

# A Comparative Study on Halfbreed and in Search of April Raintree

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**S. Udhayakumar**

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of English and Comparative Literature*

*Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India*

## Abstract

*Comparing two novels of two different writers who share many common grounds would be a huge gain for a literary study. In that case, Maria Campbell and Beatrice Mosionier are two Canadian writers who share more commonality in terms of many such as nationality, culture, ethnicity and notably the problems too, like racial, social, gender issues etc. Both these Canadian writers are Metis who have struggled hard to earn an identity for them. Their pursuit to embrace the strong identity has become the prime objective in their life. They both belong to more or less the same period and the struggle for them also remains the same because of the long prevailing multicultural issues in Canada. The Euro Canadians have constructed Metis as a shameful identity through their narratives. As a reaction to such construct, these writers show a radical spirit in changing the shame vested upon their people and have chosen writing as a weapon. So, an attempt to make a comparative study is very much feasible on these matters. Hence, the paper is about to explore those common elements in their novels Halfbreed and In Search of April raintree respectively, and also it investigates on the writers' different approaches in handling their struggles and challenges, their different feministic perspectives and their transformation. Moreover, multiple of themes have been found in much common between these works and so the paper tries to make a detailed exploration of that.*

**Keywords:** Canadian Literature, Feminism, Comparative Literature, Empowerment, Racism

Maria Campbell and Beatrice Mosionier are contemporaries in the Canadian literary arena whose contribution in the field of writing has brought a tremendous social change in Canada in terms of multiculturalism. The concept multiculturalism has been adapted by Canada during 1970s and 1980s. And during the time, these writers published their works Halfbreed (1973) and In Search of April raintree (1983) respectively which vitalized the growing changes in the country. Notably, their revolutionary works have impacted the society greatly to moot a change in the attitudes of the people. The conflict that is aroused by the notion of difference has been settled by this concept of "Multiculturalism" which is an alternative term to hybridity or cultural hybridization which is originally articulated by the postcolonial critique Homi K Bhabha. His idea insists on assimilation that is to whitewashing cultural differences and also to achieving cultural synergy and transculturation through mutuality of culture. In fact, the mutuality eliminates the hierarchical nature of the Euro domination and facilitates equal exchange. Bhabha further tells about the birth of third space. It is nothing but a space where the purity and originality of cultures sound illogic and hence provides space for an international or a new practice. During 1970s and 80s, there are only a fewer acceptability to the practice of multiculturalism among Canadians and people gradually internalized the concept of multiculturalism little by little. The writers of the time Maria and Beatrice were Metis who felt it is their bound duty to make Metis to par with other ethnic and cultural groups in the multicultural façade.

Because, Metis is seen as inferior by the Euro Canadians. Metis are neither natives nor whites. They couldn't set a powerful position in the Canadian society since, they have a confused identity. It paved way for multiple of issues like abuse, poverty, alcoholism, discrimination, etc. Thus, these writers bring to light the actual problems prevailing in their ethnic group such as their exploitation, and discrimination by the racial powers happening for several period of time from the British colonization. Both the writers have valid reasons to choose a career of writing which they use as a weapon to fight the dominant powers and to set Metis in a prestigious position among the multicultural context.

The Canadian Metis writer Maria Campbell is born in April 26, 1940 at Park Valley, Saskatchewan to a Metis family who were originally hunters and trappers but the family witness an ever-present poverty due to the homesteading in 1920s where 160 acres of lands were granted to the settlers which left the original inhabitations like them with lack of opportunity to do even farming. Her family contains the mix of Scottish, French, Cree, English and Irish. Campbell's family is little literate that her mother reads works of Shakespeare, Dickens and many to them and her grandmother Dubuque is a treaty Indian and has studied in a convent. Her great-grandmother Cheechum is a relative of Gabriel Dumont a Metis military leader. They follow catholic religious order and the worship in the church is conducted in Latin, French and sometimes in Cree. A descendent from such multi-coloured heritage, Maria has become a successful writer in spite of her poverty. Her family falls into poverty after the death of her mother. As she is the eldest of eight children, she had to take care of her siblings and so she has been dropped out from school at the age of 12. She decides to marry a white man Darrel in order to settle herself and her siblings but it didn't happen as her husband is too abusive. He puts up her siblings in a charity home and took her to Vancouver. There she gave birth to a girl child. Her life becomes worse after been abandoned by her husband. That, she had to do prostitution to earn for her living. Later, she turns addicted to drug and alcohol like other Metis women. She felt completely alienated by the society at this point of time. Then, she returns to Saskatchewan and seeing

the desperate condition of her people, she decides to change everything. She spends her time in political activism and takes connection with her community. She embraces the role of a volunteer, activist and advocate to represent the issues of aboriginal and Metis women. She has completed a course work in MA on Native Studies at the university of Saskatchewan. She has received an honorary doctorate degree from the university of Regina, York University and Athabasca University. She is the leader of many Metis social movements. She takes writing as a career to expose the multicultural issues to other. Her fame has risen high in Canada after publishing her memoir *Halfbreed*, that reveals much about her predicaments and contributions to the society as political activist. Her memoir is prescribed in children syllabus by the Canadian government. She has written few children's book such as *People of the Buffalo*, *Little Badger* and the *Fire Spirit* and *Riel's People*. Her first play *Flight* is considered as the first aboriginal theatre production which demonstrates aboriginal practices. Despite a novelist, she is a playwright, broadcaster, and filmmaker. Moreover, she speaks four languages like Cree, Michif, *Saulteaux* and English.

Like Maria, Beatrice Culleton Masioneris a victim of the racial violence against Metis. She comes from a Catholic Metis family whose nature of work is fur trade. The family has mixed, native and European lineage and still follows an aboriginal way of living. They either speak a native language like Cree or Michif the Metis' language. In 1982 the Canadian government recognized three distinct aboriginal groups; they are Indians or the First Nations people, Inuit and non-Indians or the Metis. Among the three, Metis are deprived from government aids and have been marginalised. As a result, they have fallen in to illiteracy, poverty and other social troubles. In 1940s and 50s, Canadian government devised a few child care policies as a tool to the assimilation programme for the indigenous people and Metis. On its application, the first nation and Metis children are separated for their families and forcibly made to join in foster cares. The children are put in white families as foster children to inculcate the white practices and tradition. Such practices are widely followed all over Canada and it is popularly known as "the

Sixties scoop” which continued till 1980s. Mosioner was born in 1949 at Saint Boniface, Manitoba to Mary Clara and Pelleter Mosionier as the youngest of four but the poverty stricken condition of her family has made her to get separated from the family and growing in foster homes at Winnipeg run by the Children’s Aid Society. Having grown in such foster care, Mosioner has experienced humiliations and discriminations. She has gone through many traumatic incidents in her life. The separation from her parents and siblings tormented her a lot. Being with poverty condition, her parents became sick and got addicted to alcohol. In fact, the foster care system has made her longing for the familial relationships. However, with the help of the Children Aid Society, she could complete her schooling at St. Charles Catholic School, and Gordon Bell high School and she received her graduation from George Brown College and Banff School of Fine Arts. She settled in Toronto after marrying Bill Culleton and had two children, Bill and Debbie. But the marriage life was unhappy from the beginning and so they got separated after returning to Winnipeg. Her worries have intensified when her two sisters committed suicide. Hence, she chooses writing as a career in order to find an emotional release and to voice for her people who suffer the same issues. She published her first novel *In Search of April Raintree* in 1983 which has earned her a great recognition as a Canadian Metis writer. This work of her is considered as a literary classic by the contemporary writers. Following her first novel, she published her second novel *In a Shadow of Evil* in 2000. The two novels depict the physical and psychological problems of young children in foster care system. She has also written a few children’s book and *Spirit of the White Bison* is one the best collections that records the consequence of white invasion and the subsequent loss of aboriginal tradition. And, her memoir *Come Walk With Me: A Memoir*, recounts the traumatic incidents and experience of her life.

Both their works *Halfbreed* and *In Search of April Raintree* contain multiples of themes that coincide with each other. Some of the themes like separation, self-discovery, relationships, rape, victimization, poverty, quest etc. have been predominant in both the works. Both the writers have produced similar

counter reaction against the oppressive forces and that is evident by these similar themes in them. Moreover, there are a few contrastive elements that gives a unique appearance to each of the novels.

Separation is seen as a tool of assimilation by the Euro-Canadians trying to interpellate the little ones of Natives and Metis to get internalized the Native and Metis culture as savage. In Beatrice Culleton’s Novel *In Search of April Raintree*, the protagonist April Raintree, the light-skinned Metis girl has fallen prey to such European construct after she is separated from her parents and siblings when growing in foster home. She has developed negative impression about her own race. She always wants to be in company with the whites and she longs for that. The interpellation has worked very well with April when she was with Mrs. DeRosier the second foster family. Beatrice has internalized the white’s narratives and it is evident in the below lines. She says,

“It seemed to me that what I’d heard indicated that Metis and Indians were inclined to be alcoholics. That’s because they were a weak people. oh, they were put down more than anyone else, but then, didn’t they deserve it? Anyways, I could pass for a pure white person. I could say I was part French and part Irish.” (Mosionier 44)

On the other side, Beatrice lost connection with her family and tradition. Moreover, the forceful separation by the foster care agency at the very young age has deposited the experience of trauma and sense of alienation on her that children of that age are not supposed to. The negligence of their alcoholic parents are also to be blamed for such condition. Children like her lose their parents’ and siblings’ love and care which is very much needed in their growing and that could cultivate valuable traditions and beliefs of their ethnic community. Separation is also found in the life of Maria. Though, she is raised in a family that enriched her with traditional believes and values, she is made to feel ashamed of her identity. The white construction of Metis is fed in her school and in the social discourse. She says “no-good Halfbreeds.” Maria also says, “The White man saw that that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he uses and still does today. Already they are using

on you. They try to make you hate your people” (Maria 51) Separation for Maria came in the form of marriage that her white husband puts all her siblings in foster care and she has been taken to Vancouver. The removal or separation of both the protagonists pushed them into the worst condition of their life. They lost connection with their family, community and tradition have made them to lose their self.

The process of self-discovery or self-realization in both the works seems to be little vital that, it is achieved with the support of the protagonists’ feministic spirit and develop self-empowerment. April after been separated from her White husband came to her sister Cheryl and there comes to know about the realities that what Metis is all about. What opinion she had developed about Metis is completely changed. She finds that her roots to be the one which could be relied strongly which has given her a strong identity. She embraces Metis as her legitimate and prideful identity. As suggested by the title phrase ‘in search,’ her search for her ‘self’ is achieved at this point. Cheryl has nourished April with the values and richness of their tradition which facilitated her to make a self-discovery of herself. Acceptance of the past has shaped her and turned her empowered.

In the same manner, Maria who is deserted by her husband Darryl, is left with no money in her hands. She was forced to do prostitution for her survival. She becomes addicted to drug and alcohol. When she moved back to her own places, she could realize the importance of tradition. She says,

“Going home after so long a time, I thought that I might find again the happiness and beauty I had known as a child. But as I walked down the rough dirt road, poked through the broken old buildings and thought back over the years, I realized that I could never find that here. 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. .... I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams.” (Maria 2)

Maria realizes the advices of her great grandmother Cheechum who had inculcated the

richness of their tradition in her. Cheechum used to tell stories about Riel and Dumont their Rebellion and about Halfbreed people. She is the one who has given her a moral backup. Maria tells about her great-grandmother, “The years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me. Cheechum said, ‘You’ll find yourself, and you’ll find brothers and sisters.’ I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive” (Maria 184). Cheechum and Cheryl are the foil characters to the protagonists in both the works and also they are similar to the Archetypal wise old man character defined by Carl Jung. Notably, the spirit of feminism in the protagonists is kindled by them. Moreover, the tragic incidents happened in the protagonists’ life also has helped them to undergo a self-discovery. In fact, the self-realisation has brought a good transformation in them.

Rape and sexual violence are predominant violence against Metis as they have been pushed in to a state where they are prone to all sort of threat from the oppressors. Maria and April are victims of the tragic incident, rape and however, they have recovered from the trauma though their spirit of fighting back. Maria was raped by a Mountie when she was 14 years old and this details has been excised in her seminal memoir. However, it is evident that she has fought against such violence boldly. April was sexually assaulted by a group of three racists. In spite of the tragic incident, her feministic spirit is revealed. It is evident in the following lines. April cries, “Oh, God, I want to live. This isn’t the way I want to die. This isn’t my moment to die.” (Beatrice 140)

Discrimination and shame are the weapons of the oppressors to suppress the Natives and Metis. Maria and April Raintree have witnessed discrimination from their school days. April has internalized fair skin as superior. Even though, being light skinned, April is rejected by the white children at playground. She has been bullied. Maria is also discriminated at her school same like April. She dislikes the ill-treatment lead to Metis like her. April recounts about the white’s narrative about Metis, “I know you half-breeds, you love to wallow in filth” (Beatrice 26)

Both the protagonist had strong desires and dreams to come out from the social stigmas. April

initially dislikes to identify herself with Native people that she says, “in today’s society, there isn’t anything positive about them” (Beatrice 125). April’s preoccupation about White supremacy is evident but it is nothing but her inner quest, her dream and desire to become a prideful woman among Canadians. For this, she dares to renounce her Native identity. In the same manner, Maria has developed self-hatred towards herself and her people. She says after coming from her school “all of you no-good Halfbreeds” It reveals that both the protagonist don’t want to have the negative image of native people or the Metis. The quest is seen in the character having a lot of anticipations and desires to build a better future, and to lead an individual and collective survival. All the frustrations and shames after being experiencing tragic incidents moulded them to become political activist, and have developed a spirit of fighting back. All that they wanted is to form Metis as a legally valid ethnic category and socially acceptable ethnic cultural category in the Canadian Multicultural society.

To conclude, Maria’s and Beatrice’s struggle to gain a strong identity, to form Metis as a legally valid ethnic category, and socially actable one in the Canadian multicultural society reveal the work of feminism. Both the classic works have exhibited a revolutionary spirit to fight against the social evils such as racism, chauvinism and poverty. The similar effort of the writers has made a strong picture in the minds of the readers regarding the true sufferings that Metis women are undergoing. Both their fight back is a therapeutic process of transforming shame an danger into a positive one. Both the writers have worked in breaking the prejudice, deconstructing racist stereotypes to make Halfbreed as a positivist term. Altogether, their contribution is an act of ethnic self-definition. Beatrice’s justification is very clear on her view of multiculturalism stated to Pemmican Publishers that Multiculturalism is the only possible solution to set Metis equal to others in Canadian society. In her words, “Multiculturalism is instinctively right.... Multiculturalism has helped

me to begin achieving a pride in being a Canadian citizen.”

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### Author Details

**Dr. S. Udhayakumar**, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** [udhaynimallesh@gmail.com](mailto:udhaynimallesh@gmail.com)