

JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-DISCOVERY: A STUDY OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE DIVINERS*

*Dr. T. Jeevan Kumar**

Canadian Literature, both in English and French, has developed enormously during the Second World War. Since then, with its dual cultural heritage, it has reflected the stages in the narrative of national identity. Canadian fiction, like other creative forms, has flourished from the late 1960s and 1970s and began to take off with Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Shila Watson, Maris Gallant and others. But the form rose and achieved success with the solid contribution made by women writers such as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood.

Among the Canadian women novelists Margaret Laurence occupies a unique position in the Canadian fiction. She was born in the prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba (model for the fictional Manawaka). She probably understands women better than men and has certain things which she gets only through women. She examines the dilemma of the question for identity and attempts to discover in fictional terms modes to reckon with the women's problems. So, her novels are usually preoccupied with the woman's / nation's identity. They also reflect the increased concern for the status of women in society and the concurrent increase in the desire to evolve and assert a distinctive quest for Canadian identity. Her popularity rests on.

The series of four books based on her home town, renamed Manawaka, for which she is now best known: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), retitled *Now I Lay Me Down* for British publication, *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974).¹

Each of the Manawaka novels may be described, in one way or another, 'a fictional autobiographies' and has given unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives. Her protagonists, in the beginning of the novels, might be victims but by the end they refuse to become victimized. Their state of wilderness is transformed into a state of wholeness by their journey, which is often seen as a means of escape from the claustrophobia. The actual journey becomes a metaphor for the journey towards self-hood and an acceptance of their heritage. Thus, Laurence's characters hold a mirror to the lives of several generations settled in and around the town of Manitoba. As Clara Thomas puts it:

**Assistant Professor of English, Government College (UG & PG)
Ananthapuramu – 515001. Andhra Pradesh, Email: dr.tjeevan@gmail.com*

... in their dilemmas, her characters move us through four generations of the history of this country ... through two world wars and the depression to the contemporary setting.²

In these novels, she illuminates the past of people in order to bring a sense of dignity and continuity to the lives of men and women in the present providing an act of restitution, by offering a place of social history and a ground for some sort of cultural continuity with a strong sense of mission. Indrasena Reddy and Miguel Neneve observe thus:

Margaret Laurence is aware of the dilemma and powerlessness of women, the tendency of women to accept male definition of themselves, to be selfdeprecating and uncertain and to rage inwardly.³

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*⁴ is the last novel in the series of Manawaka fiction. It has been acclaimed by many critics as the most outstanding achievement in her writing career. It is about Morag Gunn, who is born in small-town Manitoba. She loses her parents at a young age. Later she is brought up by the town scavenger and his dim wife. She goes to University in Winnipeg vowing to escape the life she has grown up in. There she marries her Professor and becomes a writer. When her husband refuses to let her become a mother and doesn't encourage in writing, she leaves her husband. Then she meets her childhood friend/lover and has a baby. She raises the baby on her own in Vancouver, London, and McConnell's Landing. When her baby leaves, she feels lonely and starts searching for her own roots – where she has come from. In the end, she finds out the truth that her roots are nowhere but in the same place where she was brought up. This powerful and fascinating story of the struggles of an independent woman and the search for her own roots is told through extended flashbacks, snapshots, and inner monologues.

The novel is divided into five sections – “River of Now and Then,” “The Nuisance Grounds,” “Halls of Sion,” “Rites of Passage,” and “The Diviners” – which move generally forward from an early summer morning to an early autumn evening. “River Now and Then” and “The Diviners” join each other to encircle the three intervening sections of the book. “The Nuisance Grounds” examines Morag's present that comes to climax in two phone calls. One is from Pique's father, Jules Tonnerre, and the other is from Pique herself in Winnipeg. These calls are separated by Morag's witness of her neighbour Royland's successful water-divining on the Smith's property. In the present, little time has elapsed, but in terms of the Memory bank Movies of her past, Morag has moved through all her Manawaka years to the point of leaving for the University of Manitoba at age nineteen.

In “Halls of Sion,” Morag ostensibly escapes from Manawaka and from her parents only to search for her own roots. In her search she meets Brooke Skelton who feels that Morag is more interesting because she appears to have no past and is, therefore, new and fresh. The climax of chapter III comes as Morag realizes that she is unable to live in two timeless, static world that Brooke prefers – a world that rejects the past and denies the future in the shape of a child. She leaves Brooke to discover Jules Tonnerre, thereby establishing a continuity between her past in Manawaka, her present life, and her future. When she leaves Jules to go further west, she carries the child she has longed for.

In “Rites of Passage,” Morag has stripped her life down to the bare essentials and sets out on the search for “vital truth” – in Vancouver, London, Scotland, Manawaka and McConnell’s Landing – that brings her home. The effect to escape, that began at the end of “The Nuisance Grounds” becomes a pilgrimage as she realizes that she no longer needs to see Sutherland.

The climax of this part and of the book is the scene at Christie’s funeral. The novel does not end at Christie’s grave, however part I and V join to comprise the fictional present of the book, that point in time from which Morag the artist as heroine, relives and recreates Christie confined to the grave. Through Morag’s part, he becomes a legend. In the end Morag realizes that she, like Royland, a neighbour who makes his living by divining wells for the farmers in the surrounding country, will pass on the gift of divining to another, probably her daughter Pique, for she has told the stories to Pique that Christie told to her, and Pique has begun to tell these stories to others. The novel, however, ends on an optimistic note even though it starts in gloom. Margaret Laurence, in an Interview with Michael Fabre, observes thus:

I feel that life and the world can be pretty gloomy and that people can certainly be hard and cruel to each other but I am convinced that gloom is not doom. There is hope and in most people there is faith, a belief in the possibility of change that will come out.⁵

The chief diviner in the novel, though there are many like Christie and Royland, is the artist who makes a pilgrimage into a living past in order to know herself, her time, and her place. Through the creative process of memory, Morag chooses those parts of the personal, family, and ancestral past that make the present and future happen.

The novel opens with Morag Gunn, already an established writer, finding herself in a disturbed and distressed state of mind due to sudden going away of her adolescent daughter Pique to an unspecified destination leaving just a note behind. This immediate crisis makes her aware of another, a deeper crisis caused by her inability to arrive at a definite identity of herself. Having been orphaned at the age of four, she was brought up by Christie Logan, the town’s garbage man, or Scavenger as he is called, who collects and carries rubbish to the dumping ground known as the Nuisance Grounds, and his wife Prin, a woman from an English family. Because of her constant feelings of self-hate and an antipathy for her past makes Morag leave Manawaka for Winnipeg for the college education. Her sense of loneliness in the sophisticated University atmosphere brings her into contact with Professor Brooke Skeleton, which culminates in marriage. Later the relationship proves to be barren as Brooke wants it to be just a relationship between a master and a slave, the colonizer and the colonized. He ridicules her attempts to express her creativity, to write a novel.

Morag then lives temporarily for a period of three weeks, together with Jules Tonnerre, her teenage boyfriend, who shares a similar background as that of Morag. The three week long affair results in the birth of a baby who is named after Jules’ dead-sister Pique. After the birth of Pique, she moves to London to concentrate on her literary career. But her presence at the funeral of her foster mother Prin make Morag experience a deep sense of inadequacy. She remembers the tales about the tales about the brave and adventurous Scottish chief, Piper Gunn and his wife told by Christie in her childhood so that she could reconcile herself to the ignominy of her present in Manawaka. But a book on the Scottish history questions the validity of the stories of Piper Gunn

and once again leaves Morag burdened with an undefined and indefinite past. This makes her to go to Scotland on a ritualistic journey in search of her roots. Unable to learn anything from her Scottish experience Morag decides that her home is none other than Christie's own country. She confirms her acceptance of Manawaka's roots by telling Pique stories about the Scottish heroes and about the Metis tribe to which Jules belong. She accepts Christie as her true father when he is on his death bed. As a diviner she speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. As Sherrill Grace opines,

The third-person voice underlines the fact that this is not exclusively Morag's story, but the story of many people, of a country, of the past.⁶

Morag Gunn is an independent woman who refuses to abandon her search for her own roots and love. For her, growing up in a small Canadian prairie town 'Manawaka' is a toughening process – putting distance between herself and a world that wanted no part of her. But in time, the aloneness that had once been forced upon her becomes a precious right – relinquished only in her overwhelming need for love. Again and again, she is forced to test her strength against the world and finally achieves the life she had determined that would be hers. In the words of Sara Maitland, "The culmination and completion of Margaret Laurence's celebrated Manawaka cycle, *The Diviners* is an epic novel."⁷

Morag Gunn is obviously based on Margaret Laurence herself, being raised in a small Manitoba town, working on a local newspaper, marrying a professional man, separating, becoming a novelist, living for stretches in Vancouver and Britain. Timothy Findley rightly observes thus:

In Morag Gunn, Laurence has created a figure whose experience emerges as that of all dispossessed people in search of their birthright, and one who survives as an inspirational symbol of courage and endurance.⁸

She is engaged in a quest for her ancestry and shows her maturing from an identification with 'Prospero's child' into the powers of Prospero himself. Even, Laurence too portrays Morag, as a diviner, as an alternative to James Joyce's 'artificer.' Growing up at Manawaka is for Morag a toughening process. She feels alienated from the town society, as the only way to survive is by putting distance between herself and a world that does not seem to want her. During these years of crisis, what sustains Morag is her individual fighting spirit and the father's love she gets from Christie. He fires her young impressionable imagination with tales of her Scottish ancestor, Piper Gunn who came piping all the way from Sutherland, over the Atlantic, across the prairies, putting heart into his people, till he brought them to the farm lands on the banks of the Red River. However, to seek social and economic freedom, Morag resolves to leave Manawaka. The idea of putting a great distance between herself and the shabby town attracts her like a beacon shining from afar.

Now she knows one thing for sure. "Nothing-nothing-is going to endanger her chances of getting out of Manawaka." And on her own terms, not the town's. (153)

But when the time, finally, comes for Morag to depart from Manawaka to seek higher education at Winnipeg her feeling of jubilation is mixed with that of guilt at being so eager to run away

from the place of birth. Her journey is not an escape from home but a quest to explore the world. Roshan G. Shahani aptly conjectures that the journey is thus seen as a means of escape from the claustrophobia, confusion and sometimes even from the comforts that home can offer. It is one form of negation and the rejection of home. This recurring motif need not be viewed in negative terms alone.

This quest acquires yet another dimension when it becomes the artists' attempt to explore the world outside their homes, in order to create and to articulate. Finally if the protagonists want to leave their homes behind, it is to search for and discover greater freedom and independence than what they would enjoy within the boundaries of home; hence the actual journey becomes a metaphor for the journey toward selfhood.⁹

Morag's sojourn is to be viewed as being more affirmatively a search for freedom and individuality. Her sojourn in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Toronto in her quest for selfhood leads her first to form and then break up family relationships. In her loneliness in the relatively sophisticated world of the University of Winnipeg, she falls in love with her English Professor called Brooke Skelton who represents the culture and tradition of the imperial metropolis, London. But then she realizes the truth that he patronizes Morag, treats her condescendingly, and makes her feel like a child. In the end, she feels that their relationship proves to be barren and becomes clear that he wants it to be a dependency relationship of master and slave. Once she realizes that her teacher husband Brooke was merely an epitome of colonial power, she does not hesitate to leave him and go back to her place where she marries Jules, a representative of the indigenous, dispossessed ones. Finally Morag, who always felt dispossessed since her childhood and suffered from a sense of inadequacy in her present placed her in a quandary regarding her identity.

Morag's progressive journey towards adequate self-perception illustrates explicitly the concept stressed by Laurence in all her writings, that is, the need to come to terms with the past for satisfactory resolution of the dilemma of identity. By recognizing Christie Logan as her father, Morag Gunn identifies herself with and accepts her Manawaka past, her own real past. Eventually, she succeeds in turning her experience of dispossession to artistic account and completes the writing of her novel entitled *The Diviners*. As a diviner, she uses her pen to divine the truths about the oppressed sections and the victimized people. She has returned 'home' in the most profound sense of the term. Thus, *The Diviners* is a home coming novel, containing within it an epic of this land and its people culminating and closing the Manawaka works with a quiet assurance that is Morag Gunn's affirmation and Margaret Laurence's.¹⁰

Laurence invests Morag Gunn with heroic qualities as Canada needs to invent national heroes according to her "Man of our People."¹¹ Morag has invented a national myth by her rejection of Brooke, the colonizer, and her acceptance of Jules, the Metis. Her background as an orphan, her early awareness of the repression of Scottish and Metis culture created the desire to explore her ancestry. This genealogical quest comes to a climax when she decides to go to Britain and it continues to be important in the final sections of the text which describe her life after her return from Britain.

Morag's memory in 'Halls of Sion' also gives a stage by stage process of creation from the time when she began to write through a first rejection of the manuscript to the exhilaration of a publisher's acceptance of her book and the drudgery of its rewriting:

This rewriting is a thousand miles from the first sitting down. No half-lunatic sense of possession, of being possessed by the thing. In fact, this is much easier, but without exhilaration...

Morag realizes, with some surprise, that she is able to defend her own work. Also, it is a relief to be able to discuss it, no holds barred, with no personal emotional connotations in the argument. Only when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with the knowledge that this part of herself really is there. (259-260)

The need to survive and then to grow had impelled Morag to reject first Manawaka and then the cocoon of unreality that her marriage with Brooke had come to be. In Vancouver, pregnant, frightened, still distraught because of what she sees as her betrayal of Brooke, and still totally uncertain that she can make a living by writing for herself and her child, Morag knows that she must go on, that she cannot go back.

Morag uses her pen to expose the sorrow and misery of the oppressed ones in Manawaka. She invents national identity for herself using the cultural materials provided by 'diviners' such as her foster father, Christie Logan. She rejects an identification with the imperialist image, but rather identifies with the indigenous, the dispossessed and the land of her birth thus embodying Laurence's view of a Canadian national identity. Through her novels, Morag also speaks for the outcasts, the half-breeds and the Metis. She opens up to an entirely new world with new ideas, thereby breaking all the outdated Manawaka social structures.

Morag has always felt dispossessed since her earlier childhood. She prepares to write the success story of a novelist, like Laurence, coming from the back wood of Canada, or to demonstrate the strength and fortitude of a woman, who learns to live and love exactly the way she wants, and who is prepared to take on the whole world for the sake of her independence: Apparently, the growth of the woman-child, girl, young woman, wife, and middle aged mother. Morag from her childhood grows into a young girl whose need for love is both physical as well as emotional. Jules Tonnerre, a Metis school fellow of Morag, adds to her experience by initiating her in the mystery of sex.

To conclude, we may say that Morag's journey towards self-discovery quite deliberately aims at a specifically Canadian identity by fusing together personal and national history so that it emerges not merely as Morag, an individual's story but a story of the nation. She, being the victimized individual of identity crisis, undertakes "a voyage of exploration"¹² towards acquiring an adequate self-perception. Her journey is complex but an exploration of the meaning of life.

References

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