

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS AWAKENING: A COMPARISON OF MARIA CAMPBELL'S *HALFBREED* AND BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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“The voices of the unheard cannot help but be of value – the voices of the unheard cannot help but be of value – but how can one squeeze one’s loved ones small, onto the pages of a three – dimensional rectangle, empty of their form, minus their favourite colours and the rhythm of the music that moves them? Not all the stories made it into this book, but the essence of them did. Some of the stories were from men – very few. Most were from the women and children who have waltzed in and out of my life.” (I Am Woman, 3-4)

Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is a typical Native autobiography, as it is concerned not only with her individual self but also with the awakening of her consciousness, inseparable from that of her people. This autobiography dedicated to 'my Cheechum's Children' begins with an introduction: "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is to be a Halfbreed woman in our country." (2) Though a friend of hers had asked her to make it a happy book, Maria proclaims: 'This is what it was like, this is what it is still alive.' Similarly, *Karukku* by Bama, a Dalit woman writer from Tamilnadu, 'breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count' is, according to Mini Krishnan, 'is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function' (v) . None of the works is a synecdoche of an entire people. Though rooted in local and personal experience, both speak to and for a vast chunk of humanity, transcending their milieus; hence, an attempt is made to compare their treatment of this common suffering and the narrative devices they

deploy or discover in this process. Both direct to self-awakening and to the awakening of their roles in society.

Maria Campbell's autobiography is a search within for the peace which she first sought and did not find in her old hometown, where she returned after her long journey into the world. Coming home after a long time, thinking that she might find again the happiness and beauty she had known as a child and walked down the night, and she realized that the land changed like her and her people were gone. The circular journey is reenacted in the life story to eke out its meaning for herself and others, as Bama also wrote her life history when she left the convent and returned to an ordinary life among ordinary people, responding to Father's request. Like Maria Campbell, she feels at the end of her life story, which is all the beginning of the work, 'for the time being', 'I cannot see my way ahead yet, I believe it is possible to live a meaningful life, that is useful to a few citizens' (109).

The life history of Maria Campbell is born out of a synthesis of the Western autobiography as journey and revelation of religious introspection, which can be taken to the travel account and the oral tradition of the Natives. It is reminiscent and retrospective rather than introspective and full of domestic details and personal relations. It has several anecdotes and is made of little events, and it follows a more linear pattern than Bama's telling, unlike Foucault's horizontal pattern. History is the process of organising events from different periods under a single heading. Whereas Campbell's story is like Nietzsche's genealogical history.

Both stories begin with the milieu of their childhood. Maria's tale begins with Saskatchewan as part of the North West Territories, and the history of the land and her people's emergence from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the prejudice and hate that comes with the opening of a new land. The settlers were squatters with no title to the land. It juxtaposes the heroic fight of the Halfbreeds. For their land claims with the official history. Maria's people fled to Spring River, fifty miles north-west of Prince Albert, after the Riel Rebellion, as the land was covered with lakes, hills and bush and was good for hunting. But soon, the homesteads were reclaimed by the authority, and they became "Road Alliance People. Maria's story of her people begins with miserable conditions that held no hope for the future.

Bama's tale begins saying 'our village is very beautiful' because of the mountains surrounding it on the rocks (Paras) with the names given by the folks, 'the takes and the ponds stand side by side in a row, but differ functionally, and then says, the people were also divided by the kind of fish they ate. Her people had to steal fish, but they were closer to the water.

Campbell gives the family history, starting with her great-grandmother Campbell, who was called Cheechum and was the shaping force in her life. Her quiet mother had a collection of books given to her by her father, and her imagination was captivated by Shakespeare and other stories. She imagined the house was a Roman empire, the two pine trees were its gates, she was Julius Caesar, and her brother was Mark Antony.

Bama then discusses several folk deities and the stories associated with them, as well as other goddesses. While talking about the land, she mentions the caste system, which is also linked to land ownership. Most of the land belongs to the Naickers, and the description of the village based on Caste, the Paraya settlement (to which she belonged) was close

to the cemetery. The upper-class settlements were completely separated from those of the lower-caste communities, and all important centres, like the post office, the church, and the schools, stood in front of the upper-caste area. The sense of discrimination was deeply implanted in this area.

In both societies, a sense of shame was also built into the very inner being of the Metis and the Dalits, respectively. More than that, these people were also further divided. The Indians and half-breeds were different from each other. When Maria expressed her openness in the Council meetings, it was attributed to the white in her, because treaty women do not express their oppressions as Halfbreeds do, though there were plans for her to marry an Indian boy, the says he was terrified of her, and she couldn't stand by them.

Kate Vangen speaks of 'Halfbreed' as a reclaiming of a third position distinct from the 'Indian', or the words of Julin Emberly focus on the distinction between the Halfbreeds as self-sufficient trappers and hunters and better than their Indian brothers.

Similarly, the Parayar and Pallar distinction is highlighted in *Karukku*, as is the distinction between them and other background classes, such as Nacikers and Nadars, who claimed to be superior. There was a big fight between the Parayas and the Chaliyars over the cemetery. Bama narrates an incident in her childhood: When I crossed the street of the Pallas and come to her street, the street of the Parayars an elder of her street was carrying a small packet and holding it by its string, without touching it and went to the Naicker and extended the packet towards him cupping the Land that held the string with his other hand, whereas she was amused her Annan told her the truth. Everybody believed that the Nacikers, being upper caste, must not touch parayas; if they did, they would be polluted. "This is the crux of the problem in *Karukku*. She wondered: what did it mean when they called us parayas?

Had they name become that obscene?" The Naicker woman would pour out the water from a height of four feet while Parachi received with cupped hands, who did all the cleaning for them and accepted their life over rice and currie as the nectar of the gods. Annan also had similar experiences in the library, but it was he who made her realise that they must throw away their indignities, and for that, they must work hard and learn.

Annan told me all these things. And he added, "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn." The words that Annan spoke to me that day made a very deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi. (P.15)

In *Halfbreed*, Campbell's use of humour, 'making faces' as it were, at the absurdity of culture and racial stereotyping is a way of turning back the resilience of the tormented on the tormentor (191). Emerley adds:

These moments of textual aberrancy signal a threshold of difference, a point at which the hierarchical position contained by an ideology of the subject-of-oppression (Native subjectivity contained as 'oppressed people,' and dominant white subjectivity contained as "the oppressor") is overturned. (Emerley 160)

In *Karukku*, there is a deeper agony as the low caste people were degraded all the time. Caste precedes Karma, and it does not disappoint after death. It is the way in which they are alienated from other human beings that brings anguish, along with

anger. None of this is the way in which Dalits themselves were made to believe that they are degraded and that the situation can not be changed. The internal division of the Parayas and Pallas also contributed to the continuation of their Plight. They used to fight to the death one moment and join together again the next moment, but again they will be fighting with caste. Bama wonders:

They fight to the death one moment; the next moments they join together again. Suddenly, and for no reason at all they'll be fighting and wrestling with each other. A hundred times a second there are scuffles amongst them. Shameless fellows. Of course the upper-caste men will laugh at them. Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end? (P.41)

It is in the background of such a state of affairs, both Campbell and Bama choose to hold their heads up and walk erect. In the case of Campbell, Cheechum told her: 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."(37) She also told her low the halfbreeds lost their dream of freedom because some of them wanted good deeds, she expressed:

"They fought each other just as you are fighting your mother and father today. The white man saw that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he used it and still does today. Already they are using it on you. They try to make you hate your people." (P.51)

Campbell says that her prior lesson had been learnt and she tried to keep her head up and defend her friends and cousins in front of the white kids.

Bama was inspired by the capacity of her people for hard work, but she lives on gruel only through education and jobs they could reasonably empower Hoping to transform her society through this

she transformed her identity and chose to be a nun and found that the church was also in alliance with the upper class.

In fact both Campbell and Bama lost their faith in the conventional religion. Campbell's mother's persuasiveness was due to her religion, her faith in a Catholic God (22). Whereas law was concerned with justice and not poverty, even religion was used only to perpetuate their suffering here on earth hoping to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. But Campbell began to feel that there was no sin in this country than to be poor (81). Again it was Cheechum told her "not to worry about the Devil, or where God lived, or what could happen after Death' (81). She also taught her to see beauty in all things around her, deep inside each thing a spirit lived. By reorganizing the life of everything she was accepting God and heaven and hell are man made.

Bama also found that religion does not help the poor. During the childhood. She was frightened by the lessons about the Devil even while inside church, which would list her sins and hand them over to God. The church was also physically close to the upper class and sisters only slapped her often. They collected the skeleton of a priest and prayed to the teeth: "I want to study well; I want to be clever. We prayed for all sorts of things like that" (77)

When she finished schooling and joined the Convent boarding School, the fear 'bhayam' she felt towards God gradually left her and love, Paasam, grew (87). But when she joined the college, she began to wonder why should go to Pusai every day and take communion (88) as they were linked with the priests who were hypocrites. Like Campbell, she felt she could speak directly to God and not through prayer others had taught and see God through the mind's eye, in nature and in the ordinary events of every day (88).

Bama was totally disappointed when she joined the order hoping to serve the people. Even then

schools taught the children only to accept their misery. But from the Bible she knew that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed and Jesus too, associated mainly with the poor and he fought for the poor. She dedicated to speak up what she believed and be sure to herself, she also realized Dalits have also realized that others have never recognized them as human beings and that they were created in the likeness of God ...

"There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind.(94)

Campbell also realized at the end through Edith that she had misunderstood that Cheechum had been trying to say to her. She also realized that neither books nor politics was of any help: "The Russian Revolution wasn't important to me anyway. Instead I started reading Canadian and Indian history."(178)

She returned to her fields and people and joined the Native Movement. Cheechum passed away, what she said was alive and become true. "You will find yourself, and you'll find brothers and sisters." "She hoped that one day people will set aside then differentiates not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to serve." (184).

The dream life ended with her entry into her people. As Battaille and Sands say:

"Her struggle for people"

Bama also comes to a similar conclusion. She had lost every thing, but not courage and hope and pride:

Yet with all the pain, there still is a certain happiness in the depths of my mind. I have courage; I have a certain pride. I do indeed have a belief that I can live; a desire that I should live. For the time being, I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it is possible

to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others.(104)

Many, particularly Dalit women for whom toil is their very life breath, have helped her to identify her own strength. (106).

Campbell ends her story with the metaphor of blanket, which gave no real warmth. She also uses metaphors of growth and warmth and the picture she was given is symbolic. "In the center was a burnt-out tree stump, and at the roots were little green shoots sprouting up. The forest was like our lives, and the shoots represented hope".(171)

Bama's very title signifies the poverty of growth. The word Dalit itself means the toil and soil of the earth or that which is rooted in the soil." The Indian Dalit is the first owner of Indian soil only by going back to the soil, the Dalit realizes her/his true identity. As Lakshmi Holmstorm says. "Bama is writing in order to change hearts and minds"(xii)

Both Campbell and Bama convert the word into a sword and represent the people, by representing their lives and the lives' of their people.

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