CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
A major preoccupation in the writings of Margaret Laurence is exploration of ancestral past and its far reaching consequences. Canada is a young nation without ancient tradition or history. Margaret Atwood observes in The Journals of Susanna Moodie¹ that Canadians are in a sense immigrants though they were born there. In the Canadian context, the search for roots therefore becomes an imperative necessity. In the multicultural framework of Canada, there is a growing acceptance of the fact that in its diversity of race and culture lies its rich heritage. Margaret Laurence is a writer engaged in fictionalizing her personal past and becoming thereby the preserver of the collective history of her people.

David Stouck, in his Major Canadian Authors, calls Laurence the first writer to create a feeling of tradition among Canadian novelists.² This creation of a feeling of tradition is not the primary mission of her work, but a by-product of the intensity of understanding she brought to her characters and their predicaments. Her work invigoratingly recreates the Canadian tradition in fiction - the evocation of Canadian Scottish mythology, the small prairie town, search for home, and the language of home.

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Like Thomas Hardy, R.K. Narayan, and Faulkner, Laurence fabricated a fictional setting for all her novels and stories written out of her Canadian background. This she calls Manawaka, a world of everyman. But its particularities are emphatically Canadian. Margaret Laurence calls it is simply itself, "a town of the mind". Grounded in a small western town, her people move out into the wider world carrying Manawaka with them with its constraints and inhibitions and also its sense of roots and of ancestors. Manawaka incorporates the general geographical and physical features of the town of Neepawa. But Manawaka is not Neepawa. Its geography, the details of its situation, its landmarks, and its people depend on Margaret Laurence's experience of Neepawa and on her ability to store in memory and to transmute what she knew and what she felt of it into a created fictional world. She creates a strong sense of place and brings her fictional characters to life as much as possible. She attempts to place these individuals within the historical context of their time and place.

Laurence's preoccupation with creating this strong sense of place is linked with her desire to recover the indigenous socio-cultural and mythic heritage of her region and by extension, her nation, and thereby overcome the sense of a break with the past that, as she had seen in Africa,
disallowed the acquisition of a whole identity. The fictional world of her Manawaka novels, therefore, enables her to see for herself and show to her people the true value of the inherited past and thereby acquire a true perspective within which to locate the present. This is necessary because, as she says in Long Drums and Cannons, the past shows the present "its own face".  

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels are *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974). In these novels, Laurence illuminates the past of the 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 piece of social history and ground for some sort of cultural continuity with a strong sense of mission.

Margaret Laurence explores the themes of the quest for self-actualization and self-assertion, survival, and acceptance of heritage in her Manawaka novels. In this context, the theme of survival becomes quite an important one in her novels. In all of them the protagonists have to pass through various ordeals in order to survive. In their very different ways and out of their very different dilemmas, they find within themselves, an ability to survive, to go on living. Margaret Laurence says, referring to her themes,
"the theme of survival not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others" is inevitable for a writer who grew up during the depression of the thirties.

Margaret Laurence's protagonists are women. She probably understands women better than men and she has certain things which she gets only through women. She examines the dilemmas of identity and attempts to discover in fictional terms modes to reckon with women's problems. Laurence's feminism is not the man-hating variety. The feminist archetype she posits is that of a woman who resolves her identity crisis by relating herself intimately with her roots and her community. Her nationalism is quite different. Her people did not have any territorial ambitions. They simply want to possess and their own country. In her, therefore, Laurence displays this kind of nationalism by creating a strong sense of place and community in the invented "town of the mind," Manawaka.

Survival becomes something of an inner awakening. It leads to a miraculous realization that one is not a victim and perhaps has never really been one. The inner awakening in each case necessitates a reconciliation with the past and an acknowledgement of the inherent bond between the past and
the present. Laurence asserts the need to come to terms with the past. She says, "My writing then has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value - which in the case of my people (by which I mean the total community, not just my particular family), was a determination to survive against whatever odds".7

The present study aims at the exploration of the theme of survival and the theme of self-assertion at different levels in the four Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence, namely, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Five-Dwellers, and The Diviners. Margaret Laurence's protagonists are articulate, sensitive, self-reflective, dispossessed, and suffer from a sense of inadequacy in their present that placed them in a quandary regarding their identity. The women protagonists undertake a voyage of exploration, towards acquiring an adequate self-perception. The novelist utilises thoughts, memories, memory-bank movies, and inner monologues to constantly to keep us aware of the action unfolding within the mind of the protagonist.

The Stone Angel is Margaret Laurence's first Manawaka novel written out of her Canadian background. This novel relates the theme of family heritage that runs
throughout the remaining Manawaka novels. It is a pathetic tale of the narrator-protagonist Hagar Shipley, a ninety year old woman, who wanders in a wilderness and undertakes a halting, unwilling, rebellious journey towards self-knowledge. Her pride and stubborn will to spite her father and assert her rebellions will leads her to marry Bram Shipley and yet it is this very rebellious and unbending nature of hers that disallows her to acknowledge or reciprocate Bram's love. She is a proud, bitter, sick, and frightened old woman with a whip-lash tongue to mock even at herself. She lives with her son Marvin and his wife Doris. The present depicts old Hagar’s determined efforts to refuse to accept her infirmity and avoid going to the Nursing Home for the old, Silverheads, although it causes untold misery to her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris who are also getting old. She runs away to a deserted fish cannery from where she is rescued and hospitalised. Dwelling in isolation, she comes to terms with the past in order to acquire self-awareness and a new awareness of the family as she is sustained and made monstrous by her pride. Hagar's journey across time to her origins enables her to locate the present in a true perspective. Hagar emerges out of her self-inflicted isolation and alienation cleansing the personal bias which made her a victim and she is almost reconciled to the family against whom she had fought all her life. Hagar
discovers her self-awareness in the hospital-bed at the point of death. That is the sad paradox with which story ends. At last, her soul is "released into an inner freedom".

A Jest of God is the second Manawaka novel. It explores and explodes the myth of spinsterhood. She presents Rachel Cameron, a woman struggling to come to terms with love, with death, with herself, and her world. Everytime she lacks in confidence and poise. She is abnormally timid. All these hinder her from establishing meaningful relationships with men as well as with other women. Rachel is a victim of low self-esteem who thinks of herself as dry and empty. The conservative society of Manawaka and her exaggeration of things give room for her low self-esteem. She wants to escape from society as it repressed her feelings. Rachel's life is conditioned by her mother who governs her feelings and activities to a large extent. Several emblematic episodes like her realizing the childishness of her own mother and her false pregnancy are seen to lead the way to an emotional release. Rachel faces an archetypal situation which distorts her sense of identity. In the end, she makes a discovery of the self which is a symbolic completion of rite de passage. She is reborn and can cope with the imperialistic forces symbolised by her mother. In her new birth, Rachel acquires a holistic sense of self.
The Fire-Dwellers, the third Manawaka novel, epitomizes the dehumanizing, hellish state of urban existence. Margaret Laurence in this novel depicts the plight of Stacey Macaindra, the protagonist, a middle-aged woman, who became a victim of the bedlam in which she lives. Her consciousness of the chaotic wide world batters her sensibilities from all sides. The milieu is grotesque due to the encroachment of meaningless violence. Stacey recognises the nagging urgency to find wholeness in the oppressive landscape of meaningless violence and insane fragmentation. She quits her house and makes friendship with Luke. This journey of escape from the excrescences of city life gives Stacey the freedom and joy for which she has been yearning. She stoops to accept her own kind of sensitivity, her own ways of apprehending things or occurrences in isolation. Stacey gives a twist to her orientation towards her dual landscape by recycling the negative aspects of experience by instituting change at a personal level rather than at the level of society. She gives scope for optimistic preoccupations of life and returns home. Margaret Laurence in this novel presents the theme of survival.

The Diviners is a culmination of the Manawaka works. Margaret Laurence explores in still greater depth the tour de force undertaken by Morag Gunn, the
narrator-protagonist, who was always dispossessed since her childhood and who suffers from a sense of inadequacy in her present that places her in a quandary regarding her identity. Morag Gunn, the victimized individual of identity crisis, undertakes a voyage of exploration towards acquiring an adequate self-perception. She comprehends it by interweaving the present and the past for a satisfactory resolution of her identity. Morag's progressive journey towards adequate self-perception illustrates quite explicitly the concept stressed by Laurence in all writings: the need to come to terms with the past for a satisfactory resolution of the dilemma of identity.

Margaret Laurence presents the culture and tradition of Manawaka in her novels. At the beginning of the novel, her heroines may be victims, but by the end they refuse to become victims. 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 selfhood and acceptance of Heritage.
REFERENCES


