

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.5.34>

## **Discrimination and Injustice against Metis Indigenous in Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed***

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### **Abstract**

Maria Campbell is a Metis author, playwright, filmmaker and broadcaster. She is also working as a volunteer, activist and advocate for Aboriginal rights and the women rights. She is best known for her autobiography and memoir *Halfbreeds* which voice out against the trash nature of the white settlers who caused hindrances to the innocent indigenous people of Canada. The quest for equality and dignity remains a dream in the hearts of aboriginal people. This book is the journey of the self discovery of the author herself. The protagonist and the narrator Maria Campbell is the representation of *Halfbreeds* who did not have their own place in the Canadian society. This article presents *Halfbreeds*' frustrated mindset and their thirst for freedom. It also expresses the pitiable conditions of *Halfbreed* women socially and economically. The *Halfbreed* women's quest for equal rights and the oppression of the white and men is the major theme spoken in this article.

**Keywords-** *Racism, Gender Discrimination, Halfbreeds, Self Discovery, Resilience*

Canadian Literature is the extraordinary literature in English. Canadian writers reflect the themes of nature, socio political, multiculturalism, identity crisis and marginalization. In

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Canada the marginalization exist between the Métis (Halfbreed) people and the white settlers. “Métis are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry and one of the three recognized Aboriginal people in Canada.” Maria Campbell used her autobiography as a tool to communicate about her community to the world. Most of the Canadian autobiographical writings reached the remarkable heights because of the Canadian regional elements and cultural heritages present in the autobiographies. *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literature in English* remarks that

“Because of great non-Native interest in Native Canadians at time, personal histories esp. autobiography were in demand. Autobiography was a new form, alien to an oral heritage, in which the communal was sacrosanct. . . Personal experiences were juxtaposed with communal narratives along with anecdote and short essay creating a distinctive literary form that combined history, traditions, beliefs and personal experience. (4)

The novel opens in 1860’s Saskatchewan was part of Northwest Territories on those days. The Halfbreeds came from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the racial prejudice and settled in Saskatchewan. During that period of time there was no government, no law and order, so they formed it by their own way and sets according to their lifestyle. In this process, the Metis even assured that they were not working against the Canadian Government and they themselves would abandon their council, as soon as the territories establish law and order under a sincere government.

Here, for a very few years they lived happily, but the 1870’s and 1880’s brought the settlers and the railroad, and just as had happened in Ontario and Manitoba their way of life was again threatened. They were squatters with no title to the land they lived on. They wanted assurance from Ottawa of their right to keep the land before the incoming white settlers encroached on them by using homestead laws... They sent many petitions and resolutions to Ottawa but again, as in Ontario and Manitoba, Ottawa was not interested and continued to ignore their existence. (9-10)

The Halfbreeds fought against the Ottawa and failed in the battle, they escaped to the North Saskatchewan. The federal government had spent \$5,000,000 to stop the Halfbreed’s Rebellion. They fled to Spring River, because it is a good place for hunting and trapping and “there were no settlers” (12). Halfbreeds were self- sufficient trappers and hunters. In the late 1920’s the Halfbreeds again faced the threat of settlers, when the lands were open for homesteading. Ten acres had to be broken within three years along with improvements before the title would be granted. Or else the land would be confiscated by Land Improvement District authorities. Since they were in monetary crisis they were unable to use expensive equipment to demolish the rocky and musky region. Their defeat has become a pleasure for the settlers. The homestead were claimed by the authorities and offered it to the

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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’” (13). After that this Metis community faced a terrible life of poverty. They survived without hope and without happiness. They were completely broken when their dream remained daydreams. When they failed to improve the homestead, they became homeless. Halfbreeds always tried to fetch equality and justice for their people. They were under a pressure to remain subordinate for the white race. “My parents and I never shared any aspirations for a future. I never saw my father talk back to a white man unless he was drunk. I never saw him or any of our men walk with their heads held high before white people” (13-14).

Maria Campbell’s great grandpa Campbell came from Edinburgh, Scotland, married a Halfbreed woman and settled in their land itself. The Halfbreeds hated him for his brutal attitude towards his wife and son. He beats his wife and son with the same whip which he used to whip his livestock. Once grandpa Campbell ran away from home, great grandpa Campbell found him and tied him beside his horse. He whipped both the horse and grandpa on the way to home. Great grandpa Campbell always suspected his wife was having affair with the other Halfbreeds in the area. So, whenever he went out for a meeting, he took his wife along with him. And in turn she passed all the information discussed in the meeting. His wrath raised temper to punish her brutally in front of the public “So he stripped the clothes from her back and beat her so cruelly she was scared for life” (14).

Even though the Halfbreeds mind their own business, the white men bothered the Halfbreed women. The Halfbreed men beat their women though they are not responsible for white men’s behaviour. “Our men would become angry, but instead of fighting the white men they beat their wives. They ripped clothes off the women, hit them with fists or whips, knocked them down and kicked them until they were senseless” (37). It shows that these men did not dare to mess up with the troublesome white men, so they show their power over women by beating them to the core.

Halfbreeds faced so many insults and ashamed by the white settlers. All the Halfbreeds were Roman Catholic but at that time there was neither a priest nor a church. Germans built a church and had their way of worship. Maria’s mother took her to the church and prayed, in spite of the warnings of the family members. “A lady leaned over and said something to her, whereupon Mom took my hand and we left. We never went back and it was never discussed at home” (29). It shows that the whites are not ready to accept the Halfbreed even inside the church in the earlier period. As days passed, a Christian minister named Saint Denys visited their part of country to spread news about church and its services with the help of his messengers. The messenger informed Ha-shoo that church service is nothing but they talk and sing, he went with his drum to the church service. Ha-shoo is the famous drummer in that part of the country. The minister started the service in Cree and

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asked the people to sing, Ha-shoo chanted with his drum. He was chased out by the minister. Here, the fault is not on Ha-shoo, since they are completely new to the church and its services he acted upon like that. As a priest he should have patience and understood the innocence of Ha-shoo, but it does not happen in that case. Just because he is a Halfbreed, the minister saw his attitude as uncivilized.

Like other children Maria was tempted by the white children's food, clothing and so on. The white people ate and dressed differently. They are not like the Halfbreeds. Cheechum advised Maria that the white may trigger the Halfbreeds against their own community. This is how the other Halfbreeds fought among their own clan many years ago.

They fought each other just as you are fighting your mother and father today. The white man saw that that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he used it and still does today. Already they are using it on you. They try to make you hate your people. (47)

Halfbreeds faced multiple problems from the earlier Canadian Organization. The welfare people always keep an eye on the day to day activities of Halfbreed / Métis community. If the welfare department found any of the Halfbreed family struggling to lead a family, the department will take away the children and send them to foster homes. The welfare organization did not care even the parents convey their disapproval to give away their children to the orphanage. Being motherless and eldest among the eight, Maria had the threat of protecting her seven siblings. In order to save her brothers and sisters ending up in foster homes, Maria married a white man hoping he would take care of the family. Within few months of marriage, Maria's husband Darrel found out the truth that she married him because of her siblings. After that he started to torture her daily. He became an alcoholic and abused her savagely. His suspicious character influenced him to say that he is not the father of the baby which is in Maria's womb. "He slapped me and I fell down the stairs. . . After slapping me, he threw me on the floor and kicked me. He told me to pack up my clothes and kids and move in with that fucking Halfbreed – that the kid was probably Smoky's anyway" (107). She was completely broken when she came to know that her husband Darrel gave information to the welfare department, to send away her siblings to the orphanage. Along with her new born baby, Maria moved out of her family when she was tortured by her husband.

Maria Campbell led a miserable life of poverty when she managed to survive in the society as a single mother. She kept moving from one place to another. She worked as a cook and waitress to raise her children. Her frustrations and poverty introduced her to the world of drugs alcohol. She was psychologically affected and hospitalized due to her stress. She became an AA meeting member and slowly recovered herself. Cheechum advised Maria that the government grabs the dignity and pride and covers everything with the blanket of shame. Most of the Red Indians were drunkards and she wanted to change everything. By

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that time only she concentrated on the problems faced by the Halfbreeds/ Métis community and voiced out against the discrimination.

Through her novel Maria Campbell depicted how the Métis people suffered under the white supremacy and how they overcame all those-social injustice done to them. She concludes her autobiography with hopeful words “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. . . I no longer need my blanket to survive” (156 -157). At present Canada is free from race and discrimination. The racial atrocities against the Métis/ Halfbreed community were completely washed out by the present Canadian government. The Halfbreeds marginalization was completely burnt in Canada.

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