

Search for Self in Margaret Laurence's 'The Diviners'

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Abstract:

A superficial survey of the twentieth century Canadian Literature shows that there has been an upsurge of feminism in it during the last thirty years. In the sixties and seventies the rise and success achieved by women writers such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro is something remarkable. Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is a novelist of feminine sensibility even though the place 'Manawaka' acquires a symbolic status for her and becomes a way of living representing the essential attitude towards life. Margaret Laurence's last novel '*The Diviners*' deals with the struggles of a middle-aged woman, Morag Gunn to become a writer. She has to wage a battle with herself and her husband. Margaret Laurence is concerned with morality and the transmission of culture beyond the scope of her parents in her personal quest for identity. Thus the novel occupies mostly the interior landscape of the protagonist in her struggle to come to terms with herself.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Feminine sensibility, '*The Diviners*', Quest for identity

The early growth of Canadian literature can be traced to the oral voices of the original people- the Indian tribes spread far and wide in the temperate regions. Their oral tradition as well as their songs and stories were passed on from one generation to the other. Till the thirties, the Canadian novel did not adopt any modern technique even though traces could be found in the works of the writers who started writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. The novel since the sixties shows its own catchment area of experience. This period has seen the emergence of brilliant names like Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Norman Levine, Michael Ondaatje and Robert Kroetsch. This period is identified with the flowering of experimental fiction, minority fiction, satiric fiction, feminist fiction, childhood fiction, regional fiction and popular fiction.

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is a novelist of feminine sensibility even though the place 'Manawaka' acquires a symbolic status for her and becomes a way of living representing the essential attitude towards life. She also displays her social responsibility and relates it to her times. Her novel '*The Stone Angel*' (1964) expresses her essential concern in certain ways. She combines the private and public worlds by representing her own vision of life. Laurence always tries to explore the constructing definitions of women and also discovers her voice and uses it as a path to self-realization. In her works, the innocent psyche of her protagonists is revealed through their interaction with those who are emotionally related to them.

In Canada, many artists from all parts of the country have been creating mythopoeic places for the past few decades. Laurence is also one among them. Her Manawaka has all the elements of mythopoeic present in its reflection. Like William Faulkner who created Yoknapatawpha as the geographical location of his fiction and R.K. Narayan who transformed Mysore into the Malgudi, Margaret Laurence also presents Manawaka as a small Canadian town.

In Manawaka novels '*The Stone Angel*' (1964), '*A Jest of God*'(1966), '*The Fire-Dwellers*'(1970) and '*The Diviners*'(1974), Margaret Laurence examines her idea that human societies are built around tribal instincts. The entire order concerns the pre-occupation of the heroines with their ancestral or past. All the five protagonists, Hagar Shipley, Rachel Camron, Stacey MacAinda, Vanessa Macleod and Morag Gunn are of Scottish origin. They are living as strangers in their homeland, Manawaka. It is a transformation of Neepawa, a place in Manitoba, Canada which is the birthplace of Margaret Laurence herself. Though the five heroines leave Manawaka at one time or another, they are not able to separate themselves from it emotionally.

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'*The Diviners*' deals with Morag's struggle in the world of harsh realities. Morag is a strong, loving, tough, ironic and imaginative forty-seven year old writer. She faces the problems of divorce and personal losses, more like a man than like a woman. During this process of her struggle to find her identity, she makes her way towards a creative writer. In a public discussion at Moharok College, Laurence says that "In '*The Diviners*' she came closer to portraying herself than in any other work. However, the novel is not totally autobiographical, for the things that happen to Morag in the novel, did not all happen to Laurence" (288).

The novel is divided into five sections- '*River of Now and Then*', '*The Nuisance Ground*', '*Halls of Sion*', '*Rites of passage*' and '*The Diviners*'. There are nine chapters in each section, which begin with a short account of Morag's present life, her anxiety about her daughter and her writing. The main story is about the struggle of an independent woman and her need for love is expressed through flashback techniques called memory bank movie. Snapshots and inner film are also used as supplementary to the flashback techniques.

The first section of the novel- '*River of Now and Then*', shows the forty-seven year old Morag deeply disturbed by the departure of her eighteen year old daughter Pique. This prompts her to dig out some photographs and by looking at them she recalls her own childhood. While commenting on the third snapshot, she reflects "I don't recall when I invented that one. I can remember it, though, very clearly. I must have made it up much later on, long, long after something terrible had happened"(17). The memories may be invented ones, but she notes that the death of her parents is the first memory. Christie, her foster-father tells her tales of her ancestors- of Piper Gunn

and his woman Morag. Having listened to Christie's stories, she immerses herself in the story and becomes the story teller. Thus story telling becomes the focus of the second section of the novel, '*The Nuisance Ground*'. '*The Nuisance Ground*', ends with Morag's determination to leave Manawaka but she knows one thing for sure; nothing is going to endanger her chances of getting out of Manawaka. Regarding this Dhawan comments:

When she forsakes the town for the urban environment of Winnipeg and later Toronto, her sense of relief and release underlines her ignorance of the central lesson of the novel and of Morag's self-exploration, the inability to escape the past. Only through the experience of gathering together the fragments of her life does she come to realize that she cannot obliterate or forget her past. (35)

Morag's step-mother Prin is the centre of the third section of the novel- '*Halls of Sion*'. Prin is an embodiment of silence. It is only after Prin's death that Morag is led to question her marriage with the English Professor Brooke Skeleton and her own role as the Princess. Then Laurence writes "These Halls of Sion. The Prince is ever in them. Only after Prin's funeral that Morag truly begins to stand up to Brooke, begins to find her own voice and to feel confident in her own abilities both as a woman and as a novelist" (126). Part four of the novel- '*Rites of passage*' focuses on Morag's realization of herself as a writer and as a mother through the novels she publishes and through the stories she tells about herself and her daughter. This section enables her to assert her individuality. The concluding section of the novel - '*The Diviners*', reveals Morag coming to terms with her losses that she has suffered-the loss of Pique, the loss of Jules Tonnerre and the loss of her own power as a diviner.

The opening lines of the novel symbolize Morag identifying herself with the flow of the river current:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite directions. This apparently impossible contradictions made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching... Morag watched, trying to avoid thought, but this play was not successful. (3)

After losing both her parents, Morag Gunn is brought up by a childless couple of Manawaka- Christie Logan and his wife Prin. The fact that Christie is the town scavenger brings trouble to Morag, because when she goes to school, the other children tease her talking about the profession of her foster-father. Though she suffers much, bravely goes on. She learns the wise way of not arguing with adults because this only will help her to survive. When a neighbour tells her at the age of five that she has to go and live with the Logans as she has lost both her parents, "Morag says nothing. She can learn you can't argue when you are a kid. You can only wait not to be a kid anymore" (7).

Another lesson that Morag learns early in her life is "never let them know you are scared" (34). Growing up at Manawaka is a difficult process for the orphan Morag. She feels alienated from the town and society. Morag's only way to survive is by keeping a distance between herself and the world that does not seem to want her. During these years, what sustain Morag are her individual

indomitable spirit and the love she gets from Christie. Christie kindles her imagination with tales of her Scottish ancestor Piper Gunn, who has come piping all the way from Sutherland, over the Atlantic, across the prairies, putting heart into his people, till he brought them to the farmlands on the banks of the Red River. In order to get social and economic freedom, Morag decides to leave Manawaka. The idea of distancing herself from 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). She finally departs from Manawaka to seek higher education at Winnipeg. Morag Gunn finds her roots sometimes in the Scottish-Presbyterian origins and sometimes in the tales of her clan Gunn, told by Christie Logan. Christie manages to create a world with the real events along with imaginary ones with which the orphan girl may identify herself. These events mirror the agony and sufferings of the clan of the highlands called Metis. Her novel "Shadows of Eden" re-creates the tales of Piper Gunn which Christie imparts to Morag. It is a re-creation not only of Morag's ancestral past but also of the mythical past of the country itself. This novel shows the novelist's understanding of the universal truths of life.

It is only after she visits Scotland that she realizes that her origins lay in the myths and tales retold by Christie when she had been a child in Manawaka and not in this alien land. Morag finally realizes that the heritage given to her by Christie is more real and relevant to her personal identity than her Scottish origins. Morag's visit to Scotland and her daughter's ability to accept the twin legacies- of her father's Metis heritage and her mother's Manawaka heritage helps Morag realize that she too needs to reconcile the two major influences of her life.

Laurence depicts different phases in the growth of the woman- Morag, the child, girl, young woman, wife and middle-aged mother. When the child Morag grows into a young girl her need for love is both physical and emotional. Jules Tonnerre, a Metis school fellow of Morag adds to her experience by initiating her into sex. Morag's relationship with Jules Tonnerre is poignant on the social and cultural levels. Jules Tonnerre represents the social and cultural alienated individuals who are French-half breeds who have to earn their livelihood by doing things familiar to them and in Jules' case by singing the folk songs of their clan.

Many years later, Jules enters into Morag's life when she is trying hard to make a success of her marriage with Brooke Skeleton, a university professor. Brooke refuses to let her become a mother, serve at that point of Morag's life as a substitute of the child she cannot have by Brooke Skeleton.

The initial tension in their marriage begins with the publication of the novel-"*Prospero's Child*". In "*Prospero's Child*", the heroine Mira is an obvious reference to Miranda. The story evolves around the growth of Mira from a childlike state to that of a mental maturity when she rejects all barriers. The parallels of Morag's life are very clear. Brooke, like Prospero, is the father figure and colonizer. Morag, like Miranda, initially submits herself to the tutoring father but after attaining maturity resents the cage and escapes from it. Morag leaves home to find temporary love with Jules, who is too individualistic in spirit to be tied down to marriage and family. But he does

not mind if Morag wants a child from him. Morag gets involved with two men who follow their own dreams, without really caring for her feelings. This, in fact tells about her feminine sensibility to work for independence and attainment away from the world of men. Regarding this, Laurence suggests that women's dependence on man is not so much emotional, as a biological necessity which becomes a cause for unnecessary mental torture for the heroine of "*The Diviner's*".

According to Brooke, Morag is just a plaything to him, without an independent entity. He is too much involved in furthering his career and his professional status. He never cares for Morag's intense craving for motherhood. Her feminine sensibility is outraged and she breaks up the marriage in order to get her freedom to have a child. She becomes the victim of a subtler kind of alienation. Morag is bold, defiant in her disregard of social taboos. Finally she gets what she wants. Divorced from Brooke, she gives birth to a daughter, whom she names Piquette, the dead sister of Jules Tonnerre. Her meeting with Jules enables Morag to walk out of her sterile marriage with Brooke. As Jules rightly says "Magic. You were doing magic; to get away...I'm the Shaman,eh?"(273).

Christie and his tales of Piper Gunn gave Morag an interest in her ancestral past. Struggling to establish herself as a writer, she journeys to London where she finds work as a book-seller's assistant. She meets a Scottish painter by name McRaith and they become friends. He offers to take Morag and Pique to Sutherland, the region in Scotland to which the Gunns originally belonged. For Morag, it is a kind of pilgrimage to discover her ancestral roots. They first go to McRaith's home at Crombruch, a small fishing village. But when he wants to drive to Sutherland, Morag unexpectedly turns down his offer. Obviously her thinking had changed after reaching Scotland. She tells McRaith:

I don't know that I can explain. It has to do with Christie. The Myths are my realities something like that. And also, I don't need to go there because I know now what it was I had to learn here...I always thought it was the land of my ancestors but is not.

"What is then?"

"Christie's real country, where I was born? (390)

Soon after this, Morag rushes to Canada to visit Christie on his death-bed at Madawaska. When Christie passes away from this world, Morag acknowledges that her inheritance is the legends of her ancestors. Later she purchases a farm-house at MacDonnell's Landing on the banks of a river. With the purchase of this farm, her search has ended: "Land. A River. Long house nearly a century old, built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper, History- Ancestors" (414). For the first time in her life, Morag writes her novels in tranquility of mind and amidst natural surroundings. Here, she completes her novel. "*Shadow of Eden*", which incorporates Christie's tales of Piper Gunn "who probably never lived in so-called real life but who lives forever. Christie knew things about inner truths that I am only just beginning to understand" (418). At the end of her struggle and wanderings, she feels at home with her neighbours, the river, the environment and the changing seasons.

Pique too has a life of her own. She keeps going off in different directions. Though Morag worries about her daughter she does not directly interfere in her life. The mother who has been

craving for an independent life hesitates to shape the destiny of the daughter. The Canadian problem of multi-culturalism is perhaps best seen in Morag's daughter, Pique who is the inheritor of two different cultures. But Laurence has not gone into the details of Pique's ability to accept her background. In fact, one gets the impression that her capacity to reconcile the two strands of influence is presented more as a guide to Morag who is the central character of the novel. Appreciating her daughter's ability to adjust, she adopts Pique's view point. However, Morag's quest is more individualistic than typically Canadian.

The final image of "*The Diviners*" is that of Morag living her life at MaConnell's Landing devoting herself whole-heartedly to writing. The reference to a nineteenth century work, 'The Canadian Settler's Guide' (1855) indicates her interest in history as well as feeling for women writers. She reflects appreciatively on the achievement of her predecessor" Catharine Parr Traill, mid-1800s, botanist, drawing and naming wildflowers, writing a guide for settlers with one hand, whilst rearing a brace of young and working like a galley slave with the other"(95). Morag feels so much involved with Catharine Parr Traill that she is frequently in the habit of carrying on imaginary conversation with that worldly wise woman. This serves her instead of the feminine companionship, which she misses in her daughter away from home. During her second conversation too, Morag says that she feels caught between the old pioneers like Mrs. Traill and new pioneers like her neighbour, Royland. Morag's third and final conversation with Mrs. Traill indicates her own psychological progress:

One thing I'm going to stop doing, though, Catharine. I'm going to stop a feeling guilty that I'll never be as hard working or knowledgeable or all-around terrific as you were. And I'll never be as willing to let the sweat of hard labour gather on my brow as A-Okay and Maudie, either. Even, Pique, Ye gods, working as a cashier in the bloody supermarket all day, and then going home and feeding those squawking chickens and washing dishes and weeding the vegetable garden, etcetera... I'm about to quit worrying about not being either an old or a new pioneer. So farewell, sweet saint-henceforth, I summon you not. (406)

Royland who makes his living by divining wells for the farmers in the country, arrives at Morag's door to announce that he has lost the gift of divining. But he also declares that it is not a matter to be given to someone else. At this stage, Morag's response is positively affirmative. She says" I see that now" (452). Morag's story-telling now becomes an act of faith, an affirmation of community. Margaret Laurence like other great artists has admirably fulfilled the role of a seer. The following words about her protagonist Morag appear to resolve the dilemma for both, occurring in the last page of the novel. "The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man? She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift or portion of grace, or whatsoever it was, was finally withdrawn to be given to someone else" (452).

Morag retains her own skill of creative writing. However, she is not quite sure of how effective her novels are and how useful to the readers. Margaret Laurence comments:

At least Royland knew he had been a true diviner. There were the wells, proof positive. Water. Real wet water. There to be felt and tasted. Morag's magic tricks

were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn't given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing-that mattered.(452)

As a writer Morag develops the skills of a diviner such as insight in order to fathom what goes on in outcasts and poor people. She is in a position to understand Manawaka from a better perspective and make its people lead a better life. As a diviner, Morag, in her fiction, speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. In short, Morag uses her pen to divine the truths about the oppressed and victimized sections of the people. In her writings she raises her voice against colonialism and authoritarianism. In effect, she becomes a spokesperson of Laurence's post colonial nationalism.

Morag Gunn has never allowed any male to dominate her at any time of her life. They include her step-father Christie Skeleton, Chas, Daniel McRaith and Harold. She shares mostly her creator's viewpoint "Boys are generally mean. Those girls, who have a hope of pleasing them, try. They who haven't a hope, either stay out of their way or else act very tough and try to make fun of them"(78). Morag Gunn knows that unless a woman is tough, the male-dominated society will treat her like a doormat. As she think aloud " If you want to make yourself into a doormat...I declare unto you that there is Christly host of them that I'll be only too willing to threat all over you" (120).

Unlike Hagar who remains a proud, stubborn, bitter and unreasonable woman even at the age of ninety having a tongue to cut and mock even at herself, Morag becomes a more matured and reasonable individual because of her self-exploration.

The five novels of Morag are important in many ways. They not only establish Morag as a writer but also further her development in life. Morag plays more than one role- an orphan at the age of five, adopted daughter of Christie, wife of Brooke, lover of Jules, mistress of Dan and mother of Pique. The titles of the novels assume a lot of significance for they show her development. In them, Morag begins in a state of innocence and moves on progressively to being tutored by Brooke, to breathe away and become an outcast, to having a glimpse of the Eden of the past which comes alive through the Piper Gunn stories to a final state of viewing writing as divining. The symbolic river that flows both ways and which is evoked at the beginning and the end of the novel represents Morag who divines into the past and the future in order to understand herself-"Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (453). It is this silent moment in which she achieves a state of grace that she turns once again "to write the remaining private and fictional words" (453)

Morag Gunn, a Manawaka orphan,, also projects the trials and tribulations, the joys and sorrows, the comedy and tragedy of the colonial Scottish community that finds roots in Canada. "*The Diviners*" becoming a number one best-seller in the very year of its publication is an indication that Laurence did not fail in her object of projecting the need of realizing one's ethnic identity. She is not just an ethnic Canadian writer in a provincial society, but one who speaks for her nation and country.

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