

# The Construction of Canadian Metis Identity in Halfbreed

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**Abstract:** *Halfbreed* is a representative aboriginal novel of Canadian female writer Maria Campbell. It is an extraordinary memoir that records Campbell's life experience as a Canadian Metis woman and initiates a rebirth of Canadian aboriginal literature. In the novel, Campbell began her recovery journey after overcoming the difficulties of poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Through her recovery, she became aware of self-consciousness and dedicated herself to fighting for the rights of Canadian Metis. This essay analyzes the complex psychological process of inferiority, hatred, obedience, and loss that experienced by Canadian Metis when they suffered discrimination and oppression both physically and spiritually, as well as the way of constructing their cultural identity. Meanwhile, three elements of Campbell's consciousness awakening process are demonstrated. Campbell has always been the leader in the process of pursuing her cultural identity. It is the result of the joint influence of individual, family and society factors. The awakening of the awareness of Canadian Metis will help and inspire the aboriginal groups and people sharing similar experiences around the world, to pursue their own cultural identities and strive for revitalizing their own cultures.

**Keywords:** *Halfbreed, Canadian Metis, Consciousness Awareness, Identity Reconstruction*

## 1. Interpretation of Identity

Identity is a kind of cognition and description of the subject itself, as well as the confirmation and construction of the essence of the self, including cultural identity, ethnic identity and many other aspects. The identity can also present different forms of identity according to different subjects. For example, the subject carries out identity activities with cultural self as the core between two different groups, emphasizing the influence of different cultures, which is called "cultural identity"; if the self is the core, emphasizing the psychological and physical experience of the self, this is "self-identity"; if it takes society as the core and emphasizes people's social belonging, this is "social identity"; if it refers to the choice of cultural subjects between two different cultural groups. Because of the influence of different cultures, this cultural subject must regard one culture as the collective cultural self and the other as the other, this is "collective identity". Identity is mainly a question of cultural identity, which is composed of individual attributes, history, culture and development prospect of the subject.

The term Metis comes from French and originally refers to the offspring of French men and aboriginal women in Canada. Later, it was stated that all children of European intermarriages with aboriginal peoples in Canada were called Metis, which means half-breed.

The Metis culture has been dominated by the mainstream culture of the metropolitan country for a long time, and their traditional ethnic culture have been marginalized due to long-term alienation, which made their own culture survive in the cracks. Therefore, when the Metis wanted to speak out for their own culture and to prove their existence, it must first construct their own national attribute and establish their cultural identity. As a Metis, Campbell was born in 1940 in Northern Saskatchewan, on a trap line and grew up in a road-allowance community. Her father, the grandson of a Scottish businessman and a Metis woman. Her mother, the daughter of a Cree woman and a French-American man. The complex half-breed Canadian made her trapped in identity confusion.

## 2. Psychological Process of Identity of the Canadian Metis

Imperialism and colonialism exert hegemonic control over the political, economic and cultural aspects of colonial countries. Under these dual cultural suppression, the Canadian Metis have gone through a long and painful psychological process in their pursuit of identity. Imperialism and colonialism

destroyed the traditional culture and conceptual awareness of the Metis in their life and spirit, and instilled them with Euro-centrism of the mainstream of western civilization. Being forced to accept the labels and positioning of inferior nations and barbaric civilization, the Metis eventually became the “marginalized” ethnic group which without social status, cultural status, and discourse power. On the one hand, the colonists vigorously promoted their own culture, and on the other hand, they kept degrading the culture of the colony in order to achieve the purpose of destroying the national spirit and will of the colony. Under this cultural suppression, the Metis have been extremely deformed and distorted, and undergone a long and painful process on the road of pursuing identity.

### ***2.1. Inferiority Complex and Hatred***

In white society, any person of color would be ostracized, discriminated and oppressed. White people regard themselves as racially superior, carrying out racial discrimination against all colored people. In their eyes, all colored people are inherently inferior nations, barbaric, ignorant, lazy...

The Metis lost their national consciousness and internalized these labels as their essential attributes due to long-term colonial rule and cultural hegemony, which caused a suffocating sense of inferiority to accumulate deep within the Metis over the years. When Campbell saw that her father never talk back to a white man unless he was drunk, and her people never walk with their heads held high before white people, she had realized the difference between the Metis and white people since then. It was not until Campbell herself experienced the insults of the whites to the Metis, that kind of feeling was even stronger. Every time the Metis entered a town where white people live, the townspeople would stand on the sidewalks and hurl insult them. “Half breeds are in the town, hide your valuables.” If they walked into stores the white women and their children would leave and the storekeepers’ wives, sons and daughters would watch that they didn’t steal anything. And when the white men bothered the Metis women, the Metis men would become angry, but they dare not resist. Instead of fighting the white men they beat their wives, and even whipped and abused the women to vent their anger. They knocked their wives down and kicked them until they were senseless. For the first time, Campbell felt the ridicule, prejudice, and discriminatory attitudes of white people toward the Metis. It was also the first time she have seen her people repressing a deep sense of inferiority complex toward the white. After experiencing long-term ideological control of cultural hegemony, the Metis had subconsciously internalized the mainstream civilization of western civilization, and consciously accepted the ideology that white people are superior to all colored people. They dare not have any confrontation with the white people, always being obsequious and submissive.

Being exploited and oppressed by colonialists for a long time, the Metis was in an inferior position politically, economically and culturally. As a result, they struggled desperately and even felt humiliated and unconsciously hatred for their identity. When Campbell was studying at a mixed school of whites and the Metis, she experienced the difference between white and half breed. Whenever they occur, always specifically divided into two groups. Everything was so different from the food that was given out, the attitude of the teachers, and the clothes that they were worn, etc. The Metis children could only eat ordinary pancakes, cold potatoes, and wild roasted gophers, while the white children could have nutritious boiled eggs, vegetables, fruits, and cake desserts which the Metis children were lucky to have even at Christmas. And they would be ridiculed by white people for such ridiculous reasons. For the first time, young Campbell felt ashamed of her own race, hated her identity of half breed and even resented the parents who brought her half-breed ancestry.

### ***2.2. Compliance and Imitation***

Living in a sense of inferiority and hatred, the Metis’ cognition of themselves had become increasingly blurred. On the one hand, they desperately wanted to change their half-breed identity, but they could not achieve it; on the other hand, under the control of long-term cultural hegemony, they have accepted the civilization of the suzerain country, accepted the values of white people, and extremely yearned to become white.

The Metis were struggled with the gap between fantasy and reality. The simplest way to extricate themselves was to be compliance. In order to enter the white world, they submitted to colonial rule and imitated whites. The Metis began to show their preferences to whites. They imitated whites, hoping to be recognized by whites and integrating into their lives. When the whites invited the Metis to their homes, they laughed and drank with them like brothers because it was the first time in their lives that the white man had talked to them like men. When white people shown their friendliness to them, they would be

satisfied. The Metis were nothing but frighten people. They obeyed the rule of the government, accepted all kinds of unfair policies and treatment in silence, and lost the consciousness of resistance. In this way, one day when a leader came here and tried to lead them to strive for a better life and equal status, the Metis could not be united. They colluded with the white people, and even fought with them, mocking and attacking their own race as the white people have done. The Canada government seized on the psychology of the half breed and attacked them with the most powerful weapons: Fighting between each other was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat half breeds, and the whites use it as still does today. They try to make the Metis hate their own people. Therefore, the whole plan of this organization ended in vain. Since then, no one had led the Metis.

In order to make a living, Campbell persisted in marrying a white man even in the face of various oppositions. She naively thought that marrying a white man could help her enter the white world, change the family's living conditions and her own identity, end the miserable life, and solve all problems.

However, she had married to escape from what she thought was an ugly world, only to find a worse one. Her husband Darrell often abused and cursed her after they got married. Her husband's family was not satisfied with her half-breed identity and kept verbally insulting her. She had no status and dignity in the family, and lived a painful life like a nightmare. She was completely lost in her marriage.

### ***2.3. Loss of Identity***

The cultural colonization and indoctrination caused severe cultural alienation and cultural anxiety of half-breed. They do not know who they are, and their real cultural identity attributes were lost in the long term slavish education. The half-breed people are in a state of confusion, depression and lost.

People's cognition of things, the construction of identity and the establishment of worldview were all derived from the customs and resources of the nation on which they were based. However, the Metis' culture was wiped out because it was in conflict with the white civilization that they did not know and that imposed itself on them. The Metis recognized many of the beliefs that they had adopted with reference to the subjective attitude of the whites. Due to long-term colonial rule and cultural hegemony, this kind of ideology became the collective unconsciousness views of the Metis that rooted in their minds, and internalized as their essential attributes, thus made them fell into the confusion of identity recognition and lost themselves. The Metis struggled with their own identity.

The Canada government maliciously caricatured the history of the Metis, remade the Red River Rebellion, which defended the rights of the nation, into comic entertainment, and turned the outstanding hero in their history, Louis Reille, into a dirty and violent insane idiot. The whole uprising was treated as a ridiculous farce. All the white people laughed, even the people of the Metis laughed at their own heroic predecessors. By means of cultural hegemony, the government controlled the colonized people in terms of culture and education, demonized and degraded the culture and heroes of the Metis, so as to further colonize their thoughts and ideas. Under this cultural suppression, the Metis have been extremely suppressed and distorted. The racial discrimination entrapped in the colonial rule caused serious cultural alienation and cultural anxiety to the Metis. They were eager to become white people in order to get rid of the cultural inferiority complex deep in their souls. They were also afraid of going back to being a half-breed, so that they hated the half-breed identity they were born with. In order to gain the recognition of white people, they trapped in delusions with the goal of learning a white language or marrying white men. They did not know "who I am", and their true cultural identity attributes have disappeared in the long period of enslaved education. The Metis have lost the opportunity for self-awareness and the ability to resist themselves. The whole nation was in a state of confusion, despair, depression and lost.

Campbell also went through a period of loss of identity. Her childhood dreams of a better life were dashed into pieces when she moved with her husband to Vancouver, the big city she had been looking forward to. Life was even more bleak here than it had ever been before. She met many people of half-breed here. Those men who walked aimlessly and seemed not to see anything or anyone; women who appeared as though they had endured so much ugliness that nothing could upset them; and pale, skinny, raggedy kids with big, unfeeling eyes who looked so unloved and neglected. They were pale, scrawny, ragged, with ethereal eyes, aimless, wandering the streets like zombies. There are even children who seem to have suffered endlessly and have no dreams. Life in Vancouver was very hard, finally Campbell and her daughter Lisa could not make ends meet after being abandoned by her husband.

Because of her dual identity of a half-breed and a woman, as well as she had no work experience. It was so difficult for her to find a job, and she could only find lower-class job as a cleaner. The psychological changes that Campbell have gone through from wishing her husband to return to them, to gradually

disappointed, to finally desperate for her husband and life as well. The hardships of life and the inferior social status of the half-breed were the last straw that overwhelmed her. She once hoped to marry a white man to become a white, which could integrate into the white world and change her identity once for all. However, the reality was not the same like she wandered. She was increasingly confused between the two identity attributes, completely lost herself, and did not know who she was and the meaning of life. As a result, she started drinking, taking drugs, and even becoming a prostitute, living without any goal and the significance. She fell into endless confusion, and she could feel nothing but numb, depressed and desperate. She wanted to forget her nation and even committed suicide twice, hoping to completely lose her identity. She was like everyone else in her people. Even entering the white world can not change the identity of half-breed, can not to be white. They could feel and achieve nothing but lost.

#### **2.4. Reconstruction of Identity**

When Campbell was suffering in desperate, she thought of her great-grandmother Cheechums' teaching and eventually began to awaken self-consciousness. She began to put down her prejudice against her own people, understood the situation and ideas of them, accepted her own race from the inside of heart, eventually reconstructed her identity.

Her daughter Lisa and great-grandmother Cheechums were her most important spiritual pillar which have been supporting and encouraging her. So that she could successfully went through two times painful withdrawal and finally regained her hope in life. Campbell also joined an AA group, where all members told their life stories one by one. They described how AA helped them find a normal way of life, happiness, peace of mind and self-esteem. The place has also helped Campbell stop using drugs and alcohol, regain a sense of meaning in her life. Campbell felt strong and no longer confused anymore. She found a job as a cook, and broke the stereotype of patriarchal society that women are worthless and ignorance, and successfully qualified for the job through her hard work. Since then, whenever life was less than satisfactory, Campbell never degenerated, but ran for it. Cheechums' teaching made her understand that when the government gave them something, they would take all that they have in return—such as your pride, your dignity, your courage and faith, all the things that make you a living soul. And then the government would give you a blanket to cover up your fears and shame in their own way, until one day, someone would uncover it and throw it away, then the world would change at that time. When Campbell was working as a wateriness in the restaurant, she saw two tiny, raged, with big-eyed Indian boys, who looked so much like her little brothers. They had been bullied by white people without anyone helped them. Campbell was so angry and overcame her inner fears, stood up to protect them in public, and opposed the white people. At this moment, she realized her blanket. She felt her unconsciousness frighten toward the white from the inside, which took so much strength and courage to resist them for protect the rights of half-breed. And she understand the indifference, cowardice and submissiveness of her people. From then on, her consciousness began to wake up, and she was determined to remove her people's blankets and throw them away. She began to realized that she should put herself in the position of the Metis, examine herself as if examining them, and believe that the things that created her own situation also created their situation. Fundamentally speaking, they all suffered the same pain. And their problems were as important as Campbell's, and as difficult to solve, no matter how insignificant Campbell felt they were.

Therefore, she began to put down her prejudice against her own people, understood the situation and ideas of her own people, accepted her own race from heart, eventually reconstructed her identity. In addition, she also looked for ways and means to help her people solve their life and spiritual difficulties and help the Metis regain cultural identity. As a result, she found many people like her, and actively participated in various organizations fighting for the rights of the Metis, fought for the rights of the half-breed and also aboriginal people, helped the Metis to reconstruct their cultural identity in the society, made them being recognized by the society.

### **3. Factors in Campbell's Awakening of Consciousness**

In the process of confirming the identity of Canadian Metis, Campbell was a true portrayal of the psychological process of all the Metis, and it also shown her uniqueness. When the Metis were deeply confused and lost, she could clearly see the reality and realize the situation of the Metis. She was the first who started the awakening consciousness, and then she has been devoted herself to helping the Metis reconstruct their cultural social identity, and fighting for protecting the rights of them. Campbell could become a leader of the awakening of national consciousness, which was influenced by many aspects such

as personal, family, and social factors.

### **3.1. Personal Factors**

The awakening of consciousness was inseparable from her own life experience. As the oldest child in the family, Campbell experienced a turning point in her life after her family being rejected by her people and the white man when the organization failed which her father was involved and her mother died. She no longer had the warm and happy family as before, and there would be no more harmonious gatherings of all half-breed, who used to celebrated together during holidays and some festivals. After Campbell's mother passed away, Campbell took on the role of both father and mother, taking care of all siblings while working to support the family. Living in poverty means that people lack many of the opportunities available to the average citizen, this connects with lack of basic education and may lead to alcoholism, substance abuse, and domestic violence as ways to cope. Campbell experienced absolute poverty and the lack of basic necessities, but she was never to ask for help, as she knew her sibling would be taken away. Bearing the hardship and pressure of life at an early age, Campbell witnessed the cruel reality of the society toward the half-breed. She has gradually been trained by the society with a mature character and strong will, with which she could always survive in all kinds of tough living conditions.

At the same time, the aboriginal women who living in Canada were hard to received any education, let alone engage in any profession, and their lives were hampered by heavy household chores and childcare. Meanwhile, under the control of colonial hegemony and cultural indoctrination, the Metis men were developed the attachment characteristics of flattery, laziness and obedience to the white people, and lacked the spirit of resistance. However Campbell was still receiving education while taking care of her siblings, the knowledge and understanding of society and the world she received was completely different from those of other women of her own race. When a leader Brandy came here and tried to lead them to strive for a better life and equal status, It was the first time she have an emotion like happiness, pride and hurt all at once. This feeling was knotted up in her guts and made her feel very lonely for something she do not understand. It was precisely because of her education and rich life experience that Campbell was able to be deeply inspired by this incident, which enlightened her in spirit. Unlike the ignorant half-breeds, who were blinded by the Canada government laughed at this very meaningful and great thing, Campbell was very different from the her people. She admired the leader Brandy very much, and supported him wholeheartedly.

Campbell's unique personality and experience constitute her unique personality charm, which is an important factor in her future successful awakening.

### **3.2. Family Factors**

In addition to the internal factor of individual, family education and training also played a crucial role in her awakening.

Campbell's father had trained her ability and will just as he had trained a boy, giving her a strong will and perseverance in the face of many difficulties in life. Her mother did her best to turn her into a lady, taught her a lot of life experiences and abilities as a woman, with the grace and charm of a procreating woman. The one who influenced her most was her great-grandmother, Cheechum, who was her best friend and confidante.

Cheechum was a wise and experienced person whose whole family was fought alongside Louis Riel during the Red River Uprising. She had distinctive rebel spirit, wisdom and foresight which became the most important factors stimulating Campbell's consciousness awakening and the construction of her identity. In every important moment in Campbell's life, Cheechum's instruction supported and encouraged her, and guided her to bravely face challenge, find the right direction and finally realize her value of life. When Campbell was young and incapable of judging good and evil, Cheechum taught her never to bend her head in front of white people and always to hold her head high. When Campbell hated her own nation and said ugly things to her parents, Cheechum severely criticized and educated Campbell. Only when one had a sense of national pride and responsibility for his own identity could he be respected by others. When Campbell lived a vagrant life in Vancouver alone, confused, degenerated and lost, and even wanted to commit suicide to give up herself, it was Cheechum's spiritual strength that inspired her to fight hard and bravely. Cheechum played an important role in Campbell's life and spirit, as an enlightening teacher, confidant, spiritual pillar, and also a lighthouse.

Thanks to Cheechum, Campbell finally understood that what Cheechum had been trying to say. She

should not go out into the world in search of fortune, but rather that she should go out and discover for herself the need for leadership and change: if the way of life were to improve she would have to find other people like herself, and together try to find an alternative.

### **3.3. Social Factors**

Everything is interrelated and exists in a dynamic relationship with a variety of social forces. So everything will be influenced by the social environment and ideology. Living in a white patriarchal society, the Metis women were in the triple oppressive situation. In colonial society, white people oppressed the ethnic minorities; in patriarchal society, men oppressed women; and even western white women oppressed the Third World the Metis and aboriginal women. Where there is oppression, there is resistance, so the most oppressed Metis women represented by Campbell took the lead in awakening consciousness.

During the hardest, darkest, most painful and loneliest days in Vancouver, Campbell was keenly aware of the prejudice and discrimination against half-breed in society, especially the discrimination against half-breed women. They could not even find a suitable job. Their abilities were often questioned in life, and they have no place for survival and development. At first, they came to this big city full of hope and energy to fight for life, after suffering the disaster brought by life, discovering the darkness of society and the cruelty of reality, they found their powerlessness so that they could do nothing but only aided by the laws of society, and relied on men to survive, even did things that violate the principles. They gradually lost themselves, falling into confusion and despair. Campbell has encountered many the Metis women and aboriginal women like herself, and even fell and lost with them.

When Campbell was working for Lil on prostitution, the girl living next door to me was part Indian, tiny, fragile and very pretty. She always cried desperately and one day was found that died from an overdose of drugs. Such thing was normal at that time, and people would forget about it and the existence of this girl very soon. But this incident lingered on in Campbell's mind forever. Campbell then met another woman who had been deserted by her husband and left to raise seven children, she could not make enough money to feed them, pay rent and other cost of life. So she had started giving abortions which break laws. Therefore her children were taken away from her and she lost her license to nurse. She lost everything even her hope. Since then she began drink heavily and had been in and out of jail. She didn't know who was to blame--herself or the government. Knowing these women's experiences, Campbell had been wondered that what happened anyway? Why did people have to fight so damn hard for so little? She wondered then if good, straight women ever experienced the torment, agony and loneliness had to face, and if they did, how in hell did they cope?

Why did an innocent half-breed women have to go through such a miserable life? Even though she did not take the initiative to make mistakes, but the society forced her to be in such situation. Why when they experienced these unfair treatments, no one came out to resist, no one stood up for their rights but just silently accepted. Campbell had witnessed many half-breed and aboriginal women in the life of all sorts of difficulties and deeply sympathize with them. Sometimes women do not have any problems, but the society, the system, and the government force women to fall into this situation. Inspired by her own experience, Campbell decided to help women who were suffering the hardship as difficult as her and established shelters to protect them from degeneration. She has also worked with Indigenous youth in community theatre and advocated for the hiring and recognition of aboriginal and the Metis people in the arts.

Campbell had the prerequisite of consciousness awakening from the aspects of personal, family and society, which were conducive to better understanding of herself, constructing her identity, and helping to drive the awakening of the whole Metis. Since then, Campbell began to concern herself with the nation and devote herself to the process of identity construction and consciousness awakening of the whole nation.

### **4. Conclusion**

Halfbreed is regarded as the founding work of aboriginal literature in Canada, which still inspires and encourages Canadian Metis and aboriginal Canadian today. Campbell tells an autobiographical account of her personal life experiences in the context of the Metis culture. Without social status and a stable residence, she was constantly seeking her own identity. Campbell expressed her great concern about the spiritual state of the Metis, and reexamined her own complex dilemma. She created a distinctive voice

for the people ignored by mainstream society.

After analyzing the complex psychological changes that Canadian Metis experienced when they construct their cultural identity in front of the mainstream white civilization. This essay clearly demonstrates how the half-breed suffered from mainstream social discrimination, which made them become a marginalized ethnic group struggling for survival in the cracks. And how they constantly reflected on and recognized their own cultural and the mainstream culture of Canada, and finally reconstructed their cultural identity. Meanwhile, it also illustrates that Campbell's three essential factors in the process of consciousness awakening.

The reconstruction of cultural identity and consciousness awakening among the Canadian Metis could help and inspire the entire half-breed and other groups in the world which have the same experience to pursue their own cultural identity, striving for national culture and exploring a road to national rejuvenation.

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