CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) was born Jean Margaret Wemyss of Scots-Irish descendants. She grew up in the small prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba, Canada. In 1947 she graduated from United College (now Winnipeg University), and in the same year she married John Laurence, a civil engineer, with whom she had a daughter and a son. Her husband’s job took them to England, then Somaliland and Ghana, where they spent five years. In 1962 Margaret Laurence moved to England, with her two children, where she wrote her famous Manawaka sequence: *The Stone Angel* (1964); *A Jest of God* (1966), filmed as *Rachel, Rachel*, directed by Paul Newman and starring Joanne Woodward; *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969); *A Bird in the House* (1970); and *The Diviners* (1974). In 1972 she was made a companion of the Order of Canada and in 1977 she became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Margaret Laurence returned to Canada in 1973 and lived in Lakefield, Ontario, until her death at the age of sixty-one.

Margaret Laurence is immensely popular and quite important to modern fiction as a genre. She underwent a period of experimentation during her early years as writer in Africa. She uses domestic settings and examines the home and the family as also the loci of oppressions/suppressions. Women characters in her novels are at odds with their persona and environment. Her women characters are emotional and intellectual participants.
Women have traditionally been storytellers all over the world. They not only use the mythic sources of the epics, but also the more realistic material of family histories and memories. So does Margaret Laurence. She not only juggles with the formal tradition of social comment but also brings novel materials into her literature with vividly etched portraits of women in her community, in the process of paving way for a refreshingly new lingo. The familiar language used between women as a mode of communication is one of colonialism (patriarchy) and its aftermath, indexing changing social conditions which provide specific background to universal themes of solitude, adolescence and adulthood, sexuality, death and rebirth from the matrix of her novels and short stories.

The works of Margaret Laurence are feminist in the sense that they do represent a woman's perception and point of view in a specific way. Margaret Laurence says that she writes what she believes everyone has always known. Yet she is making a radical change in the whole literary tradition by re-telling from a woman's point of view, traditional and archetypal feminine life patterns that have been portrayed till now by male authors only. It is Laurence's very ease and comfort at being a woman and an artist in the same skin that makes her work so remarkable, so trustworthy, and so full of vision and compassion. Self-pity is never part of Laurence's own baggage, and she recognizes certain heroism in her women characters which have so much to endure but so little to complain.
Canadian literature is written and recognized in two languages, French and English. "The Literary History of Canada" sums up Canadian literature in the following words: "...‘English Canadian’ and ‘French Canadian’ are commonly used to emphasize a ‘bicultural’, certainly a bilingual situation, in a land settled by many people of many different origins."\(^1\)

Multiculturalism in a bilingual context takes on a different meaning, an exact point of divergence rather than convergence. In a bilingual situation like Canada, it is the state that empowers two languages, the Anglophone and the Francophone and hence two cultures: the English and the French as the canon. In the process of effacing all other languages and their cultures, such an endeavor in fact, necessitates a strong resistance for the flowering of polyculturalism. Perhaps it is this issue which makes the study of the literatures in English of Canada interesting, especially that of the “marginalized” individuals. Canada is phallocentric in nature where sexual colonialism operates, which refers to the relationship between sex and power as Kate Millet puts it. Through this system, a most ingenious form of interior colonization occurs. To be a woman in such a situation is to occupy a subordinate position in an androcentric set—up. A sexist culture exists where there is an imbalance of power between the two sexes, man being the colonizer and woman the colonized. This “(m)othering” of woman, in the words of Simon de Beavoir “is not imposed of necessity by natural
feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of education and social tradition under the purposeful control of men”

Feminist movement under the mark of man had to change. The geographical positioning of Canada being the neighbour of a super power such as the United States of America, feels the domineering presence of the USA ubiquitously. The Canadian dilemma is also perhaps linked to the psycho-social and economic colonization of Canada by the USA. Naturally, it becomes very vital then for Canada to establish its own identity. Moreover, the marginal position of women in Canada corresponds to the marginality of Canada in the international horizon. Being herself marginalized, the Canadian woman feels closer to the cultural milieu of Canada than Canadian man.

A close study of Laurence’s novels reveals that her focus is so much on “the inner world of feeling and sensibility that even the impact of feminist movements has generated more of poetic or lyrical articulation of the inner tensions of women than social documentaries voicing the cause of women.”

Margaret Laurence is solidly rooted in Southwestern Manitoba, the setting of Neepawa, her home town, and of Manawaka, her fictional one, her characters “talk Canadian”; in their idiom and turns of speech we hear Canadian as distinct from “American” English. Moreover, in their dilemmas, her characters move us through four generations of the history of that country, from the western pioneer experience of Jason
Currie and Thimothy Connor through the two world wars and the Depression, to the contemporary setting and problems of Stacey Cameron and Morag Gunn. The powerful impact of her novels in that country, *The Stone Angel* alone has sold 78,000 copies in the New Canadian Library edition—reflects the identification her readers feel with her themes and her characters. To call her simply "Canadian" or more restrictedly by region as a "prairie writer" is too narrowly nationalistic. She is regularly published in England and America as well as in Canada; various of her works have been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish, and because of *Long Drums and Cannons*, her study of Nigerian novelists and playwrights, she is known and respected among students of African literature everywhere.

Margaret Laurence belongs to the most gifted writers of the emergent nations, countries which like Canada, must find and recognize their own cultures and their own voices. In her convictions about writer's place in society and in the themes of her fiction, she is particularly linked to Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, and Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott and George Lamming of the West Indies. She would agree with Achebe's strong sense of social mission in a changing, postcolonial world that the writer cannot be expected to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. She is equally challenged by the demands and the responsibilities of the art and the craft of fiction.
The themes of alienation and survival are central to the works of the Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence. She repudiates the fragmentation and alienation afflicting her society and feels that the quest for spiritual survival is a necessary antidote to it. The characters in her novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration “which is imagined as a freedom to love, to share, to meet, to touch. Such a state....is our spiritual home, the human goal the grail.”

A spiritual void has been created by the erosion of religious faith in modern Western technological society. According to George Whalley, vital communal myths have been replaced by

...debased substitutes under the pressure of obscurant science because we blandly imagine that everything is quite easy to explain, that there is nothing supernatural. So it comes that we are too smart to be taken in by myth. Cosmic impertinence of this flippant and hubristic kind does not promise well for the fate of Western Civilization.

Canada’s colonial past complicates matters even further for, till the past few decades, Canadians seemed familiar with the “there” and “then” but suspected that “here” and “now” was a kind of spiritual limbo. Since “nations are to a large extent invented by their poets and novelists,”
Canadian writers like those in the postcolonial countries of Africa and Asia, have been involved in the exciting process of fostering a national identity. The writers hope that their myths which are rooted in their socio-historic reality will be shared by their audience. Nations and individuals must consciously indulge in the process of self-discovery and self-definition. During a conversation with Margaret Laurence in 1970, Robert Kroetsch said:

Canadians now understand this exciting and painful experience of meeting themselves. We used to have to read everybody else's literature. All of a sudden, here are books about us!

... Well, may be, it's more comfortable to read about other people. Reading about us is like writing about us: you discover our own complexity, our own contradictions."

The novels of Margaret Laurence are among those which powerfully articulate the problems inherent in being 'Canadian'. Laurence is acutely conscious of the fact that since myths are "clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life" they help create a deeper awareness of it. Laurence says that her stay in Africa taught her much about the potency of myth and the value of ancestral connection and adds that we human beings have an incredibly basic need to create myths about ourselves. Myth making is a vital and necessary human
activity, for, a myth is the structure of image or narrative in which an apprehension of reality and of the supernatural expresses itself.

Irving Layton asserts that every artist is an incurable mythologist. The highly individualized characters created by writers invariably take on archetypal dimensions. Laurence is a self-conscious mythologist in Layton’s sense of the term. Laurence feels that communal myths which aid the passing on of the authentic heritage are necessary to help overcome feelings of alienation and despair.

Laurence is quite obviously a profoundly religious writer in the best sense of the term. Like Freud and Jung she seems to be suggesting that “religious experience can be a numinous one, stabilizing old neuroses and so accomplishing a kind of psychological salvation.”

Having emotionally imbibed the United Church tradition (Methodism mixed with Scots Presbyterianism), all her works reiterate the feeling that there is a mystery at the core of life which may or may not be referred to as God and her love for all things great and small made her actively campaign for nuclear disarmament during her lifetime. During an interview with Donald Cameron, Laurence says that there is a great deal in the Bible which moves her very deeply and, it expresses “certain symbolic truths about the human dilemma and about mankind. The expression of the various facts of human life and of human life searching for a consciousness greater than its own that is, in God.”

Like in most stories in the Old Testament, in each of her works there is a movement
from alienation towards order and meaning: "...not the making or imposing of order on chaotic fragments, but the men and women to apprehend." Life, she says, is extraordinarily and in a way wonderfully formless, and yet the whole world, if examined minutely has got an incredible form. Laurence implies that an encounter with the mythic world is greatly aided by religious faith. The archetypal figures in the Bible, for instance, help us to sense the archetypal mainsprings of our own being, which life buried deep in our unconscious. The world of myth can be apprehended not by the conscious but by the unconscious parts of the psyche. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell poetically describes this unique phenomenon thus:

> The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind—whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity; for the human kingdom, beneath the floor of the comparatively neat little dwelling that we call our consciousness, goes down into unsuspected Aladdin caves. There not only jewels but also dangerous jinn abide; the inconvenient or resisted psychological powers that we have not thought or dared to integrate into our lives. And they remain unsuspected, or on the other hand, some chance word, the smell
of a landscape, the taste of a cup of tea, or the glance of an eye may touch a magic spring, and then dangerous messengers begin to appear in the brain. These are dangerous because they threaten the fabric of the security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too, for they carry keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of self.\textsuperscript{11}

Though our security is temporarily threatened during the process of self-discovery, we are “awakened” to a “bolder, cleaner, more spacious, and fully human life.”\textsuperscript{12} Discovery of self helps the quester understand the transpersonal dimensions of the human psyche, overcome alienation from others, and arrive at the phenomenological realization that ‘self’ is indeed a place co-extensive with the environment. Though all the protagonists struggle to overcome their alienated conditions, only a few succeed. Stacey (\textit{The Fire-Dwellers}), Rachel (\textit{The Jest of God}) do not seem to be able to escape from alienating circles while Hagar (\textit{The Stone Angel}) and Morag (\textit{The Diviners}) seem very close to self-realization, which Jung refers to as “individuation.” Though some seem to succeed and others do not, Laurence respects and wants us to respect each one of them and regard them as “unique and irreplaceable.”\textsuperscript{13} By portraying the inner
journeys of their spiritual heroes as truthfully as possible, Laurence challenges us as readers to be truly human.

The three major obstacles that the protagonists encounter in their quests are restrictions posed by family, by society in general, and by institutionalized religion. In successfully resisting the conventions, the protagonists are true to themselves. This quality distinguishes them from other women who are subsumed in their familial and social roles. The urge to know the "real" self sets the protagonists in the path of self-realization. The quest has both spiritual and psychological implications. The quest also strengthens the sense of their identities. It also distinguishes them from other people with no sense of self. Laurence portrays the contrast and conflict between the two categories which have moral and psychological repercussion. Thus, the questioning women are spiritually and psychologically superior, though they are far from successful in the social sphere. Their acceptance of society results from their acceptance of the spiritual and psychological aspects of life.

The fiction of Laurence is marked by a neat dovetailing of themes and techniques. The concepts of "doubling" and "time" highlight the themes from the point of view of writing techniques. "Doubling" is a psychological concept which can be related to the idea of true/false selves and the concept of circular time highlights the entire process of self-realization. By projecting time from the present to the near historical past, to the distant mythical/archetypal past, and by making "real" the
inner and psychological time, the writer attempts to portray time as a continuum and break temporal restraints. Similarly, by offering an entire range of perspectives ranging from the mythical/archetypal to national, regional and individual, she diminishes the distinctions of spatial reality. Sri Chandrasekhara Saraswathi, in his book The Vedas, concludes that at the point of self-realization, there is freedom from "the play of time and space."  

Laurence may be termed humanist in her affirmative stance regarding the essential dignity of human beings within a complex reality. She maintains the existential-humanist position in all her works. In her fiction, it has psychological and social implications, taking into account both the individual and society. In her interview with Bernice Lever, Laurence states that in a social process and in the interaction between individual and society, "there's so much circumstance or fate. There are always things trying to limit your freedom or limit your chances to survival."  

Secondly, the quest for identity in Laurence's novels is the archetypal quest for identity shared by many English Canadian works. This trait also offers comparison between Laurence and writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott and George Lamming, all of whom are committed to a strong "sense of mission". As Clara Thomas observes, these writers attempt "to explore and illuminate the past of their peoples in order to bring a sense of
Finally, Laurence carries this search for identity to a larger frame to embrace a nation's search for identity, the postcolonial search and on to the archetypal quest. To cite an example, Kenneth Hughes in his article "Politics and A Jest of God" shows how Rachel's character can be read as "individual, as woman and as the symbolic representation, the type of Canada in a process of transformation. Readers in other countries will readily see how Rachel embodies different aspects of their own post-colonial experience." The same may be said of Hagar who in the end becomes "everybody's grandmother" crossing boundaries of age, race, culture and nation. Thus the underlying quest of the protagonists is an attempt to accept the past and understand the present in order to shape the future. Arguably, this expanding movement from the individual outwards to embrace humanity at large accounts for Laurence's creation of universal concerns within the space of an individual, regional, specifically Canadian identity.

Margaret Laurence attempts to deconstruct social reality. The process of deconstruction of social reality by the protagonists is seen in their questioning and rejection of accepted familial, social and religious norms. The male-dominated social conventions of marriage and chastity for women are deconstructed and accomplished through the creation of spinsters like Rachel and adulterous relationships maintained by married women like Stacey and Morag.
Laurence is highly critical of the superficial bourgeois norms of the Manawaka society. In presenting accurately the changes taking place, even while presenting the familiar landmarks, Laurence makes Manawaka a living community. She shares this trait with writers like R.K. Narayan, William Faulkner, Stephen Leacock, Robertson Davies, and Alice Munroe. In creating a dynamic town, Laurence emphasizes the role of place as an identity marker. Although Laurence subverts the norms of Manawaka, she seems to rely more on the need to adapt and reappropriate existing norms. A very good example of this is her treatment of the Metis in her Manawaka novels. Hagar convincingly echoes the popular views of the Manawaka society about the Tonnerres who live on “the wrong side of the tracks” of the town in The Stone Angel. For Rachel, it is the town’s distinction between natives, settlers and immigrants that explains the difference between her and Nick in The Jest of God. For Stacey and Vanessa, there are brief moments of questioning of norms in their relationships with Val and Piquette respectively. In the Morag-Jules-Pique relationship, there is a culmination of the need for unity and communication between the settlers and the natives.

What begins as the difference in the use of language between Hagar and John, Bram and Lazarus Tonnerre, ends in Morag accepting the songs and tales as heritage. Through the tales and songs, Laurence creates an identity specifically Canadian and regional. Yet, it is not narrow parochialism, for the attempt here is to project something that is
common and necessary to humanity at large. The use of myth may also be seen as an attempt to discover things mythical/archetypal and to enhance the presentation of the individual. This leads us to the question of psychic reality, for the archetypal is but a collective manifestation of the unconscious psyche in Jungian terms. The first step in the quest for a psychic reality involves a movement away from society, which results in alienation. The positive aspect of alienation is the objectivity it gives the artists and their characters to view the societies they condemn. As Jack Lindsay points out in his article "The Alienated Australian Intellectual," alienation in this context is to be understood "in the simple sense that they feel quite outside the thing they describe; they are cut-off and view the idiot scene from the other side of the asylum-wall." This objectivity in Laurence, because of a strong sense of place, myths and heritage, heightens the effect of self-realization by placing the individuals within a larger national/archetypal framework. It enables Laurence to cross the barriers of narrow parochialism and nationalism, for she uses the very same barriers to shape a new reality from old.

The emphasis placed on the psyche by Laurence has some interesting implications to the mode of writing evident in her works. Many of the techniques used by her bring out vividly her ideas of self-realization. It is interesting to note that the concept of doubling projects the distinction made between inner/outer realities, true/false selves, which may be extended to embrace oppositions, such as male/female,
self/society, spirit/matter, mind/body etc. Likewise, the search for identity may be equated to the search for lost time. The search for time can be traced in the reliance on memory by almost all the protagonists. The narrative techniques used are the flashback and flashforward modes. If the search is extended to that of selfhood, then the time-scale is universal (devoid of usually available identity markers like family and society), involving collective memory which is archetypal in the Jungian sense. Thus the search moves outward towards social/national markers and correspondingly inward towards personal and collective unconscious which are repositories of myth.

Though Laurence is not radically feminist in her concerns, her writing is "feminine" the sense in which Helene Cixous uses the term. Before discussing the feminine mode it is important to clarify the fact that feminine is not equated to women and masculine to men. This clarification is important because the writer is a woman. She uses "the mode of introversion and passivity, the mode of Narcissus and of Orpheus, exploring the world by means of the self". These elements correspond with the elements Freud identified with the feminine: "narcissism, passivity and masochism." The narcissistic elements may be traced in the quest of the protagonists in search of themselves and this is reflected in the narratives through the use of mirror images. The passivity of the questers is revealed in their acceptance of the cosmic, suprapersonal and things beyond intellectual grasp. For Morag, it is not
the reason which provides solutions to the riddles of life and art, but her intuitive understanding of the flight of the blue heron and Royland's acceptance of his loss of magical powers. The masochistic element may be traced to the pervasiveness of suffering in the fiction of Laurence. The realization of one's sins and guilt and atoning for them parallels the confrontation of one's shadow in Jungian psychoanalytic terms. It also refers to the acceptance of one's body, one's frailties and omissions. Laurence emphasizes the need for a state of "silence, simplicity and humility" combined with intuitive powers. The feminine mode may also be found in the use of circular time which proceeds infinitely and in the reliance on myth, dreams and archetypes. The creative mind is essentially androgynous and the multicultural perspectives available to Laurence enable her to cross the barriers imposed by sex and gender.

Margaret Laurence's fiction grapples with relevant issues and problems confronted by women the "(m)othered" in phallocratic culture. In her endeavour Laurence does not take recourse to radical methods exercised by radical feminists like Kate Millet, Toril Moi, etc., but accepts dominant ideologies with reservations. To Laurence, the ideal of womanhood is androgynous wo/man rather feminine. She does not totally discard female duties like mothering, nurturing etc., but attempts through her writing to subvert conventional morality, the most radical claim being a change in male sexual behaviour, to accept woman as human being first and woman next.
REFERENCES


