

Self-Empowerment as Revealed in the Two Canadian Women Characters Lou and Maria: A Comparative Study

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2021-09014118

Volume: 9

Issue: 1

Month: July

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 10.05.2021

Accepted: 16.06.2021

Published: 01.07.2021

Citation:
Udhayakumar, S. "Self-Empowerment as Revealed in the Two Canadian Women Characters Lou and Maria: A Comparative Study." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 169-173.

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v9i1.4118>



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Abstract

*Self-empowerment has been achieved by women at various levels and under various circumstances. These circumstances are not naturally made where as it is the construct of the male chauvinistic society. Despite the social pressure and circumstances, emerging out as independent women autonomously from the social bondages such as women suppression, physical abuse, etc. is the real growth of women who hail from all walks of life. These social pressures and bondages which have impacted greatly in the lives of Lou the protagonist from the novel *Bear* and Maria Campbell from the memoir *Halfbreed* have been widely studied and analyzed in this paper. Tracing out the similar and contrastive characteristic features of the two characters Lou and Maria, their different social backgrounds, their reaction to the social pressure are the major premises of the paper. Further, it deals with how feminism has worked in the two different contexts and their emergence is brought to the light.*

Keywords: Feminism, Comparative literature, Canadian literature, Self-empowerment

Introduction

Women Self-empowerment is the catch phrase and most importantly, the expectation of all the feministic movements and feministic ideologies. Towards achieving this, feminism has been working constantly by supporting and motivating women who are oppressed socially, economically and politically. Feminism encourages women to be resilient to the social issues led against them and to rise up against all their oppressions. The resilience and the fighting spirit are the burning feministic notions resonating in the minds of women who dream to be liberated. Two such liberated women are being discussed in this paper and they have been identified as self-empowered women who have broken the barriers and clutches of the society. And they have brought change in the attitudes of women as well as men in terms of gender equality. The characters are the popular protagonist of the Canadian literature. Maria Campbell's autobiographical work *Halfbreed* whose protagonist Maria is critically analyzed and compared with Lou the protagonist of *Bear* which is authored by Marian Engel. These characters have been identified as self-empowered in spite of their afflictions. Hence, these characters are brought under a comparative study to highlight their similar and different conditions and circumstances that molded them as a liberated and self-empowered women.

Comparing anything in the broad arena of the literary landscape is comparative literature. It is an academic field which accommodates many literary and non-literary genres irrespective of space and time and so the arena is enormous. Mathew Arnold has defined Comparative literature as, "Everything there is a connection, everywhere there is illustration."

Hence, the recently developed phenomenon, Comparative study traces the connections with in two different texts or any sources to enhance and enlighten the minds with multiples of ideas. Through this lens of comparative literature the discourse and actions of the two different characters Lou and Maria is brought under a parallel examination analyzing their parallel characteristics and also their different approach in life to fight against social evils. Moreover, the idea of feminism reflected in the characters as a means of empowering themselves are further observed and compared.

The main task of feminism is to empower women in terms of social, political, economic equality with men. Empowerment is seen as the goal and achievement of women in all fields and domains. Devising various strategies in uplifting and empowering women of different domains can't be generalized. Because, women of different backgrounds like, ethnicity, culture, economic status undergo multiples of problems in their day to day life variedly. Moreover, the intensity and vitality of the problems faced by each woman individually is different and unique based on their personal circumstances. Women self-empowerment can alone be the solution to every woman who encounters such oppressions. Women self-empowerment is nothing but of breaking of the insecurities in the society in terms of reproductive life, nurturing children, maintenance of the household, working environment etc. A woman being self-empowered feels independent; develops a sense of fulfillment, feels strong and powerful than anything in the world.

Jessica Dowches has listed some characteristics of the empowered women. First of all, the empowered women live their purpose to bring meaning and fulfillment to their life. Secondly, they know who they are and have self-awareness. Thirdly, they love them-selves and their body by keeping away the negative self-talk. Fourthly, they keep on learning continuously by finding ways to grow and develop themselves each day and learn from their mistakes. Fifthly, they build confidence by executing actions and work in order to change the world. Sixthly, they work wholeheartedly as they know there are more things to do in the world. Seventhly, they challenge the status quo of the society by questioning the

traditions which prevented their opportunities. Eighthly, they show vulnerability by building meaningful relationships with others to stay connect with the world around. And finally, they know their worth by understanding the respect they deserve. Lou and Maria are the characters who have acquired the above mentioned characteristics in the process of exploring themselves.

The character Lou is the protagonist of the novel *Bear* which is written by the most popular Canadian women writer Marian Engel. The novel is said as the most controversial one because of its unusual story plot. Lou is a 27 years old, unmarried and independent woman who leads an unfilled life in Toronto. The social pressures and male chauvinism has deeply affected her psychologically when she is in Toronto. Her relationship with men in the city is unfulfilling to her and she remarks that as colorless life. But when she is displaced to the new island, she discovers herself completely. She could define her femininity by herself in the lonely place where social norms, traditions and customs couldn't control her. Her social life and personal life becomes complete in her hands without the guidance of any norms or rules in the solitary island. Since Lou's physical relationships with men in the city has made her life colorless and passive, she develops dislike towards men who treat women as an object which she realized during the physical relationships with them. So she has transformed herself as a woman who wants to challenge the status quo of the society. Though her approach to fulfill herself is debatable and unusual, her attainment of the sense of liberation is what all feminism looking for. Her life becomes colorful in the isolated place and later she returns to Toronto with complete strength to face any sort of challenges in her way.

Halfbreed depicts the autobiographical incidents in the life of Maria Campbell. Her thirty years of experience with Metis community; the oppressions by the whites and natives, poverty and abuse have impacted Maria in her upbringing. She is the eldest child in her family and so many responsibilities have fallen on her. The responsibilities become more when her mother died at her age of 12. She couldn't complete her school education. She has experienced the bitterest experience in her school where she

is discriminated badly by her peers and teachers because of her mixed identity. She is a halfbreed by birth which means half native and half white and so she is put in a confused identity. This has made her to feel inferior and alienated in her home land. Her anger against the society is her reflection in the work. In order to settle herself and her siblings she plans to marry a white man but her marriage life turned a nightmare. Her husband puts all her siblings in a charity house and takes her to Vancouver. And there, she is abandoned by him. She is left with a girl baby and no money in her hands. Social pressure and the need for money have pushed her to do sex work and later she is addicted to alcohol and drug. However her life turns green pasture after she joins in a welfare trust. She completes her degree and dedicates herself to serve her Metis people. She is resilient and rise up after all the hardship she faced. Her failure and disappointments turns her successful and makes her self-empowered.

The fictional character Lou and the non-fictional character Maria have faced crisis at many stages of life. However, they fight against their fate and problems in order to survive. Both their approaches are a survival pursuit but they meet crisis that are different by nature. The crises are the dilemma that happens in one's mind. Lou and Maria have such dilemmas that Lou has developed different opinion about men and Maria has developed quiet different opinion regarding ethnicity, culture and men. The crisis is so important that it has induced and spurred the character Lou and Maria to make their own choice of their life. It is a point where the characters struggle to survive and resolve it eventually to get a place in order to survive. Taking their life in their own hands and ends their life or keep fighting to survive even when there is no hope to survive. In that case, Lou and Maria have taken their life in their own hands and kept on fighting to acquire their rights. There must be two choices left. One is the best bad choice which means the choice between two horrible things. And the other one is irreconcilably good choices which is less stressful because when having two good choice leaving any one is little painful. Lou had left with no choice in the town but when she moved to the island she has had multiple of choices. She doesn't feel painful for leaving other choices. At the same time,

Maria has left with no choice. She is neither white nor native so she is left with a confused identity. She is not left with even a bad choice. The choice about settlement in her life; deciding to marry a white man to settle in life also turned to be horrible. In order to escape from the social pressure in her life, becoming a drug addict is a bad choice. While comparing the two characters, Maria's crisis is more devastating than Lou's because Lou's crisis is quiet common to all women and Maria's crisis is something particular to metis woman. Hence, Lou's choice is less stressful than Maria's choice.

Maria encounters identity crisis where she initially feels inferior about her identity as Metis. She strives to overcome the sense of shame through all her efforts. For instance, she has experienced shame at her school days itself. Her peer groups and teachers in school have discriminated her and that incident becomes deeply got settled in her mind. She says that, "we had a lot of fights with the white kids, but finally, after beating them soundly, we were left alone." She is even not allowed to speak their language in schools. She also says,

"I do recall most vividly a punishment I once received. We weren't allowed to speak Cree, only French and English, and for disobeying this, I was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light, and locked in for what seemed like hours." (Halfbreed)

She also experiences such humiliation in her everyday lives and it is not only her but also her whole community members suffer from such discrimination. She is neglected by the society and so she is made to develop a sense of alienation. She says, "no-good Halfbreeds." And more horrifically, their lands have been grabbed. These people have faced alienation in their homeland which haunted Maria much. Even in church, she has felt the same where the sisters treating them partially which couldn't be tolerated by her. She reveals that,

"The Mass was held in Latin and French, and sometimes in Cree. The colorful rituals were the only thing which made the church bearable for me. I was spellbound by the scarlet and purples and even the nuns, whom I disliked as persons, were mystical and haunting in their black robes with huge, swinging crosses." (Halfbreed)

There are also many instances where Maria faces crisis. Her community members are originally hunters

and trappers but they are not allowed to continue their livelihood work. Therefore, these people have been pushed into poverty. Poverty is also a major crisis in Maria's life. Because of that, she has made a wrong decision to marry a Whiteman Darrel thinking that she could settle after the marriage. But all is in vain. Maria is made slave by her husband. She suffered abuse. And finally, her starvation has made her to opt for sex work. Hence, the failed marriage is also seen as a crisis in her life.

Lou's crisis is something different from Maria's because in her case, she is fighting with her own conscious which means her attitude about men. She is caught in the gender stereotypes that man as superior and women are inferior. It results in identity crisis for her. She has developed such inferiority when she has been treated as an object by the men she met. It is in these lines below,

"Because what she disliked in men was not their eroticism, but their assumption that women had none, which left women with nothing to be but housemaids."
(Bear)

The attitudinal mindset that men and society perceive about women bothers her a lot. The male attitude of belittlement and reducing women to object is identified by Lou as a crisis. She doesn't want to be suppressed through such attitudes. Because of her colorless life, she feels unfulfilled. She hates the attitude of men who only like women's physical beauty. She remarks about men that, "He loved her as long as the socks were folded." She realizes how sexual politics has been played dominantly by male. She feels less strong and less independent in the society as women. And when she was relocated to an isolated place, she feels that she gains strength and liberty.

Shame and anger are the transformative forces in the life of Maria and Lou. Maria Campbell experienced the utmost shame and humiliation as metis women encountering problems in the Canadian multicultural society. When she is young, she expresses her dislike to her family about her intolerance with such discriminative brutality, for which her great grandmother has advised her as,

"I will beat you each time I hear you talk as you did. If you don't like what you have, then stop fighting your parents and do something about it yourself."
(Halfbreed)

After facing much hardship and the negative ways of life like drug dealing, addictions and sex work, she has become self-aware and she has made up her mind to pursue her studies. She realizes that only education can bring her success in life. She joins a welfare trust thinking that there should some purpose and fulfillment in life and has started serving her community members at Saskatchewan. She has developed confidence to execute action for bringing a change in the world. She no more feels shameful about her Metis identity and by the way, she builds meaningful relationships with her community people to stay connected with the world around her. Hence she knows her worth and becomes a self-empowered woman.

At the same time, Lou understands her femininity and realizes the oppressions lead against women in terms of sexuality. Her physical relationship with the bear makes her to feel mentally strong. The anger against the male chauvinistic society makes her to feel comfortable with the bear and makes her to think it as a perfect revenge on male chauvinism. She expresses that,

"The tongue that was muscular but also capable of lengthening itself like an eel found all her secret places. And like no human being she had known it preserved in her pleasure. When she came, she whimpered, and the bear licked away her tears." (Bear)

The self-discovery is the result of her anger against the male dominant society. Finally she has transformed into a purified soul after got separated from the bear. Lou as Hester Prynne in the fiction *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne holds scaras a symbol of purification for which she never feels guilty. She doesn't feel shame of having sex with the bear.

She says, "Make me comfortable in the world at last."

This indicates that she is liberated. Lou feels her act as a purposeful one and has developed a sense of fulfillment. She is aware of herself when she moves with the bear. As a self-empowered woman, she learns from her mistake that she has resolved to go back to Toronto bearing the blood mark with the sense of contentment. After that incident she has developed confidence to face the society. She is the woman who has challenged the status quo of the society that she has attempted an unusual

relationship with the animal in order to make herself feel mentally strong than men.

To conclude, Lou and Maria are fictional and real characters respectively have less and no choices to fight against their crisis. However, they have found a possible way to get rid from their crisis. Their resolution in emerging as an independent woman is so remarkable. Both the characters have different social background but their similar move in transforming themselves as liberated women explicate the feministic notions in them. Lou and Maria became mentally super strong and confident in facing the world after their transformation. Maria doesn't feel embarrassed to reveal her Metis identity and her dark side of her life which shows she has attained fulfillment and empowerment. In the same way, Lou doesn't feel guilty or humiliated after her physical relationship with the bear. In fact, she treats the blood scars as purification factor and feels elated.

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