CONCLUSION
CHAPTER VIII

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This study 'The Canadian Fiction of Margaret Laurence brings out the value of Laurence's work and its relevance to contemporary literature and society. Laurence's novels are paradigmatic of the concerns of all Canadians, male and female. The search for an individual identity is paradigmatic of the constant search for the elusive Canadian identity. The fictional prairie town of Manawaka is created through the five novels wherein wilderness is present as a feature of environment and available as metaphor or symbolic space for the exploration of her protagonists.

The first chapter in the thesis has dealt with the biographical sketch of Margaret Laurence and the influences that shaped her fiction. Laurence is a Canadian writer solidly rooted in SouthWestern Manitoba, which is the setting of Neepawa, her hometown and Manawaka, her fictional one. This chapter elaborates on the social influences that helped to form Laurence, from her early exposure to anti-colonialism through the students' politics of her Winnipeg period and the culture shock of Africa, to the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Chapter two 'The Thematic Web of Margaret Laurence' refers to the themes that inform her fiction. Although Laurence concentrates on people, the sensual appeal in the landscape is always felt. The theme of the conquest of land is linked to the theme of the imprisoned spirit. Laurence's primary theme is freedom, a concept that has psychological, spiritual and political ramifications. The quest for freedom, the relationships of equality and understanding, for the survival of the spirit with dignity and love. These Laurentian themes reflect the emotional involvement with socio-political problems, which Laurence believes to be essential for the
novelist. The themes of freedom and survival relate both to the social and external world and to the spiritual inner one. They are themes, which Laurence sees as both political and religious. The relationship of the past to the present, roots, ancestors are some of the other themes which inform Laurence’s fiction. Her theme of freedom in the political sense concerns the search for the Canadian identity and her concern for the Metis in Canada.

Laurence’s first Canadian novel is discussed in the third chapter. Laurence starts off the Manawaka sequence by placing at its centre ninety year old Hagar Shipley. Hagar’s great flaw is her pride, her instinct to rebel, and her refusal to give or accept love, her inability to communicate. Hagar's problems are universal and as such she stands for Everyman. The theme of freedom and the subthemes of communication, survival, pride as isolating wilderness and redemption are brought out through the character of Hagar Shipley. We also get our first view of Manawaka, its tight social hierarchy, its legacy of stubborn strength and scorn for weakness, its reverence for ancestry. Throughout the novel Laurence contrasts things natural with things artificial, foreign or imposed by civilisation. The former are irradicable, timeless and essential while the latter, are ephemeral, superficial and lifeless. In psychological terms, she contrasts conscious and unconsciousness experience.

The fourth chapter entitled ‘Sisters’ Narratives’ is the continuation of the psychological dilemma fundamental to The Stone Angel. In A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, Rachel Cameron and Stacey MacAindra are the next set of women protagonists. The theme of freedom, communication, division of selves, human alienation and isolation, personal identity, and the case of women in a male-dominated society are brought out through the character of Rachel Cameron, a spinster school teacher. Besides being a psychological study, A Jest of God is also a representation of the socio-historical forces in Canada and Canada’s relation to Great Britain. While Hagar is old and ugly and Rachel is neurotic, self-obsessed, Stacey of The Fire-Dwellers is a housewife and mother who is prey to myriads of threatening horrors which are both real as well as imagined. She is a fire dweller trapped in the flames of modern society. The dilemmas of personal identity knowledge and assurance of oneself and of communication as the fragile but precious means of confirming identity continue in The Fire-Dwellers. Stacey is Everyman and Everywoman in North American urban society.
The eight stories that compose *A Bird in the House* are the subject matter of chapter five. The stories reveal a society through its precocious product and critic. They trace Vanessa McLeod’s growth to maturity depicted as an understanding of herself and her heritage. The main motivation of these stories was to exorcise the powerful demons of Laurence’s own past, particularly Grandfather Simpson who had inspired in her so much bitterness when she was growing up. As such the autobiographical element is dominant in these stories. Inner freedom is again the dominant theme here. *A Bird in the House* is an integral part of the Manawaka works as they have evolved. The stories make a unique contribution to Canadian literature, in a particular Canadian time and place, under the deadening blows of the Depression and drought of the thirties and into the early years of the Second World War.

Chapter six *The Diviners* is an analysis of the last of the Manawaka novels. The novel culminates and closes the circle of the Manawaka works. It overflows with ideas about life, about life in Canada and about life in Canada as experienced by a woman. The novel clarifies the ideas expressed in the earlier books and also expresses those ideas for which Laurence never previously found a suitable fictional embodiment. *The Diviners* comes to grips with currently debated issues: the search for a Canadian identity; the discrimination encountered by women, the unjust treatment of native people, ecology, psychic and economic alienation, struggle, growth and hope. With *The Diviners* the wheel comes full circle. The five Manawaka works all interweave and fit together. *The Diviners* is the story of a people and a country and not simply and individual.

Manawaka, the small prairie town in Manitoba which has emerged through the five books, has been discussed in chapter seven. The creation of Manawaka—besides being an unique artistic achievement—acquires importance and significance since it provides the textual space for the imaginative revision of Canada’s cultural dependencies namely, the search for Canadian Identity (political freedom) and women’s search for inner freedom (women’s liberation).
Laurence fits her female heroines from the Manawaka cycle into her thematic pattern and reemphasizes that freedom and survival are simultaneously social and spiritual states, hence both political and religious themes. Her political development towards a greater self-consciousness of the rights of individuals, nations and groups to possess their heritage and work out their own destiny seems inevitable. Manawaka is reinvented by every narrator in her own idiom, from ninety year old Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* to the middle aged narrators of the other fictions, all of whom are engaged in coming to terms with the past, recalling a childhood place from which they have moved away. Manawaka also possesses, implies and constantly reveals beneath its surface the fourth dimension of time and the timelessness of men and women as the victims and prisoners of the institutions they have made for their own survival and of the endless stumbling pilgrimage of the Tribe of Man towards God. Manawaka is indeed Laurence’s vision of human nature. As a symbol of human divisiveness whose inhabitants are separated by pride and greed, Manawaka is an inner and outer world and an inescapable one. The achievement of each of Laurence’s protagonists is that finally she stands and faces and so triumphs over the Manawakas within.

Laurence’s theme of freedom in the political sense concerns the search for the Canadian identity and her concern for the Metis in Canada. Cultural nationalism and women’s liberation (inner freedom) dovetail in Laurence’s Canadian fiction. For a better understanding of these issues the Appendices will offer some background information on the following. A) The Canadian Quest for Identity B) The Metis C) The concept of Wilderness D) Connections between cultural nationalism and Women’s liberation.

Thus we see that the points argued in this thesis centre round the principal concerns in Laurence’s Canadian fiction. Broadly speaking, Laurence’s Canadian fiction concerns the Canadian search for identity. The old identity questions ‘Who am I’, ‘Where did I come from’? Where I am going?” are translated in terms of the search for an interpersonal understanding of the self. Family, roots and ancestors are the sub themes.
Margaret Laurence having witnessed the naked effects of colonization through her African experience is able to better understand her culture’s dilemma of identity consequenced by Canada’s colonial experience. In the fictional quests for self-discovery and self-actualization of her women protagonists, she metaphorically problematizes Canada’s similar quest. As Laurence resolves her protagonists’ dilemma of identity through the process of their coming to terms with their past, she provides, in fictional terms, a viable mode to resolve the Canadian dilemma which like that of her protagonists, issues from a fractured and conflictual relationship which is caused by the colonial experience.

The multiplicity and heterogeneity of Canadian cultures give rise to an attempt to look for regional identities as an alternative to the goal of seeking a homogeneous national identity. Laurence creates the fictional prairie town of Manawaka through five books. A sense of place pervades the novel, where the prairie depicted as either garden or wilderness provides a focus for opposing values. The landscape by its very nature suggests a moral or psychological drama in which characters and the town itself engage. In Manawaka, wilderness is present as a feature of environment and available as metaphor or symbolic space for the exploration of female difference. In Manawaka, the enclosed community defines itself against the surrounding wilderness. Laurence’s heroines who are brought out in such borderland territory retain their doubleness of vision in their adult lives. Their perceptions that the wilderness as place or state of mind is not something that can be entirely shut out. Although they try to find escape into the city, they realise that they carry Manawaka within them.

Laurence’s novels are paradigmatic of the concerns of all Canadians, male and female. The search for an individual identity is paradigmatic of the constant search for the elusive ‘Canadian Society’. The alienation and fear of domination of a woman in a patriarchal society is paradigmatic of both Canada’s residual colonial legacy and Canada’s fear of social, military and cultural domination. Laurence has chosen women protagonists to put across her points of view since close parallels can be seen between the historical situation of women and of Canada as a nation for women’s experience of the power politics of gender. Their problematic
relation to patriarchal traditions of authority have affinities with Canada's attitude to the cultural imperialism of the U.S as well as its ambivalence towards its European inheritance.

The colonial mentality and Canada's recent emergence from it have close affinities with women's gendered perceptions of themselves for the revivification of the feminist Movement since the 1960s has created the conditions for a change in women's consciousness as they struggle to find their own voices through which to challenge traditions, which have marginalized and excluded them from power. Looked at from the outside, there is a strong connection between the preoccupation of nationalism and Laurence's fiction. The ideological coincidence coupled with the fact that women's stories provide models for the story of Canada's national identity makes Laurence's Canadian fiction meaningful. The feminine resistance on a need for revision and a resistance to open confrontation or revolution might be said to characterise Canada's national image at home and abroad, while women's stories about procedures for self discovery which are as yet incomplete may be seen to parallel the contemporary Canadian situation.

Laurence's Canadian novels are centred on a series of striking individuals. Out of the Manawaka background, common to many of us and within the imaginative range of all of us, is a timespan of almost a century. Each of these women is battered by events, but also moves of her own free will towards self-recognition, self-acceptance and the awareness of a limited freedom. They endure and they grow, gradually shaking off debilitating guilts and fears and learning to accept themselves as well as others with tolerance and love. That same journey is, of course, the necessary primary foundation of any individual's liberation. Margaret Laurence's gift to us is that they come indomitably through the pages; with laughter, with bravery and with reassurance, our ancestors, our sisters and our friends.