CHAPTER V

The “Joys and Sorrows” of the Métis People: 
*Halfbreed*

Seek happiness for its own sake, and you will not find it; seek for duty, and happiness will follow as the shadow comes with the sunshine. - Tryon Edwards

It is not helps, but obstacles, not facilities but difficulties, that make men. - W. Matthews

A desire to resist oppression is implanted in the nature of man. - Tacitus

Maria Campbell’s, *Halfbreed* (1983), a first person chronological narrative, is written with the conviction that it is essential to truly represent the Métis people, including their plight and oppression, especially that of the Métis women. The book originates, as Campbell herself puts it, in the need "... to tell 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." Besides writing about her personal agonising experiences and joys, Campbell also subtly exposes the White oppressive tendencies which have "... devalued so many conventions, traditions and institutions and ... have damaged so many lives, dislocated so many homes." In this respect, the novel gains political overtones, but is not a strong political statement like the narratives
discussed in chapter II. Rather in this book the sense of celebration of Native life is equally strong as the ordeals faced by them. In fact, in this narrative:

The complex, multi-dimensioned relation of Métis, treaty Indians, White communities, priests, nuns, residential and local schools, are all briefly but tellingly uncovered and explored. Domestic life, weddings and funerals, dances and feasts, the work of physical and community survival, doing without, personal loss, living with grief, adjusting to dashed hopes ... all map into a cluster of personalities and events which, accumulating and driven to climax over the course of Campbell's story, become progressively more familiar in the context of current bitterness.³

*Halfbreed* is an autobiographical narrative which shatters the myth of assimilation with the Whites. The novel is the story of Maria, whose life as a Métis child in northern Saskatchewan and as a young woman in the city is depicted. It is a disguised commentary on the hostile attitude of the non-Natives towards the Natives. Maria Campbell's style reminds one of the Native oral-tradition where colloquial language is blended with the written prose. "In *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell seems to create a continuum between oral and discursive forms, thereby destabilizing clear-cut boundaries and establishing a third space beyond binary oppositions."⁴ In spite of being born to one half-white parent the protagonist Maria is not accepted in the mainstream White society. Her attempt to be accommodated through marriage with a White man fails miserably. The book brings out at length the precarious position of a Native woman in contemporary Canada, and also attempts to "... present a critique of the colonial and neo-colonial regimes to educate people about their mode of
functioning and . . . call for united fight against the oppressive imperialist regimes to bring about a better social order."^5

Campbell places her experiences in a proper historical perspective by giving at the outset the history of her race i.e. the Métis or the Halfbreeds who came to be called as such because of their half Native and half White origin. Maria explains why the Métis came to Saskatchewan in 1860s; “The Halfbreeds came here from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the prejudice and hate that comes with the opening of a new land” (p. 3). These people settled at Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Louis and St. Laurent. With no government and no law and order they formed their own administration. In 1870s and 1880s, however, the government intervened but it equated the Halfbreeds who had been living on the land for many a years with new White settlers. The law demanded that they had to live on their own land for three more years before they could claim it. The Métis had hoped for a better treatment from the administration. Even at this stage, Maria reveals, the Métis were not against the regulations of the State but the way of its modus operandi.

The Halfbreeds were not the only ones offended with the federal government. The Indians and the poor Whites too had grievances against the authorities. When their joint petitions and resolutions sent to Ottawa didn’t receive any attention, Dumont without Riel’s knowledge led the Halfbreeds to the Battle of Duck Lake. As a result of this Ottawa formed a committee to look into the complaints of Halfbreeds. Campbell regrets that had this committee been formed earlier much bloodshed and violence could have been prevented. Maria strongly condemns the White authorities which sent eastern troops under General Middleton to Saskatchewan wherein “eight thousand troops, five hundred NWMP and white volunteers from throughout the
Territories, plus a Gatling gun, arrived to stop Riel, Dumont and one hundred and fifty Halfbreeds" (p. 6).

The fate of the Métis is not very different from the other Natives. They too are the victims of oppressive and discriminatory laws of the government which favour the Whites only. Maria discloses how because of unfair laws on homesteads, the Halfbreeds lost their land claims. This dispossession made them squatters. They shifted to crown lands where they got branded as “Road Allowance People” since without land they had to live on the roadsides and depend upon welfare for the living. And as Penny Petrone points out: “With the loss of the land they had always thought of as their own, they soon discovered that they had also lost the source of their identity.” The hunters and trappers so proud of their skill and dexterity experienced failure. They had seen their elders being defeated during Riel Rebellion and now their own failure as farmers made them feel too ashamed of their being. This drifted them towards alcoholism. Maria Campbell feels pained to think how her proud and happy people were reduced to shame for being Métis.

While Maracle’s autobiography Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel centres around her personal experiences only, without going into the historical context or any mention of the family members; Maria gives details about her ancestors (mélange of Scottish, French, Cree, English and Irish). Maria familiarizes the readers with her Great Grandpa, Great Grandma—Cheechum, Grandpa Campbell, Grannie Dubuque, father and mother. Maria recognizes the role played by these respective persons in her life especially Cheechum with whom she shared a special relationship, whose philosophy shaped Maria’s Weltanschauung i.e. worldview and also ultimately saved Maria from ruin and dé bâcle by saving her from drifting into despair.
Unlike most other narratives by Native women a major part of the book gives a glimpse into a happy Métis family and Campbell’s own happy childhood. When Maria was born in April 1940, the father was disappointed because he was expecting a boy. This, however, didn’t deter his spirit to raise Maria as the best trapper and hunter. Maria had a wholesome upbringing where her father taught her hunting skills, her mother groomed her to be a lady and Cheechum, Maria’s “best friend and confidante” (p. 16), taught her how to live life and shaped her worldview as well. Maria remembers the whole family as a special single unit where even the grandparents had their distinguished place. Maria describes the ambience of her home which in contrast to Maracle’s was very serene and soothing. She says, “Daddy would be busy in the corner, brushing fur until it shone and glistened, while Mom bustled around the stove. Cheechum would be on the floor smoking her clay pipe and the small ones would roll and fight around her like puppies” (p. 17).

Unlike Maracle’s troubled childhood and turbulent home Campbell’s home was full of warmth and togetherness. Maria’s parents had enough time to spend with children, and as a result had healthy and friendly relations with them. Parents taught them their traditional knowledge of herbs, roots and tracks. Kids also learned dance and music from them. The parents transferred to them the Halfbreed history in the form of stories. Likewise folk-tales and mythology also got engrained in the children.

The strength of Maria’s carefree and nonchalant childhood was the father. He doted on his wife and was very respectful towards her. This made Maria and other siblings feel secure in his company which contributed towards their healthy thinking. Maria and other family members really missed the father, when from early October till Christmas he went away trapping: “How we missed him! It was as if part of us
was gone with him, and we were not complete until he had returned” (p. 53). Puddings were made and the tree decorated, when in the middle of the things the father entered “with a full-grown beard and a sack full of fur on his back” (p. 54). He kissed the wife, hugged the children and even made pancakes for everybody. Overall, Maria’s childhood accounts are full of joyous family get togethers with the feeling of caring and sharing being the most dominant.

Maria’s interaction with the White Christians had some impact on her but it could not trouble her the way many Native children were troubled. Once again it was her father who proved quite influential in saving her from agony. Rejection of these Christian’s pseudo-concern and pity by her father, made her learn the value of self-respect. Initially she envied the Christian children for their better clothes, better eatables and a better standard of living. Later, however, she found them to be cold, distanced and apathetic people who looked down upon the non-Whites. Maria silently questioned the Whites’ perception of their own religion which could not make them good human beings.

The Christians were quite insensitive and hostile towards the religious practices of the Halfbreeds. Maria remembers how in one of the services Old Hashoo took up his drum and chanted. The minister quite disparagingly asked him to leave, and as a result the whole congregation of the Métis people left. For them their dignity, unity and self-respect was more precious than the Church. Maria also remembers the Church’s representative priest as a cunning and greedy fellow who always arrived at the dinner time to have the goodies. In the churchyard he didn’t allow the Halfbreed children to pick up the luscious strawberries since they belonged to the Godman – priest. However, he himself took things from Indian’s Sundance
Pole which belonged to the Great Spirit. This hypocrisy and paradox in the priest’s behaviour made Maria reject their religion and its practices. So quite early in her life she learned to value her own religion and culture and judiciously located the limitations in others’ practices.

During the Christmas, the Whites left boxes with already worn clothes and eatables in them, in front of the Halfbreed houses. Maria’s father picked them up and burned them. For him his dignity and pride were more important than the White pity and false sympathy. To justify their own religious charity and conscience the Christians left the things for the Halfbreeds. Maria at first felt bad on losing the goodies. However, in the school she realized the importance of her father’s actions. When the White kids in the school made fun of the Halfbreed children who wore the leftover clothes, Maria really felt thankful to her father who saved her from gross humiliation and embarrassment. Unlike Maracle who was unfortunate to have a father who was the cause of humiliation and mental turmoil of the children, Maria was fortunate to have a father who was such a source of strength and security to the children.

Maria’s mother, however, was a staunch Christian. She prayed regularly and even if there was little money at home, she gave money to the Church. When the new Church came in the neighbourhood, in spite of the father and Cheechum’s objection, she had gone to the Church with Maria. However, there somebody said an indecent thing to her after which she never visited the Church again. But she also did not disclose what she had heard. This made Maria more critical of Christianity as a religion. When mother died, the priest refused her a proper burial since father had forgotten to administer the last sacrament before she died. The pain caused to the
mother and the insensitive treatment that the mother's body received made Maria lose faith in Christianity completely.

Maria's joyous childhood and adolescence, however, was not unaffected by racial discrimination. She particularly remembers the prejudice of the White town people. Whenever the Halfbreeds went to sell Seneca roots and berries in the town, the Whites hurled insults at them. The Whites accused them of stealing and watched over their actions. A certain change came over the Halfbreed adults as they entered the town. They looked down and even walked with their heads down. Children with their grannies also marched in the similar manner. Maria as a child found it quite humiliating and she decided that she would always walk with her head high up.

Even the Whites' literature was full of racism which either didn't mention the Métis at all or didn't give them any perspective. Maria's mother read Shakespeare, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott and Longfellow to her children. Mother's accounts, no doubt stirred Campbell's imagination but they also made her believe that the protagonists were Whites only. So when all the cousins played together Cleopatra and Caesar and the White-skinned, red-haired cousin became Cleopatra, the White neighbourhood also laughed at them, mocking at their play action. They assumed that the Métis were unable to understand, appreciate and enact the roles of Cleopatra and Caesar. James S. Frideres also comments, "The subjugation and control of Native Canadians has been continued through a process of individual and institutional racism."^7

The humiliation experienced by the Halfbreed menfolk because of racial discrimination made them alcoholics. Inebriation made them temporarily forget
injustice received from the Whites. During the summer get togethers all the money earned got drained out in liquor. Sometimes the White men misbehaved with the Halfbreed women. But instead of protecting their own women, the Half-breed men were harsh towards their own women. Their own complexes and inability to confront the White racism made them beat their own women. In fact, it was their frustration and despair which made them ill-treat their spouses.

Maria entered the White world through Grannie Dubuque who was quite influenced by the White way of living since she worked for the White people. When Maria was seven years old Grannie Dubuque arranged for her to stay in a residential school in Beauval. Maria recalls that during that part of her life she was “lonely” and “frightened.” She experienced exploitation in the school. There she was asked to pray, and clean the dormitories and hallways. And ironically, there was no study at all. Even for speaking in the Native language, there was severe punishment. The Whites could not understand/realize that “Language would have opened the windows of opportunity for cultural communication and understanding.” Her father then took her out because a new school had come up in the neighbourhood. However, things were no better here. The White children’s ridicule made the Métis kids ashamed of their poverty. Even the White pedagogues were unsympathetic. Maria remembers that in a particular class the teacher discussed the Natives as poor. The teacher read out from St. Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 3 to 12: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.” Maria took it to be an umbrage at the Native and Halfbreed people and retorted, “Big deal. So us poor Halfbreeds and Indians are to inherit the Kingdom of heaven, but not till we’re dead. Keep it!” (p. 61). Maria further recollects how the lunch breaks were the most humiliating,
terrifying and insulting. The Whites had cakes, cookies, jams and eggs which the poor Halfbreeds didn’t even eat at Christmas. For the lunch, the Métis kids usually had gophers and bannock. This contrast led to a feeling of deprivation and frustration, and Maria even troubled her parents demanding things they couldn’t afford. It was Cheechum only who made Maria see the things in a correct perspective. She made Maria understand that the interaction with the Whites was never a healthy experience for the Halfbreeds. She avered that the Whites always incited the Métis with their valuable things to create the rift among the Halfbreeds. So it was unfair to trouble the parents for useless luxuries.

Maria also saw the ‘practical’ application of selfish ‘friendship’ of the Whites as explained by Cheechum. She experienced betrayal by the Whites at home itself. A Whiteman and his wife were Maria’s father’s good customers for both meat and homemade Whiskey. After the fellow won the elections, he started instructing on morality and the evils of drinking. When father invited them for drinks, they refused. The very next day the fellow came with the police to raid the house. The police searched for whiskey and meat since it was illegal to keep them. Maria rejoices that the White fellow failed in his attempt because of Cheechum’s foresightedness. Cheechum had made everybody hide the meat and whiskey. So when the police searched, there was nothing they could get hold of. As such the whole family was saved from disgrace, dishonour as well as destitution.

The Natives and the Halfbreeds have always been politically conscious. They have always strived for the betterment of their fellow beings but could not unite themselves earlier. Maria’s childhood also saw the beginning of political unity
among the Halfbreeds and the Natives. But she also witnessed failure within the organisation because of the White’s policy of divide and rule as well as because of the insensitivity of certain fortune-hunters among the Halfbreeds. Though the Métis were united they did not have proper leadership. When Jim Brady came, people saw hope of regaining their own land. His arrival excited even octogenarian Cheechum who encouraged the father to attend the meetings and become politically active. Only Grannie Campbell dissuaded the father from the meetings as she believed that any association with the Whites brought only despair and disillusionment. Cheechum, however, avered that efforts had to be made constantly with vigour in spite of a few abortive attempts. She believed only then the father could tell his children that he did try to change the circumstances and about various other occurrences. Cheechum’s perspective was definitely correct as Maria says, “How proud I was of my Dad!” (p. 73). Gradually the father got really involved in the meetings and even Maria got initiated into politics at quite a young age.

In the school the White students made fun of Campbells for their father’s political activities. Young White kids taunted them, “Saskatchewan has a new Riel. Campbells have quit poaching to take up the new rebellion” (p. 74). Maria advised her young siblings not to react to such callous statements since she had full faith in her father’s activities. Later, however, the father and the daughter both faced disappointment from the Métis themselves. The Whites offered Jim Brady and other political activists government jobs which they readily picked up and lost all interest in their own people’s welfare. The selfishness and deception of his political colleagues disheartened the father.
The futility of his attempts made the father “another defeated man” (p. 75). The pain caused by his own people pushed him towards liquor. Gradually, her father’s temperament and attitude changed. Maria recalls with regret and great pain that now they had to tolerate poverty along with a morose atmosphere at home. Initially even if they were indigent they at least had peace, laughter and bonding at home. Her father had become a frustrated and an angry man who started hitting the mother also. Once he even slapped Cheechum. Though afterwards he did try to make up, still, the times had changed. Maria blames the Whites and the unscrupulous and fraudulent Métis for the deterioration in their lives.

The grandparents play a prominent and an influential role in the life of Native children. Their philosophy helps children in their crucial moments. In Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel Lee Maracle had a grandfather whose stoical, calm and imperturbable thinking guided her at many a trying moments. Still unlike Campbell’s Cheechum, Maracle did not have a confidante in him through whom she could rise after each fall. Apart from the father, it was her great grandmother Cheechum who played a very significant role in Maria’s life. Cheechum was a staunch Native who refused to sleep on a bed or eat off the table because for her these were not a part of their culture. Cheechum’s little possessions added to Maria’s wonder and amazement. Maria always looked for an excuse to sleep with Cheechum because, as she says, “There was a special smell that comforted me when I was hurt or afraid” (p. 17).

Cheechum also moulded and influenced Maria’s religious beliefs and thinking. Maria did not find any peace in religious practices of Church and prayers. She was more comfortable with Cheechum’s philosophy which was “practical,
soothing and exciting . . .” (p. 81). Cheechum asserted that destiny could not be altered, therefore, one should always be prepared for its various unpredictable courses. Cheechum’s spiritual wisdom avered that the soul within the human body experiences heaven and hell on earth itself. Cheechum, therefore, emphasised the need to check and control one’s words, thoughts and actions. Her “… sentences set forth a deep strong, moral, and spiritual vision and understanding” in Maria. These ideas appealed more to Maria than the ritualistic worship of the Christians.

Cheechum had a very strong intuitive power. Maria believes that she knew about Maria’s destiny and in her own ways made Maria strong enough to face it and survive it as well. Cheechum taught her to be a proud Halfbreed. When the adults walked with heads down in the town, Cheechum encouraged Maria to rebel against the self-humiliating act. She said, “Never forget that, my girl. You always walk with your head up and if anyone says something then put out your chin and hold it higher” (p. 37). It was Cheechum’s inspiration which gave Maria the strength to fight against various odds.

Cheechum made Maria realize her duty as a Halfbreed person. When Maria complained about the lack of luxurious things which the Whites had, Cheechum made her see things in a correct perspective through an anecdote—the Halfbreeds came to live in this particular land for they wished for an independent living. For this they were ready for any type of sacrifice but a few of the Métis said, “I want good clothes and horses and you no-good Halfbreeds are ruining it for me” (p. 51). And they went forth to grab things from the Métis so as to please the Whites. Cheechum explained how the Whites divide the Métis, make them hate each other and ultimately try to rule the Halfbreeds; “They try to make you hate your people” (p. 51). Maria learned her
first important political lesson from Cheechum—unite with your own people, respect them, defend them and fight for their dignity. From that day onwards Maria always stood for her Halfbreed people. Though as Christine Welsh mentions “... very few Métis people spoke about being Métis and there was widespread denial of Métis identity among the generations of Métis . . .”\textsuperscript{10} yet, Maria from that day onwards always spoke about and stood for Métis people as she comprehends that “The idea of resistance is . . . to construct an oppositional discourse”\textsuperscript{11} to subvert and interrogate the European unjust system.

The tragedy that shattered Maria’s secure and happy world was her mother’s sudden death. Unable to bear the loss the father started staying away for days together. The responsibility of the whole house fell upon Maria at the tender age of twelve. Maria had to take care of altogether eight children, including the newly born. To run the household even her brother Jamie at the age of eleven, started to work from 4:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. At this critical time Cheechum again proved to be the pillar of strength. She always encouraged Maria to be a dutiful person. On the father’s return Cheechum succeeded in awakening his lost sense of responsibility. The father then found a job with a farmer. Since Maria was the eldest child, she had to do all the labour—baking, cooking, washing, gardening, canning, sewing, mending, etc. At this juncture, Cheechum who was 96 decided to leave the home since she didn’t wish to be a burden. At this stage, Maria suffered not only from physical exhaustion but also from emotional vacuum in the absence of Cheechum.
The father tried to keep a housekeeper so that all the children could attend the school. But poverty proved to be Maria’s bane when housekeepers started asking for enormous money. Maria combined school and the care of young ones in a way which was highly moving to say the least. She brought young ones to school and tied them to trees. Everyone took turns to go and attend to them. When the teachers discovered the arrangement, the relief people were immediately informed. To save the children being taken away by relief people the father immediately shifted the family twenty-five miles away from the farm. When he was locking the door of the home he had built with passion and dreams for his family, the despair, loneliness and feeling of being lost was complete within the family. As Maria recalls, “I remember Dad locking the door of the home he had built for his family. The house looked so lonely; it looked the way we felt” (p. 85). The new home lacked the warmth, affection and earnestness of the earlier home but Maria decided to make the best of what she received.

When the school reopened Maria felt free again. She tried to live childhood years in those few hours. But her joy was tarnished by the demon of racial discrimination in the school. The pedagogues made derogatory racist remarks to the Halfbreed children. One ruthless teacher did not even spare six years old Peggie for her pronunciation accented in the Native language. As a result the little child even started to wet the bed. Another incident of White cruelty Maria recalls was regarding her brother Robbie who was generally a tough boy. Robbie was found to have unclean ears (though he had taken bath that day but had forgotten to clean his ears). The teacher so cruelly used a scrubbrush to scrub his hands, neck and ears that they started to bleed. On hearing Robbie’s whimpers and seeing his condition, Maria
slapped the teacher real hard. Self-respecting and strong Maria refused to accept such a brutal and inhuman treatment. Maria’s stand made all the other racist pedagogues behave properly with the Métis bairns especially the Campbells. Her strength and belief in herself earned her a victory in the school itself.

After a while, when Grannie Dubuque came to stay with the children for sometime, Maria got relief from her overtaxed life. Grannie’s motherly affection overwhelmed all the children. Under her womanly care, the children really blossomed. Maria remembers her as the greatest storyteller who beautifully amalgamated strict Catholicism with Indian beliefs. This way the children learned Christianity as well as the ancient Indian rituals. With Grannie at home Maria got some time for herself and she first noticed boys at the age of fourteen. She, however, didn’t show any interest in them because Cheechum had said, “. . . Don’t try to impress them, let them impress you. Be yourself and do what you want. Someday you’ll find the one man you belong to—when it happens you’ll know” (p. 97). Cheechum thus, gave her another lesson in dignity, in relation to menfolk this time.

In spite of a few short spells of relaxation, life for Maria was a continuous struggle. She often contemplated on how to improve the condition of the family. The emotion of sacrifice so strong in the father became an integral and indispensable part of Maria’s personality as well. To take care of her siblings she left the school and picked up a job. So with the father, Jamie and Maria working, the family condition improved a lot. Maria was delighted to provide her younger sisters with a few pretty dresses which they had always eyed but had not asked for. Though Maria felt happy with the family, yet she missed the school. Maria’s father judged her disappointment and brought home Sarah, a widow in late thirties, so that Maria could attend the
school. After her initial resistance and fear Maria accepted Sarah. She got some time
to be just herself, i.e. she could read and ride.

Maria’s life entered a new phase which was marked by confusion, rebellion
and going astray. For some time she forgot the lessons Cheechum had taught her.
She and Smoky, a half-breed, started going around. Maria didn’t realize what she
was inheriting unconsciously from these outings. The European party-culture
affected her so much so that she forgot who she was and what her duty towards her
own people was. When the father learned about her liaison, he was furious. Maria
was unable to appreciate her father’s concern for a growing daughter. He wished to
protect her from the ills of society but was unable to do so. Fed up with the father’s
nagging Maria become almost a rebel who didn’t consider her father significant
enough to keep a check on her. The father – daughter relationship changed
immensely. She kept on going to dances just to annoy him. Her despair at home and
influence of the Whites made her hurt even Smoky when he proposed marriage. She
said, “Marry you? You’ve got to be joking! I’m going to do something with my life
besides make more Half-breeds” (p. 117). There was so much confusion in her that
she didn’t even know why she was behaving in such an absurd manner. Her
frustration at her sludgy condition made her love as well as hate her Métis fellow
beings. Whenever she thought of her life with Smoky she “saw only shacks, kids, no
food and both . . . fighting” (p. 117). Maria at this juncture, had mixed feeling
towards her Métis heritage. She loved her people for their sincerity and boisterous
nature but hated them for their indigence and penury.

In spite of Maria’s mental confusion, her sense of responsibility and sacrifice
towards the young ones forced her to take a decision which altered her life forever.
She was driven by poverty to a suicidal act as she decided to marry a White rich man who would look after her young brothers and sisters as well. So when she met Darrel she knew perfectly well what her course of action should be. Though her father and Cheechum were strongly opposed to the match, Maria feigned pregnancy and got married at the age of 15: "I had a husband and I could keep my brothers and sisters. I was fifteen years old" (p. 120).

Maria’s real trail of suffering started after her marriage. The poverty of childhood though ended here but another cycle of misery, deprivation and hurt began for Maria. Darrel proved to be a cheat. Before marriage he posed to be a rich man who owned a house but later, took Maria to a rented apartment. Sometimes later he even started hitting Maria whenever he was in a mood. Gradually he started staying out late and would disappear for days together. Even when Maria was expecting Lise, Darrel hit her quite regularly. Still, Maria hung on to him because otherwise her whole family would have come to the streets. However, after Maria’s father gave Darrel a good beating, Darrel really behaved himself. Everything got settled and everyone was happy. Yet Maria’s gut feeling warned her of something disastrous. She felt that there was a lull before the storm. And her intuition came true when one day the relief people arrived and took away the children. This broke Maria completely and for days together she remained in a dazed state. She learnt later that, in fact, it was Darrel only who in a clandestine manner had called up the relief people to pick up the children from home while he was away.

Later, Darrel proposed to leave for Vancouver. On the way, they stopped at Kristen, Alberta at the place of Bonny, Darrel’s sister. She had a strong racist
attitude. Bonny forced Darrel to leave Maria and one morning Bonny kicked Maria out of the house. Though Maria was aware of her husband's wicked and indifferent nature, desertion was the last thing she had expected.

All alone with the baby, Maria found a temporary haven with a Chinese restaurant owners who too were the victims of White atrocities. While Maria was staying with the Chinese restaurant owners, Maria saw the racist attitude of the Whites even towards the Chinese. The Europeans had the audacity to call the Chinese "chinks" or "yellow bastards" even in the Chinese restaurant. Maria concluded that the Europeans were racist by nature itself, a view shared by many:

The non-Whites in Canada share many similar experiences despite their diverse cultures and ethnicity. First, there is the history of their colonial oppression, regardless of whether they experienced it in the Caribbean or India or Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Secondly, there is the common experience of racism faced by them in Canada.  

However, fear of Bonny made Maria patch up with Darrel again. As expected, with Darrel once again began a phase of despair, poverty, frustration and suffering. Darrel took her to the ugliest and dirtiest place of Vancouver. No matter how much Maria tried, the apartment was always filled with cockroaches. Even the toilet was common with the residents of other apartments, where "The most rejected-looking people would be waiting their turns with . . ." (p. 132) her. She even felt and saw her own plight; emotional turmoil, physical suffering and mental agony in her neighbours. She says, "I wondered, as I waited, whether anyone of them had parents who loved them, or if they had ever laughed, or loved, or hated" (p. 132). Maria was in a place where people were in constant stupor, nothing seemed to affect them and
they had become emotionally numbed. She had nobody to identify with, or even spend sometime with. Besides, her relationship with Darrel was as good as over. Darrel didn’t think her to be significant enough to be told what he did, whether he had a job or not and didn’t even talk to her. Though Maria tried to keep herself busy with Lise, yet she felt herself in a vacuum. Darrel again left her with no money. She realized her mistake in trusting Darrel. Nevertheless, it made her strong to face the world and she decided to earn her own living.

At Vancouver Maria hovered between hope and despair. Her despair took a new turn when she contacted Lil whom she had met in a party. Maria knew what she was heading for, yet, her dreams (toothbrush, milk, bowl of fruits, cookies, etc.) made her enter an extremely ugly world. Still she felt guilty for her dreams and her efforts to achieve them. She says, “Dreams are so important in one’s life, yet when followed blindly they can lead to the disintegration of one’s soul” (p. 133). Maria entered the sordid, ugly world of prostitution. Maria was aware of her vulnerable position. She never cried because she knew that if she ever tried to shed a tear, she would never be able to pull herself up again. To deal with her pain and agony she got hooked on to the drugs. She lost total control of herself and even forgot about Lise. After sometime, Maria shifted her job as a keep of one political leader whose name she doesn’t give out and refers to him as Mr. _______. Her hollowness and loneliness increased here all the more. She “... was like a block of ice ... had no feelings” (p. 138). However, her meeting with Ray changed her life for better. With Ray’s help and her will Maria got out of her addiction to drugs.
Still Maria was not out of the ugly world entirely. With Ray’s help she did earn lots of money, but through smuggling. Then she decided to lead a clean life and took Lise to Calgary. However, she got a shock as she was unable to find a job for herself. This was because she had no education and was without any job experience. Soon she was back to depression, pills and drinks. Ultimately she had to go back to Vancouver and put Lise in the convent once again. Her life went back to earlier troublesome and miserable living. Her stay with Trapper just invited beatings and nothing else. Then one fine night Cheechum’s words echoed, “You can have anything you want if you want it bad enough” (p. 144). These words reawakened her. Maria was then determined to come out of the rut she was in.

Again Ray saw her through her addiction and even provided her with a cook’s job in a ranch. So by the time Maria was twenty years old she had already experienced poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, marriage and motherhood. After a while the people around the ranch became nasty, as such Maria shifted to Calgary to pick up a housekeeping job. Her determination to improve her lot made her join a school. But the load of work and school burdened her too much. Depression set in and she tried to commit suicide. Her torment, agony and loneliness almost compelled her to abort second pregnancy. However, the mother in her prevented such an inhuman deed.

Maria’s extremely humble condition forced her to contact the welfare people whom she really detested. In her first attempt she did not receive any money from the welfare. On Marion’s suggestion the second time Maria wore “a ten-year-old threadbare red coat, with old boots and a scarf” (p. 155). This time she was lucky to receive vouchers for groceries. The whole episode humiliated Maria and she realized
why her parents and Cheechum were so dead against the Welfare. The relief people
gave the money but took away the pride, dignity and self-respect of a person. The
White welfare was hypocritical. It never helped the Métis but only degraded them.

After a long and bitter struggle Maria’s revival began. When she met David,
Cheechum’s words “Someday, somewhere, you’ll meet a man who’ll grow old with
you and you’ll know him when you meet him” (p. 160) came true. David’s
boisterous, outgoing as well as sympathetic nature enlivened Maria again. Though
even now travails of life kept casting their shadows. No sooner did she settle down in
life, than the news of Lil’s arrest and trials of Lil’s accomplices paved way for
depression and anxiety in Maria. Even after the trials were over Maria was unable to
collect herself and had a nervous breakdown because of tension. She had to be
hospitalised and was released only after she started attending AA meetings to ensure
that she comes out of alcoholism.

AA gatherings altered the whole outlook of Maria. She comprehended and
discerned Cheechum’s words, saw the indispensability of unity among the Halfbreeds
and her concerns grew from personal to larger social issues. She got politically active
in various meetings concerning the Métis problems. She perceived and realized her
raison d’être

However, Maria’s awakening and activism were not appreciated by her own
Métis men. She experienced sexist bias even in political activism. Eugene who
talked openly against the Whites couldn’t tolerate Maria voicing her opinions
regarding the Whites. Gradually, she saw the result of the European influence on the
attitude of the Native men towards the Native women. She says, “I realize now that
the system that fucked me up fucked up our men even worse. The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that the women were a source of evil. This belief, combined with the ancient Indian recognition of the power of women, is still holding back the progress of our people today” (p. 168).

Fortunately Maria also met a few Native males who could sympathize with the Native woman’s problems, for example, Stan Daniels who in spite of being the victim of “Savage! Savage” shouts of the Whites had managed to keep his serenity intact and had not turned into an alcoholic. His attitude was not infected and tainted like that of the majority of the Native men. He was really concerned about the Native girl on the street. “He understood how the men in prison felt—it was good to get temporary relief away from their problems. He understood how women ended up on the street, and the things that they could not talk about, and how the Indian women felt about being abandoned by their men” (p. 169). With people like Stan around Maria found new companions. She matured as a human being as well as a politically aware person. She realized that “Women’s awareness about development is basic to her empowerment. For achieving this awareness the most important ingredient is the necessity of a healthy environment about her perception by the society and the community in which she is born.”

Maria Campbell’s difficulties pave way for her transformation. Very much akin to Maracle, she outgrows her personal pains and joys to finally converge with her community. Her individual ordeals, like Maracle and Culeton, lead to her political activism as she discerns that without her own people she cannot/does not exist as an individual and that her respect lies in being respected as a Métis.
Campbell’s book clearly conveys that any writer is affected by not only her personal life but also by her larger historical context. So what is true of Ngugi Wa’ Thiong’O in the African context is also true for Maria’s writing in the Canadian context. Therefore, as Harish Narang puts it; “A piece of literature representing one of the highest forms of development of human sensibility is a social phenomenon. . . . It is . . . a deliberate act of social communication . . . . Any serious work of literature, created as it is within the framework of existing social relations, is not only a living document of the contemporary happenings but also of the historical processes underlying them”\textsuperscript{14} is quite evident in Halfbreed. This text is undeniably a representative of how author, literature and politics inextricably blend together to depict the contemporary issues in particular milieu.

Reading Campbell’s Halfbreed is a richly rewarding experience. The narrative is indeed a vibrant, vivid and incisive portrayal of the life and world of the Halfbreeds. The book does not portray the Halfbreeds as merely suffering victims but as joyous and vibrant people. The narrative is full of moments of laughter and amusement. Maria describes a particular incident where an old lady instructed her “never to look at animals or people when babies were made” (p. 21) otherwise Maria would go blind. This she repeated with great authority to her cousins. After a few days one of her cousins looked at two dogs and screamed in terror. All the children became almost hysterical in fear. When all reached home Cheechum made them aware of the reality. Another funny incident Maria recalls is how the priest made old Cadieux leave drinking even though for a while. The priest gave old Cadieux’s daughter a bottle with Virgin Mary inside it. So when religious Cadieux saw Virgin
Mary he threw all his homemade brew. He even sweared to leave drinking altogether. However, he was back to boozing in a week's time.

Maria recalls various incidents which filled her life with fun and humour. In a particular incident, Maria remembers, she and her siblings taught a lesson to the greedy Father who never let children have strawberries from Churchyard but himself picked up things from Indian's Sundance Pole belonging to the Great spirit. The children took a wire and strung it across two trees on the either side of the footpath. They strung a wire a couple of feet further as well. So when the Father arrived he fell down and got up to fall once again. Maria also remembers one of the hunting trips with Dad, Jeremy (mother's uncle) and Chi Pierre (Jeremy's friend). When they reached the National Park, the Elk were calling. Dad tried to warn Jeremy and Chi of the approaching Elk but in their argument they didn’t hear Dad. Dad shot at Elk and when he and Maria looked around, Jeremy was on top of the tree yelling “Get off, it's my true” (p. 62) and Chi was trying to climb the tree screaming, “I'm your brother-in-law. He'll kill me” (p. 62). Finally, Jeremy fell down as the branch broke down and Chi himself climbed to the top.

Like other narratives by Native women, Maria Campbell's book is also a trenchant critique of the White establishment. She reveals with much detail and lucidity how the settler's racist attitude and exploitation keeps the Métis sunk in poverty. She discloses the vicious circle of racism, poverty, lack of education, lack of equal opportunities, which leads to alcoholism. Through her personal experiences only she makes the reader see the direct connection between the various problems of the Natives and the Métis.
Apart from her personal experiences, Maria also records many other instances observed by her and which hurt the Métis. White racism, Maria stresses, is often manifested in acts of cruelty. She cites an incident in a restaurant where two four and eight years old Native boys came in. To reach the toilet, they had to cross the crowd. As they started, one of the White men yelled, "Watch it! The bows and arrows are coming" (p. 158). The men started to laugh to make the kids really uncomfortable. It was Maria’s angry shout which made the White men quiet. The humiliation faced at a tender age creates a fear inside the Native children which sometimes stays even when they grow up. This was evident because the young boys’ parents preferred to stay out. Maria understood their behaviour also, "... I understood about these boys’ parents—it was easier for them to stay in the car. If they came out from under their blankets, they’d have to face reality, ugly as it was" (p. 159).

Racism does not get restricted to common everyday experiences. It assumes enormous proportions. Maria discloses how even the history is misrepresented in the movies. In a particular movie Louis Riel was depicted as a lunatic and Gabriel Dumont as a fool. In the movie only NWMP and General Middleton did all the heroic things. Such misrepresentation Maria feels tarnishes the image (reality) of the Indians and the Halfbreeds. Maria’s experience reminds one of Lee Maracle’s experience in the school where the Native history was again misrepresented. Louis Riel here also was presented as a madman.

Maria’s brief experience as a prostitute acquainted her with many a White politicians. These she found to be extremely hypocritical in nature, she concluded that neither the poor White nor the Native poor people can look up to them for any help or sympathy. She even said:
poor people both white and Native, who are trapped within a certain kind of life, can never look to the business and political leaders of this country for help. Regardless of what they promise, they'll never change things, because they are involved in and perpetuate in private the very things that they condemn in public. (p. 137)

Charles Paris, a White, reveals the politics of the White leaders:

We said to the Native Community, ‘You can’t have those things; they’re pagan rites’, and so we took away from the Native communities, under our law, those distributions of fish and the goods of the earth, as they shared them among their people. And so the Native community was denied their rights, in the name of our way of looking at things.\textsuperscript{15}

The politicians had introduced welfare. However, this welfare had only the interests of the Whites in mind. Cheechum was the first one who guarded Maria against the White hypocrisy. The Whites exchanged self-respect and dignity for welfare. Cheechum said, “. . . when the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return—your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul” (p.159). Cheechum’s words proved true when Maria needed the welfare money. She had to act dumb, stupid, ignorant and pretend to be on the mercy of the Whites before she really received some money from the relief system. The insensitivity of the relief people hurt her badly. She also remembered how the welfare placed Maria’s brothers and sisters in permanent foster homes. The father and Maria were not even allowed to know about their whereabouts. The welfare thus, becomes oppressive in practice causing frustration, hopelessness, and anxiety both to the children and the other members of the family.
Maria also strongly condemns the Whites’ manipulative tendencies. They manipulated the Native poverty and money became the instrument to disunite the Indians and the Halfbreeds as well as break the Métis unity. Maria particularly refers to the various projects taken up by the Natives. The project money was divided among the Native project holders, and reports which suited the Whites were presented. Therefore, Maria says that the money was “Not very much, just enough to divide us . . .” (p. 183). Maria Campbell’s narrative amply illustrates what James S. Frideres comments on in some detail:

The federal Government has neglected to consult with Natives concerning their welfare, has failed to develop and finance effective programs to assist Natives, and, at times has prevented Natives from becoming organised in pursuit of their rights. The political organisation of Natives has also been hindered by the factionalism that has developed within different segments of Native society. All these factors, and others, have led to the marginality of Natives in Canada.¹⁶

However, in spite of many setbacks Maria saw hope in the reorganisation of Native organisations which were founded by Jim Brady and Malcolm Narris in 1920s. Even Eugene founded the Alberta Native Communications Society. The Natives organised and “There was a new feeling of pride and hope everywhere” (p. 183). These developments gave her hope to continue her struggle.

Maria’s book ends on a very optimistic note. She shares this optimism with the writings of Lee Maracle as well. Maria feels happy that Cheechum’s words, “Because they killed Riel they think they have killed us too, but some day, my girl, it will be different” (p. 11) and “It will come, my girl, someday it will come” (p. 75) — full of hope and optimism, ultimately came true. Besides, Maria also propagates non-
violence and unity among all: "I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. May be not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to survive. Then together we will fight our common enemies. Change will come because this time we won't give up" (p. 184).
NOTES

1 Maria Campbell, Introduction, Halfbreed (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973; Goodread Biographies, 1983), p. 2. All subsequent references to the book are from this edition and have been incorporated in the parentheses in the text itself.


8 Satendra Nandan, Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story, p. 95.


