

Discrimination, Racism and Poverty in Campbell's Half Breed

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Abstract

Discrimination and poverty are the diseases to a healthy society. And these have been the theme in most of the literary pieces created in Canadian Literature. One such novel which deals with poverty and discrimination of native Canadians by the Whites is Maria Campbell's HALF BREED. This is the autobiographical work of the author recording the bitter experiences of her own life as a lonely, depressed woman living in a community full of bigots. Maria Campbell was the first Canadian novelist from the natives, who wrote in English. At the age of 36, Maria Campbell wrote her first work, which is an uncoiled narration of her own experiences, comprising nothing imaginary, and everything it has with it is truth, bad and bitter truths of life. The whole novel "HALF BREED" is a portrayal of the varied difficulties, which every native Indian had to suffer under the dominant society.

This paper analyses her thirty three years of life, which was torn into pieces by the racism and discrimination as an example of degraded race half breed.

Introduction

Maria Campbell was born on April 26, 1940 near Park Valley, Saskatchewan in North America. Her family was a mixture of five races: French, Cree, English, Scottish, and Irish. They were called 'half breeds' and they belonged to Métis Community. As they were half natives and half whites, they were neglected by both the communities. At the age of 36, Maria Campbell wrote her first work, which is an uncoiled narration of her own experiences, comprising nothing imaginary but bad and bitter truths of life.

Walter Brueggemann says, "Surely history consists primarily in speaking and being answered, in crying and being heard. If that is true it means there can be no history in the empire because the cries are never heard and speaking never

answered” History of Métis people were an unheard cry to the world and their untold miseries are still unanswered.

The half breeds,

- By birth had to suffer out of their poverty.
- They had an unrecognized and unacceptable birth.
- Most of the half breeds were laborers
- And even now their writings are accepted but not the people.
- No one paid any attention to them.
- Abandoned by the society, government and even by their relatives.
- They underwent cultural, sociological and political prejudices.

Three things

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.

These three things were always interconnected. Injustice laws lead to poverty, which lead to discrimination respectively. Mostly the Métis people, who had a cultural background, were subjected to cultural degradation too. Their culture was corrupted by the intrusion of the Whites into their land and even they were neither regarded as human beings, nor supplied with respectable jobs. Most of them turned into drunkards and their children were put into foster care, where they grew up, familiar with English culture, religion and language. The shattered families resulted in large number of suicides among the natives. They were socially, politically, economically retarded. They had to suffer verbal abuses from the Whites. They remained poor all through their lives. Half Breeds yielded their culture to the Whites and started speaking in the language of new, dominating immigrants. “Our land with them and their Bible with us “was the cry in the hearts of the natives after accepting the religion of the Immigrants.

Land Act

The novel is a talk about half-breeds and their sufferings by a representative of them. They were forced to leave the belongings and their lands by the “Land Act”, an injustice law formed by the Whites, which declared that if the natives don’t seem to take care of their lands properly for three years their

land will be ceased by the Government. This Law made most of the natives landless and almost in the status of beggars in the reservations meant to them by Government. This was the first blow upon the rich yet uneducated natives by the White aggressors. But the rich love which prevailed among the natives, and their culture could not be ceased by the government.

The whole novel "HALF BREED" seems to be a portrayal of the varied difficulties, which every native Indian had to suffer under the dominant society. Maria Campbell had recorded her thirty three years of life, which was torn into pieces by the racism and discrimination as an example of degraded race half breed. The novel begins as,

"In the 1860s, when Saskatchewan was part of what was then called the Northwest Territories and was a land free of towns, barbed-wire fences and farmhouses"

The book is written as the letters, which were addressed to the author herself. Land Act made the forefathers of Maria Campbell into, homeless Road Allowance People. The conditions endured by the 'Road Allowance People', and descriptions of Saskatchewan life in the 1920s is very clearly described by our author. The lands ceased from the half breeds were distributed to the white immigrants and they built cabins and bars on those lands. The book also unfolds the story of Campbell's ancestors, who struggled for the social, legal, political and cultural dynamics represented by the Whites regarding their lands. Campbell alludes to the land in an introduction, and notes that "like me the land had changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself. That is when I decided to write about my life".

Early Life

Campbell was born in a home where her maternal grandmother, Dubuque whom she called 'Cheechum' lived. Cheechum was a lady who taught Cree cultures and their rituals to Maria Campbell as she grew up. But being the oldest of seven children, Campbell was forced to quit her school education at an early age of twelve. Till then Maria was educated in a Residential School set up by the White government where she was not allowed to speak in her mother tongue Cree. As she was a native, the other community girls and boys started teasing her and she was often insulted. This racial discrimination in schools shows how this social evil have deep rooted in Canadian society. So she quit her education and turned out to be

the primary care giver to her siblings. But latter when her father's second wife, Sarah took care of the children, Campbell resumed her studies in the Community school run by the natives'. And here she was happy.

She fell in love with a native man, Smoky. But at the age of fifteen she married a white man, Darren in order to keep her family united. But unfortunately, her husband reported her to the Welfare Authorities and the siblings of Maria Campbell were placed in foster care. He took her to Vancouver and abandoned her in the slums, penniless. Having a female child in her hands Maria was forced to face the realities of the world, all alone. In order to have her bread, she tried on various hands. But her struggle for existence was weakened by the racist approach of the people towards her. She had to fight the Cultural aggression imposed on her to survive.

Cultural Degradation

Campbell turned into an alcoholic and the extreme discrimination and poverty made her a prostitute for her bread. At this point one could identify that "Half Breed" has the theme of Cultural Degradation due to poverty. Lil, a pimp got major part of her money. Ray another man turned her as a Drug Mule. Ray was arrested while Campbell was set free from his clutches. It was her poverty that made her to get into such bad circumstances. The Values taught by Cheechum made her to hate such a life and so she educated her child in the convent and left the slums. And went to Alberta where she found David with whom she lived hiding her past terrific businesses she carried out till then. David helped her by joining her in a dress making course and her native friend Tixie helped her to be out of drug addiction. She struggled to keep her secrets out from David throughout her life. And these stresses lead to nervous breakdown. She attempted suicide twice and was then hospitalized. All these were the result of White superiority over a poor native woman.

At the age of fifteen she tried to escape from poverty and discrimination by marrying a white man. But the marriage was broken in a short time. She was left alone in slums of Vancouver and her values got degraded. The rational values taught by her grandmother, Cheechum strengthen her struggle for existence. Ancient Cree rituals and Cheechum's wisdom were the important factors which contributed to a genuine novelist. Campbell's experiences confirm Cheechum's class-based analysis:

"I realize now that poor people, both white and Native, who are trapped within a certain kind of life, can never look to the business and political leaders of this country for help. Regardless of what they promise, they'll never change things, because they are involved in and perpetuate in private the very things that they condemn in public". The worst effect of Poverty in her life could be well understood by these lines.

Campbell's heritage was at first filled with rich culture, then with the arrival of a White man (white superiority), immorality found its path into Campbell's life. And then again native culture had remodeled her into a normal and peaceful artist. Culture is the one that educates and safeguards people.

Pen as Asylum

In order to prevent herself from entering into the earlier ditch, she took pen as her profession. The letters she wrote to her were filled with fictional qualities thus she published it under the title "Half Breed" in the year 1973, which attained world's attention. Half-breed takes into consideration also class and gender groupings, and in the end a broad social community of those who seek justice. The book has a practical conclusion:

"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."

With the success of "Half Breed" she published her latter novels like "People of the Buffalo: How the Plain Indians Live" in (1976), "Little Badger and The Fire spirit"(1977), "Riel's People"(1978), "Achimoona: An Anthology"(1985) "The Book Of Jessica"(1989), "Road Allowance People"(1995).

"Half breed" is a best seller in Canada and is described as "the most decisive book written by a Native person" by The Canada Council for the Arts. The whole text is mainly concerned with frequent discrimination, with the negative impact with which the Métis Indians had to live their life on. The narrator conveys her sorrow and sufferings by emphasizing what it is like to be a half breed. And it describes the battle which goes on between the natives and the whites. It also pokes at the racist still hidden within the pluralistic Canadian Society. The argument of the fiction is taken to the climax by describing her own experiences under white superiority; through her experiences she explains how badly the whites treated her and her people.

As a successful writer in the Canadian Literature Maria Campbell did not ignore her Half Breeds, she returned to her own people and worked with the Non-Profitable Native Organizations, all across Canada. Then Maria Campbell worked as a professor in the University of Saskatchewan.

Conclusion

Regarding “Half Breed”, Jim Douglas says, “It’s not an angry book, but will make you angry! Not a bitter book but will chain you! Have a happy ending, but will not make you happy!” To Aboriginals, Maria’s work represents the struggles natives feel to be accepted into society and how to overcome these obstacles. To non-aboriginals, Maria’s work teaches society to be kinder to people of mixed backgrounds and races. Not many people realize this, but Maria is also an inspiration to those who self destruct themselves. Maria turned to writing as a medicine, and re-built her self esteem.

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