



## DISPOSSESSION AND RECUPERATION OF NATIVE IDENTITY IN MARIACAMPBELL'S *HALFBREED* AND SALLY MORGAN'S *MY PLACE*

**Deep Shikha Karthik**

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Govt. P.G. College, Alapur,

Ambedkar Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, India.

### ABSTRACT

*The present paper confers the works of two female aboriginal authors known as Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* in the context of dispossession and eventually regaining their native identity. It is a study of some aboriginal issues but allied to two different countries. Native people have same predicaments more or less every part of the world whether it is Canada or Australia. Canada is known for its prolonged and eventful history which has made it a nation. It is a multicultural country inheriting diversity in terms of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. Likewise, the history of Australia is full of displacement, cultural belonging, ethnicity and native histories and stories. In both Canada and Australia, native authors play a significant role in mounting Native literature because for the first time they provide non-Native readers with knowledge of hidden indigenous history. Equally, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* raise identical concerns about authentic and factual native legacy and identity.*

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, Native, Indigenous, Dispossession, Displacement, Native literature or studies.

The beginning of the twentieth century introduced a conspicuous change in the literary production of these countries. Native writers finally broke away from the influence of foreign culture and hunted materials that would awaken the nationalistic spirit and native sensibility of the Canadians and Australians. They intentionally shaped a native tradition and channelized the literature of the century. Hence, Native writers are today demanding a voice, in vision of the damage done to Indigenous culture and people by the erstwhile Europeans in the process of colonization. In *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, James Ruppert emphasizes that how Native writers encourage implied readers to learn new ways of making sense of the world. He says, "Native writers encourage implied readers to enter into conversations with which they are familiar and those with which they are not" (10).

In both the countries, natives have played a central role in shaping their society. They are popular to have preserved their ethics, primeval loyalty and a strong political, economic, social, linguistic and cultural identity. They have their specific cultural manifestations such as religion, living under a tribal system, dress, hunting and trapping as a means of livelihood or occupation of ancestral lands, lifestyle, etc. They mainly have self or group consciousness through self-identification or group identification. But unfortunately, Native people have never received their just due equally in the history of Canada and Australia.

Natives are known by various names: 'Aboriginals,' 'First Nations,' 'Indigenous,' and so on. Anything associated with Indigenous or Aboriginal or Natives peoples and the like is considered into Native Studies. The various designations are given to same Native studies or literature. According to the non-native writer and the Head of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, Peter Kulchyski who defines the implication of Native Studies in the chapter named, "What Is Native Studies?" of the work *Expressions in Canadian Native Studies*:



*Native Studies involves the creation, recognition, or legitimization of new knowledge and new forms of knowledge.* It is a scholarly enterprise, though it is not confined to academic units called Native Studies, First Nations Studies, Aboriginal Studies, Native American Studies, Inuit Studies, and the like. Native Studies programs, wherever they exist and whatever they are called, involve an attempt to support the production of a specific form of knowledge regarding Aboriginal peoples. To a certain extent, it is possible to characterize this form of knowledge as knowledge that comes from within, rather than from outside of, an Aboriginal culture, although this characterization creates almost many difficulties as it alleviates. (14)

Maria Campbell is a Métis author, playwright, broadcaster, and filmmaker of mixed Scottish, and French ancestry. The Métis community emerged only in historic times, during the fur trade period in Canada, when difficulties with an unfamiliar and demanding climate as well as the requirements of the fur trade encouraged intermarriage between male fur traders, most commonly of French-Canadian origin, and native women, particularly Cree. Therefore they are called ‘Halfbreeds’ for having mixed-bloods of two different races. Born in 1940, Maria Campbell was raised in a strong, vibrant, and close-knit Métis road-allowance community that existed marginally in shanties on Crown land (area of land, the legal title to which is held by the Crown, set apart for the use and benefit of an Indian band) north of Prince Albert, northern Saskatchewan. She is best known for her autobiography, *Halfbreed* (1973). She has also written other works, such as the play, *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (1987), co-authored with Linda Griffiths; as well as *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995), and a number of children's books which capture the aspects of Métis history, including *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977) and her other works such as *Achimoona* (an anthology, 1985), *Riel's People: How the Métis lived* (1976), and *People of the Buffalo: How the Plains Indians Lived* (1975).

In most acclaimed and popular native autobiography, *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell recalls her days from childhood till her early life as she comes to terms with her cultural identity and the racial differences between her Métis people and the whites and other Native American population that are now with her. It is the time when world around her is totally changed. *Halfbreed* is divided into twenty-four chapters along with a short introduction where each chapter not only weaves into her personal history but the story of whole native community. In this work, Maria Campbell creates a sensation by her unique individual account of the challenges and opportunities of growing up within the mixed streams of two dissimilar cultural ethos and ethics and being intensified by both.

The overriding influences on Maria Campbell's entire life were two women, one was her mother, and the other her dearly loved great-grandmother called ‘Cheechum,’ desperately proud of her Native heritage. Maria Campbell articulates of the discrimination, deprivation, sexism, and racism to which Natives and all Indigenous men and women have been historically subjected by the Canadian white society. Simultaneously, she searches for the affirmation of self-identity, tries to triumph over poverty, prejudice and the misery of being Métis. As regarding the end of the work Maria Campbell discovers her place in the political beliefs of her people and as Irma Mc Donough speaks out in "A review of People of the Buffalo" of *Saturday Nith* that, “Her struggle is a communal one. Having survived the personal struggle, she is ready to work to make life better for all her people” (72).

The conception that identity is vigorously mobilized in *Halfbreed* has presented some critics an alternative to trying to discover an inbuilt identity in the text. The work has got success in maintaining and nourishing its own literary voice. It is a portrayal of the varied struggles, which each native had to go through under the dominant society. Cornelia Holbert states her response for *Halfbreed* in 1973 review in *Best Sellers*, “*HalfBreed* ... is shocking, not because of what Maria



Campbell has been (yes, a fifteen-year-old bride, yes, a prostitute, yes, a narcotics addict, a twice attempted suicide), but because the hand that holds the book trembles at what it has done” (344).

By the late 1980s in Australia, Native autobiographies increasingly attracted the attention of the mainstream publishing industry, presumably triggered by the success of *My place* written in 1987 by Australian Aboriginal author Sally Morgan. It is about Sally Morgan's quest for native identity and acquaintance of her family's history and the fact that she has grown up under false deceits. It also imparts the story of Sally Morgan's self-discovery through knots and reconnection with her Native people, culture and community. The work is a landmark in Aboriginal literature and is one of the earlier works in indigenous writing. She has written several biographies such as, *Sally's Story* (1995) edited by Barbara Ker Wilson, *Wanamurraganya, The Story of Jack McPhee* (1990), *Mother and Daughter: The Story of Daisy and Gladys Corunna* (1994) edited by Barbara Ker Wilson, and *Arthur Corunna's Story* (1995) again edited by Barbara Ker Wilson. She has worked with many children's books named *Little Piggies* (1991) with Paul Morgan, *The Flying Emu and other Australian Stories* (1992), *Hurry up, Oscar!* (1994) illustrated by Bettina Guthridge, *Pet Problem* (1994), *Dan's Grandpa* (1996) illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft, *In Your Dreams* (1997) illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft, and *Just a Little Brown Dog* (1997) once more illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft. There is only a single play written by Sally Morgan that is *Cruel Wild Woman and David Milroy* (1999) which was performed in the 1999 Festival of Perth season.

Similar to Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Sally Morgan's *My Place* reveals her discovery of Aboriginality in her heritage. The first section of the work commences as a chronology of Sally's younger days, with general facts about school and home. Until age fifteen, Sally was ignorant that she was different from white or non-native Australians and was persuaded to tell other children at school that she was Indian. At a certain moment, Sally gets besieged by some questions related to her real identity as biological determinism or as socio-cultural performance. She writes:

Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me? (141)

After the detecting of her true inheritance, Sally digs deeper and resolves to write an autobiography about it.

Just like Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan, there are many other native authors who have tried to explore their identity through writing about their history and past. For instance, Brian Maracle is an award-winning native writer who explores the problems that face his community through his recent memoir, *Back on the Rez* (1996). There are other works which reflect these kinds of issues such as Emma LaRocque's *Defathering the Indian* (1975), which is a social commentary and Beatrice Culleton's partially fictionalized *In Search of April Raintree* (1983).

Autobiographies or life writing communicates with imaginative writing an extra symbolic nature than it would emerge at first sight, for these both contribute to the narrative quality that provides them shape. Certainly, autobiographical writing does participate with new forms of imaginative writing the possibilities offered by narratives. As Albert E. Stone mentions in *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*:

Though free to combine impressions and images of the past in order to express present needs and even future expectations, the autobiographer is bound to that past in ways the novelist (even the historical novelist) is not. Like other historians seeking addictively to formulate plausible explanations and descriptions of past events, an



autobiographer offers an interpretation of the surviving records of his or her own past.

(4)

Equally, the autobiographies *Halfbreed* and *My Place* display that how the dispossession of Aboriginal identity has taken place in the first place and the recuperation of her “true identity” in the end. Thus, ultimately Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan discover their lives’ ultimate goal by writing about their history, legacy, past, and about self.

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