

**UNDOING THE 'US- THEM' COLONIALISM: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF MARIA CAMPBELL'S *HALF-BREED* AND SALLY
MORGAN'S *MY PLACE***

DR. PUNAM C. SHARMA

GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE
SHIMLA (H.P), INDIA.

Abstract

Sometimes a book tells us what we have always known but in a way that makes it seem as if we have not heard it before.' These words from a review of Maria Campbell's Half-Breed published in The Toronto Star [coated on the jacket of Maria Campbell's Half Breed] are equally applicable to Sally Morgan's My Place. The two texts, one by a metis Canadian woman and the other by an aboriginal Australian woman, are set in two distant continents and cultures, but are almost similar or rather identical in their related experiences. This shows that similar socio- political contexts result in similar outcomes as is evident from the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized depicted in the two narratives. The atrocities experienced by the Canadian Natives and the Australian Aborigines under the British colonizers are described with such vividness that the narratives jolt the reader's consciousness and conscience both and give voice to the so far misrepresented and marginalized people. Half-Breed and My Place chronicle the sad tales of ill-treatment, distress, marginalization, dispossession, horror, shame, humiliation, struggle and heroic survival of the Canadian Natives and Australian Aborigines respectively.

Keywords:- Maria Campbell, Half-Breed, Aborigines

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'S ometimes a book tells us what we have always known but in a way that makes it seem as if we have not heard it before.' These words from a review of Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed* published in *The Toronto Star* [coated on the jacket of Maria Campbell's *Half Breed*] are equally applicable to Sally Morgan's *My Place*. The two texts, one by a metis Canadian woman and the other by an aboriginal Australian woman, are set in two distant continents and cultures, but are almost similar or rather identical in their related experiences. This shows that similar socio- political contexts result in similar outcomes as is evident from the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized depicted in the two narratives. The atrocities experienced by the Canadian Natives and the Australian Aborigines under the British colonizers are described with such vividness that the narratives jolt the reader's consciousness and conscience both and give voice to the so far misrepresented and marginalized people. *Half-Breed* and *My Place* chronicle the sad tales of ill-treatment, distress, marginalization, dispossession, horror, shame, humiliation, struggle and heroic survival of the Canadian Natives and Australian Aborigines respectively.

As per *The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia*, the word 'Aboriginal' comes from the Latin words *ab origine* meaning 'from the beginning'. It defines aborigine as, 'any indigenous inhabitant of a region or country' [79]. The word often refers to the original peoples of areas colonized by the Europeans and especially to Australian Aborigines. 'Aborigines' is a broad classification of the earliest inhabitants of Australia. In fact, there are varied groups or communities which are collectively termed as Aborigines. According to the *Lexicon Universal Encyclopaedia*, 'Traditionally, about 500 different tribal groups existed, each occupying a particular stretch of country' [59]. Each group had accumulated knowledge about the plants, insects, reptiles and fish found in the area. They also developed methods and equipment for obtaining them and making them edible. Each tribe had a distinct language or dialect although phonetically all languages were markedly uniform.

Regarding their physical appearance Moshe Y. Sachs writes:

The Aborigines, who call themselves Koori, are slender, dark-skinned
People averaging about five-feet six inches [1.68m] in height.

Their deep-set eyes are dark brown; their short faces have heavy brow ridges and large, jutting jaws.

Most have thick, wavy head and body hair-usually dark brown, sometimes blond or reddish blond [12].

Originally, the Aborigines were nomadic hunters and food – gatherers who hunted, fished and lived simply. They had no knowledge of agriculture. The people had only one domesticated animal the dingo, a dog found only in Australia. Spears, clubs and boomerangs were their chief hunting weapons. Most Aborigines wore nothing except ornaments; a few tribes used kangaroo skins as cloaks in cold weather. Metals were unknown to them. These people had no contact with the outside world until the colonizers came. They were daring survivors in the harshest of conditions. In the book, *Lands and Peoples* it is mentioned that, 'In the dry areas of Australia, they managed to exist where Europeans would have died from hunger, thirst or exhaustion.' [460]. They were basically tough people. Contrary to the belief, that the Aborigines are savage and primitive people, it has now been established that the social organization, marriage rules, taboos and religious ceremonies of the Aborigines are actually intricate and well developed. 'Their social organization is among the most complex known to anthropologists' [Sachs 12].

The Natives of Canada, like the Aborigines of Australia are also believed to have migrated to Canada. They are believed to have landed in North America through the Bering Strait and were therefore of Asiatic origin. The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia maintains that they reached America 'at the end of the last Ice Age, 14,000-15,000 years ago when the Bering Land Bridge was exposed by the lowered sea level between Siberia and Alaska' [751].

Canada possessed diverse ecology, so the Native population too exhibited great variety. The regional patterning of the Natives resulted from two major factors. First, the primary food resources were regionally distributed so regional patterns of subsistence developed. Secondly, the neighbouring groups influenced each other. As ideas and techniques spread from one group to another, the regional patterns intensified. However, the Natives of Canada unlike the Australian Aborigines took up agriculture and were the first cultivators of maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts, peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, cocoa, peyote and cinchona, but they did take up hunting, fishing and living in moving camps just like the Aborigines. Sadly, both these independent, proud races, fell victim to French and British colonization and a never-ending process of dispossession, deprivation and poverty thus began. The strategies of colonization and the resulting oppression were strikingly similar in Canada and in Australia. The Whites ruined the self-reliance of the Natives and the Aborigines and both communities were reduced to a sub-human state. The colonizers exploited the original inhabitants of both the countries in every possible way. As a natural consequence of the use of force, half-breeds or mixed-breeds sprung up because

the colonizers thought they had a right to exploit any and every native woman in the colonies. These half-breeds fell an easy prey to the colonizers, and were for all intents, purposes and interests classified with the other Native tribes despite their half-white lineage. Their native features did them more harm than good as their looks led them to easy discrimination and marginalization.

The Metis is one such half-breed tribe which suffered due to its mixed lineage. The Metis, often referred to as 'Canada's forgotten people' [Bennet and Jaenen 267], fell easy victims to colonial, political, racial and religious prejudices of the Whites. Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan experienced similar anguish and torture along with their families for being half-breeds, tales of which are related in their autobiographies. The two texts show how the colonized half-breed Natives and the Aborigines were prisoners of colour and race. They were visible double minorities who were subjected to extreme mental, social, psychological and physical torture because of their mixed lineage. They were robbed off their land and were driven into reserves which were often unwanted or unproductive stretches of land which the British and French immigrants did not value.

In fact, land was the major cause of dispute between all Native groups and the colonizers. The indigenous people had a different attitude towards the land and its ownership. In their view land could not be owned, people could use it but ownership was out of question. The Natives and the Aborigines had, not only respect for their homeland, but also had a spiritual relationship with the land. Ironically, the Governors of the colonies took all the land rights in their own hands and made free and arbitrary grants to anyone they pleased thus violating the Native's emotional bond with land.

On the other hand, the Australian Aborigines who had their religious and spiritual foundations in 'The Dreamtime' were also not spared. 'The Dreamtime' or dreaming the mythical past by the Australian Aborigines is the basis of their religious beliefs and creation stories. The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia describes that in 'The Dreamtime', the spiritual beings shaped the land and established laws and rituals. 'The Dreamtime' stories describe how the giants and animals sprang up from the earth, sea and sky it describes how sacred places were worshipped by re-enacting rituals at certain times of the year. However, the colonizers neither understood 'The Dreamtime' nor did they value any spiritual association of the Aborigines with land. Rather they began a system of tyranny, oppression and exploitation based on land issues.

In Australia and in Canada, the settlers looked with contempt upon the original inhabitants with dark hair, dark skin, deep set eyes and who spoke strange words. The Natives of Canada were used to self-government, but with the onslaught of the European civilization, the ability of the indigenous people to govern themselves was progressively undermined. Colonization affected the Natives' and the Aborigines' sensibilities in more

than one way. It not only make them in sufficient but also destroyed their collective zeal to improve their deplorable condition.

Alcoholism, despair, hatred, violence, suicidal tendencies and lowered self-respect were some horrific effects of colonization. Alcohol in particular destroyed the esteem of the Natives and the weakened every family and tribal tie. Racial discrimination was practised in virtually all spheres of life. The Whites violated the interior as well as the exterior space of the indigenous people and isolated them completely. The people were not only tortured emotionally, mentally and physically, but were also deprived economically. The settlers did start some new activities and enterprising industries, but entirely for their own benefit. The Natives and the Aborigines were made to work as slaves and were not paid even the minimum wages. At the cost of Aboriginal labour, Australia benefitted fully from the sheep-wool and gold industry, agriculture being the primary profitable area.

Dispossession and deprivation took place both in material and spiritual terms. The indigenous people suffered extreme subjugation and slavery due to deep-rooted colonial attitudes. The marginalization of the people also had psychological implications. The people lost the will and desire to live because they were reduced to a life of deprivation and dependence. Due to this, the people suffered an acute identity crisis and the half-breeds were particularly bewildered at their hopeless existence. Their identity was doubly fractured as each individual was stuck between a given identity which was fake and their own identity which was also not real as they were partially indigenous and partly white. So, they found themselves in a perpetual quest for belongingness.

All the indigenous inhabitants along with the half-breeds were endlessly projected by the Whites as savage and primitive, having neither social rules or moral values, nor any education, knowledge or civilization. Due to such misrepresentations, the original inhabitants became prisoners of stereotypical images created by their self-assumed 'civilized colonizers'. The Whites cleverly used written materials such as diaries, official documents, text books, paintings and literary works as mediums to illustrate the European beliefs which concealed their imperial/colonial prejudice and selfish purpose. The Whites purposely wrote nothing about the rich cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people, who had a sound social system of their own. In order to achieve total success in their evil plan, the Whites manipulatively attacked every belief systems of the original inhabitants and destroyed all their ceremonies.

The colonizers exerted calculated pressures to fragment and fracture the personalities of the people till they finally gave up. There was an obvious clash between two unequal rivals having incompatible cultures and different value systems. The 'fair-skinned' always won in such a confrontation. The white historians and creative writers projected the assumed negativities of the Native population through words like corroboree, cannibal, polygamy, animal like, savage, childlike, dirty, ugly and degenerate which

obviously marred the self-esteem of the native people. The distorted image of the indigenous people created by the Whites supported the latter in establishing their superiority of culture and justifying their acquisition of land for the creation of a 'superior' nation.

However, it is the educated indigenous youth, who have in recent years taken upon themselves the task to correct the distorted representation of the Natives and the aborigines by writing narratives which portray their true selves, their culture and rich tradition, their predicament and anguish and their need to be heard. With the spread of education, various movements for the recognition of Aboriginal rights have also begun. Campaigns against racial discrimination in housing, education, wages and medical facilities have brought desired results. The Natives and the Aborigines have now taken upon themselves to undo the 'us-them' colonial power structure. The search for identity, need for self-improvement and quest for self-empowerment has gradually found expression particularly in the writings of both the Natives and Aborigines.

In the absence of political or social power, the only definite means of empowerment, of making sure that one is heard, is through the use of 'word'. Writing thus becomes a very powerful and potential medium of 'writing back'. In this regard, autobiographies by indigenous people are of great value. They serve as important historical documents because they reveal the related socio-political contexts through first hand experiences. Such autobiographies narrate life events and experiences against the background of the conditions that prevailed during that period. In these autobiographical texts, the narrator plays a double role of an 'analyst' and an 'analysand' as described by Suzette A. Henke. She explains how, through the artistic replication of any life writing project generates an empowering position occupied by the author who unavoidably finds himself or herself in three different positions. Firstly, the writer is the authorial consciousness, which narrates the story in a series of re-collected episodes. Secondly, the author is a struggler competing with the fractured, fragmented, traumatized and shattered version of the self. Thirdly, the writer emerges as a coherent self through the process of narrative self-disclosure [Henke xv].

So, writing about thoughts and feelings associated with traumas forces the writer to bring together many facets of complicated events. It involves re-creating repressed memories and bringing them to the surface through the use of language. This helps to overcome self destructive tendencies too. Therefore, writing acts as a therapeutic device which relieves the sufferer from shame, pain and distress. Psychoanalytic studies of life-writings also show how, re-living the past and overcoming it helps in releasing pent-up feelings. Henke asserts that this therapeutic power resides in the experience of 're-memory' and 're-enactment' which is transferred to writing. According to Shoshana Felman as quoted by Henke, a life testimony 'is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point

of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life' [xii].

The autobiographies written by the colonized, racially discriminated and economically dispossessed Natives and Aborigines expose the brutal exploitation at the hands of the colonizers and simultaneously record the protagonists' and their communities' pain, sense of injury and sense of loss. Women autobiographies are particularly significant because they suffer an extra sexist bias in addition to culture, caste and race prejudices. Consequently, any attempt to understand the Native and the Aboriginal heritages and the effects of colonialism on them remains incomplete if the voices of women writers remain unheard.

In Canada, though the history of native writing is 400 years old, it was only after 1950 that the female voices were distinctly heard. The early literature in Canada followed the oral tradition of story telling. The discourses about traditions, songs on life and prayers to the Great Spirit were all perpetuated orally. The writings of Native women combine these oral traditions of the past with new literary tradition of the printed word. Consequently the Native women proudly state: "I know I'm a bridge between two worlds," as Alanis Obomsawin put it [Basu 195]. The women writers serve to link the past with the future, thus establishing a continuity in human relationships. 'In other words, each native woman writer becomes a bridge between her community and the reader from the new world, a bridge between the past and the present, a connection uniting various sections of humanity' [Basu 195-196].

It is interesting to see how the decolonizing process takes shape in the writings of these Native women. The life writings of the half-breed women writers assume greater significance in this context because they are half-way between the dominant culture and visible minorities. They talk not only about total subjugation to subjective control exerted by the colonizers, but also about their fellow-people who stand divested of social, political and religious freedoms. The half-breed women writings hit at the negative potentials of the super-imposing White-man's culture that has been responsible for depriving them not only of their right to equality and dignity but also to a respectable and acceptable social identity.

Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan too successfully expose the excess towards the indigenous people and give voice to the oppressed and misrepresented people of Canada and Australia respectively. Through the ordeals that were faced by them and their families, the two writers show the suffering of their races and successfully attempt to forge collective identities for all their people. The spiritual energy of the Native culture finds an eloquent expression in the words of these women writers who 'describe the pain of the centuries – not less than 400 years of pain. They show in their writings the wounds caused by prejudices, politics and poverty to people [...]' [Basu 197].

'No discussion of contemporary Aboriginal writing can ignore the impact of Morgan's work [...] Morgan emerged from relative obscurity to become a bestselling author [...] [Bennet and Strauss 341]. Similarly Maria Campbell has also made her mark by writing in a manner that is 'powerful, simple, direct, and passionate without being bitter'. Regarding *Half-Breed*. *Victoria Times' Colonist* writes, 'You can almost feel this book vibrating in your hands, it is so compelling. You read it with a kind of agonized heart-in-the-mouth sensation, half-way between laughter and tears [...]. Truth is stronger than fiction'[quoted on the jacket of *Half Breed*].

Similar views have been expressed by critics regarding *My Place* by Sally Morgan. Clearly, the text is a phenomenon, among other things, it is one of the books by Aboriginal author to which an entire critical study has been devoted. On the one hand, the agony of extreme subjugation is captured not only in day-to-day life but also in the larger social set-up. The two texts proudly unravel the richness of Native culture, the inherent goodness of the indigenous people and healthy family traditions. Both Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan play dominant roles in upholding values and traditions and in exposing the myth of equal opportunity spread by the whites, which did not exist at all.

Maria Campbell initiates her life account in *Half-Breed* with the famous and historical Riel Rebellion, which was a desperate attempt by the Natives to stand in revolt against the dictatorship of the Whites. They had even formed a provisional government at Fort Gary, Manitoba under Louis Riel., However after their inevitable defeat , which coincided with an unfortunate crop failure due to adverse weather conditions, the Natives had a real hard time. Maria Campbell writes:

So began a miserable life of poverty which held no hope for the future ,
That generation of my people was completely beaten.
Their fathers had failed during the rebellion to make a
dream come true; they failed as farmers; now there was
nothing left [...]. They felt shame. And with shame the
loss of pride and strength to live each day. I hurt inside
--When I think of those people. [8]

Maria Campbell's family was obviously no exception. For Maria, fracturing of the self starts early in life. Her unending tale of torment starts with school, where she has her initial experiences of racial prejudices. The school even at a later stage is no better because the White students and the Natives remain segregated. Such circumstances lead to an early disillusionment and disintegration, which increase with time and age. However, she bravely encounters all the difficulties. Basically a fighter in spirit, she writes, "I always felt foolish for being so weak" [85].

Life however has greater ordeals for Maria in store. She is deeply hurt by the unfair laws and unjust legal system that put the half-breeds at the lowest level, even below the Natives who were their own half-ancestors. Suffering and pain make her see life more clearly and misery makes her wise like her grandma Cheechum. In her great misfortune, she begins to identify herself more with other unprivileged people like her. She now not only understands their plight better, but actually comes closer to them by sharing a special bond of common fractured identity. Hardships make her aware of the great curse that the colour of the skin can bring and what ill-treatment it can cause. She emerges a more mature and prudent person who is more sympathetic towards the sufferings of other. Her seemingly endless ordeals and quest find culmination in the realization of the ultimate truth that humanity at large is one and that any kind of violence is a violation of all individual rights and freedom. From her troubled and turbulent past, she finally moves to optimism. No longer troubled by notions of self-identity, Maria establishes a close affinity with all the oppressed groups of people in the world as she mentions in the last two lines of her autobiography: I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need any blanket to survive [184].

A similar tale of misfortune as a result of dispossession and displacement is told by Sally Morgan in *My Place*. In contrast to *Half-breed*, which starts with a historical context and community living, *My Place* begins with Sally Morgan's personal quest for identity, which starts with her own home, and then reaches out to the community. She gradually uncovers the hidden past and discovers her origin and ancestry, which leads to her contact with the White man's world. *My Place* begins with the experience of Sally Morgan's childhood while growing up in the suburban Perth in the nineteen-fifties. The memories and images of her early childhood and adolescence provide vague hints and echoes of a mysterious and hidden past. Sally Morgan sets out to uncover the mystery and in doing so, a fascinating story unfolds. It is a deeply moving account of a search for truth and identity into which the family is gradually drawn. Finally, through the involvement of the author's mother, granduncle and her grandmother, Sally is able to reveal the past that is so far shrouded in mystery.

However, ironically enough, it is the language of their white masters, which the half-breed writers had to master to reveal to the colonizers the harm done to the innocent and helpless Native victims. The English language helped them in raising the consciousness of the indigenous inhabitants in partially decolonizing them and in confronting the White establishment with its lies and atrocities. Both Maria Campbell and Sally Morgan poignantly record uncelebrated birth, turbulent childhood, unenthusiastic youth, drudgery and passive slavery, miserable mixed marriages, burdened parentage, hopeless old age and painful death in the Natives' and the Aborigines' respectively resulting due to the excesses committed by the colonizers. The note that reverberates through the narratives is that the indigenous people cannot be obliterated, 'that their identity will assert itself, will speak for

itself through the words of its grandmothers, mothers and daughters' [Bennet and Strauss 342].

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