The quest for identity is not a peculiarly Canadian problematic. However, what distinguishes the Canadian predicament is that this preoccupation with the quest, or to put it in the words of Dick Harrison, the "essential act of 'naming,'" remained incomplete for a long period. The discourse on Canadian identity began to be articulated most vociferously in the post 1960s years. Four novelists of this period, namely, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe, and Robert Kroetsch, have attempted to reckon with the Canadian quest problematic. Margaret Laurence witnessed the effects of colonization through her African experience and thus was in a position to understand her culture's dilemmas of identity. In the fictional quests of self-discovery and self-actualization of her woman protagonists she problematizes the national quest. Her protagonists' dilemmas of identity are resolved through the processes of their coming to terms with their past. George Woodcock refers to "possessing the land" which is concerned with the basic functions of returning over time, of examining the foundations of history, of exorcising ancient guilts and celebrating ancient heroism, and of giving spirit to the land. Margaret Laurence speaks about the great need "to possess our own land, to know our own heritage, to value
ourselves in relation to a world community." Shaped by the insights she gathered by means of her exposure to and encounter with African cultures during the formative period of her writing, Laurence marks in her Manawaka fiction a transition from the African setting, though the themes that obtain in the African writing such as rootlessness, dispossession and loss continue to be integral to her fictions about Canada. Africa provides her the necessary distancing and an objective perspective in regard to the Canadian problematic of the quest for identity. As Laurence points out, the writer has got one theme, that is, inner freedom achieved by coming to terms with the past. She commits herself in fictional terms to reclaim the indigenous cultural heritage and establish a bond between the past and the present especially in novels which are in terms of fictional setting, an amalgam of many prairie towns and hence a "town of the mind." Laurence's preoccupation with creating a strong sense of place is linked with her desire to recover indigenous socio-cultural and mythic heritage of her region. Thereby the true value for the individual of the inherited past within which to locate the present is shown. The study aims at exploring the dimensions of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka fiction by examining her character portrayal in order to see how far the various manifestations of the quest for identity are inscribed her fiction.
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