groups can be considered liminal. Illegal immigrants and stateless people, for example, are regarded as liminal because they are "betwixt and between" home and host, part of society, but sometimes never integrated. Intersexual, bisexual and transgender people in some contemporary societies, people of mixed ethnicity, and those indicted but not yet pronounced guilty or not guilty can also be considered to be liminal.

Through her jobs and friends Campbell delves deep into the past and present of the Métis. Her exploration and analysis of the agony and anguish of unsuccessful uprisings through the lessons of history give her a new perspective. She understands and recognises the hopelessness of the state of affairs from which they were unable to escape, and goes through periods of despondency herself. Yet, she gradually learns to accept the slowness of change and the importance of patience and

persistence. Rather than aiming for a complete revolution she tries to achieve it in small measures.

Maria's triumph is brought about by the support and guidance of her own people and Cheechum's lessons. The cultural heritage and her adherence to it prove to be her means of survival. As Campbell writes, "For these past couple of years, I've stopped being the idealistically shiny-eyed young woman I once was. I realize that an armed revolution of Native people will never come about; even if such a thing were possible what would we achieve? We would only end up oppressing someone else. I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. Maybe not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to survive. Then together we will fight our common enemies. Change will come because this time we won't give up." (Campbell 184).

Maria Campbell concludes her story with the following words of fortitude, optimism, and determination: "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." (Campbell 184). She casts her "blanket of shame" away, making space for change and hope.

Conclusion

Halfbreed establishes Métisness as a respectable and socially acceptable ethnic-cultural category and succeeds in replacing a perception of nothingness, of being neither Native nor white, of being only half-breed. The term Métis thus attained content and context, and has become a benchmark for other individuals of mixed heritage. Halfbreed thus participated in the process of establishing Métisness as a lawful ethnic category in Canada, finally leading to the inclusion of the Métis as one of Canada's

Aboriginal people in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. It is a story of triumph over racial repression and exploitation as well as of overcoming a sense of mortification related to ethnic identity. Campbell has succeeded in reshaping the meaning of Halfbreeds from within. In writing the term Halfbreed capitalized all through her book, Campbell has definitely succeeded in reconstructing the derogatory connotations of their cultural positions and showing the world how important they are to Canada's history.

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