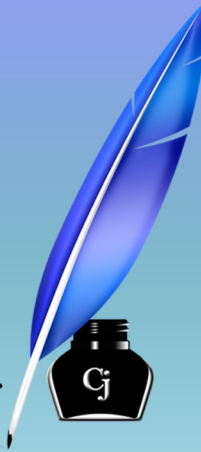


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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Portray of Northern Canada in Margaret Laurence's Fiction

Parisa Talebi

English Department

Research Scholar of Mysore University

Canada is a country which has gained importance from the beginning of the twentieth century. Canada is well known for its regions full of wilderness and the Canadians are closely connected with their land. In the 1970s, the geographical conditions of Canada were the common themes in Canadian literature, but it is worth mentioning that a tie between nature, identity and literature was strong. This paper shows the importance of nature and northern landscape of Canada in the select novels of Margaret Laurence. Laurence's novels allow the reader to explore the landscape rooted in Canada's own unique cultural reality

Introduction

Canada is a nation defined by its unique geography and climate. Canadian writers identified the land as the central aspect shaping Canadian character. Canadian landscape is a region with an evolving culture and history. Cole Harris in *"The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism"* explains: "English-speaking Canadians tend to explain themselves in terms of land and location".

Canadian writers have produced a variety of genres. Influences on Canadian writers are broad, both geographically and historically. Canadian literature is also related to the search for a national identity. National identity is related to the influence of the landscape on the Canadian's imagination. The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines landscape as "all the visible features of an area of countryside or land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal".

In her essay "Dangerous Ground", Annie Proulx argues that landscape is much more than what the landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes as being 'a portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a single glance' (2008, 12). Rather, Proulx offers her own broader definition:

Landscape is geography, archaeology, astrophysics, agronomy, agriculture, the violent character of the atmosphere, climate, black squirrels and wild oats, folded rock, bulldozers; it is jet trails and barbed wire, government land, dry stream beds; it is politics, desert wildfire, introduced species, abandoned vehicles, roads, ghost towns, nuclear test grounds, swamps, a bakery shop, mine tailings, bridges, dead dogs. Landscape is rural, urban, suburban, semirural, small town, village; it is outposts and bedroom communities; it is a remote ranch. (10)

Northrop Frye explains in "The Bush Garden" the influence of the landscape on Canadian literature and Canadian identity: "it seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is as by a series of paradoxes by the question. Who am I? Than by some such riddle as 'Where is here'?" (826). Frye emphasizes the influence of the landscape and unknown land in the discovery of a national identity.

Canada is famous for vast and inviolate nature, such as forest, prairie, and rivers. The theme of wilderness and nature are seen in the most Canadian novels. The northern Canada is

used as a background for many Canadian novels. The wild nature is depicted as being hostile and dangerous. But in female writing, landscape is portrayed as innocent and beautiful. In some novels such as *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence and *Bear* by Marian Engel, the protagonist's journey to north landscape is a quest for self-recognition.

The north is symbolic of Canada's beautiful nature. Louis Edmond Hamelin explains "The presence of the north is always around; it is background of the picture without which Canada would not be what it is" In *Grace* 1993, 68) Also William C. Wonders in his work *Canada's Changing North* states that "few other geographic regions are subject to such widely differing interpretations" (2003 Xii) North is much more than a geographical place.

The role of landscape and its influence on the protagonists in Canadian literature is discussed in this article. It also shows the relation between women and men, women and society, women and their families. The issue of identity in relationship with the landscape is also discussed in this work; the very need for spiritual search which makes life meaningful and tolerable is also emphasized.

Margaret Laurence is one of the most influential writers of Western Canada. Laurence started writing when she was young. Laurence started writing stories from the age of seven. She wrote all through her high school and college years and worked after graduation, for the *Winnipeg Citizen*, a labor daily. Her first work was not published until the Somaliland years.

In 1954, the British Protectorate of Somaliland published *A Tree for Poverty*, Laurence's translations of Somali folktales and poetry. Africa transformed Laurence from an idealistic young western liberal into a mature woman who saw at first hand the problems of emergent nations, empathized with their peoples and read deeply into their history and literature.

The present paper tries to investigate selected novels of Margaret Laurence. Laurence is a regional writer who wrote from her own place and told its story. Laurence believed that Canada's location is the ideal location for the continuation of searching their ancestor's identity.

Laurence's first published fiction, "*Uncertain Flowering*", a short story, was published in a Whit Burnett anthology in 1954. She subsequently married Jack Laurence, and they moved to Africa. Her first African novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), is set in Ghana. She created a multi-faceted Canadian experience through four generations: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dweller* (1969), *A Bird in the House* and *The Diviners* (1974). She was bestowed with many significant literary awards such as the Molson Prize, and honorary degrees by many universities. Her five works set in the Canadian prairie town of Manawaka constitute the major body of Laurence's fiction.

Margaret Laurence created the prairie town for "every man and every woman" (Thomas 1975). Laurence describes a fictional town that can be any prairie town in Canada. Laurence's respect to fictional landscape is clear in her Manawaka series. Laurence in "A Place to Stand On," the first essay of *Heart of a Stranger*, explains the connections between her real, personal hometown and her fictional "town of the mind":

Manawaka is not my hometown of Neepawa it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley ... In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much anyone prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is

simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, ... which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share (HS, 3-4).

Manawaka is an inspiration place for Margaret Laurence as Riding Mountain, Clear Lake. Manawaka's river is the symbol of life for Laurence's protagonists. When we read the Manawaka series, the town of Neepawa is shaped geographically in our mind as River Street and Japonica Street. Landscape of Manitoba is an imaginary place, in which one experiences a combination of history and personal experience. The protagonists' identity is shaped by their connection to the place where they are living.

Landscape in Laurence's novels implies a spiritual search. Spirituality for her finds meaning through presence in nature. Laurence's description of nature is more to help her in coming to terms with herself which is tormented by the incongruities of society. Social life is restrictive. The double standard of morality by the society which borders on lies and hypocrisy bothers her. Therefore, resorting to nature, she finds refuge both for peace of mind and for reconsideration of all wrong things in the urban life. Urban life centers around financial interest. This kills the soul of humanity. So, nature as part of the landscape serves as a re-invigorating force for her and give her a new life.

Therefore, it can be said that landscape for her meant new possibilities and new ideas that can be extracted through a determination in dragging out those meanings from it. If we call this determination as spiritualism, we can also conclude that landscape, spirituality and identity for Canada all happen at one time. It is obvious that landscape by itself has no meaning and it is the human spirit which tries to attribute its qualities to nature and in return, gets inspired by nature. It also is obvious that human beings should feel obliged to consider nature or landscape in that light and should have the will for reconstructing their societies in new ways inspired by spiritual connection to nature.

Laurence's spiritual experience helped her in writing mystical novels. Her spiritual experience with nature is actually that of self-contemplation which led her to state of isolation in which searching a true self became her aim. Isolation started with her life in society and became more tangible by cutting her last ties with it in her contact with nature. But, this complete isolation is a difficult phase of self-contemplation towards her reconciliation with society.

Her first famous novel, *The Stone Angel*, depicts Hagar's spiritual and psychological journey towards self-understanding. Assertion of the self and identity are the common themes of her novels. Independence and self awareness are the other important themes in her novels. Margaret Laurence, in her essay "Immigrants in Prairie Cities", describes her prairie town :

A strange place it was, that place where the world began. A place of incredible happening, splendors and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells. A place of shadow-spookiness inhabited by the unknowable dead. A place of jubilation and of mourning, horrible and beautiful. It was in fact a small prairie town (237)

Canadian nature, comprising mountain, huge lakes and other landscape is portrayed beautifully in the works of Laurence. Human beings have romantic images about their environment like rivers and waters. For Laurence's characters water is essential for life. The image of water and river is usual in Laurence's *The Diviner*. For Laurence's protagonists the only way to escape from the confines of the society is to join with nature. For example Hagar escapes to the forest in order to find her real self.

Laurence's protagonists use the landscapes elements in different ways. The train is a sign of leaving and loss in *The Stone Angel* but for Rachel in *A Jest of God*, the train is a sign of division:

Nothing is old here[on River Street in Manawaka], but it looks old. The timber houses age fast, and even the brick looks worn down after fifty years of blizzard winter and blistering summer. They're put to shame by the new bungalows like a bakery's pastel cakes, identical, fresh, tasteless. This is known as a good part of town. Not the other side of the tracks, where the weeds are let grow knee-high and not dutifully mown, and where a few bootleggers drive new Chevrolets on the strength of home-made red biddy. (*A Jest of God 17*)

For Laurence, ancestors and the past are still alive to show individual reality. In her dream she combines the concrete world on a daily life. The connection with the past is common in its Manawaka series. Landscape is showing in the everyday life of people and includes the history of their past. Landscape is not only the physical parts of geography, but also the products of civilization which are scattered on the land. The sense of alienation from one's place is graphically depicted in Laurence's novels. The protagonists' journey to nature is also as a psychological journey of self-recognition.

The landscape plays an important geographical role for Laurence. Through meticulous description by Laurence this landscape serves as a symbolic tool which reflects the meaning protagonist seeks in life. The themes of liberation and identity which impact her character and life are depicted in the geographical description of landscape. River is the symbol of freedom while mountain stands for resistance and they together form identity.

Still, in Hagar later years of life, her memory provides a force that helps reconcile her with her old age. Her body has become weak and her personal geography which was already expended through her search for identity in the younger years of her life has physically diminished. But this is no reason for her regret and sadness as she has learned to keep her personal identity strong through contact with her past and through her memories which strongly bring her close to her past geography and her attempts and hardships in that life. These very hardships have enlightened her in achieving her strong personal identity.

Stacey in *The Fire Dweller* is doubly under pressure for being forced into assuming the pre-ordained role of a woman as a mother of four, for whom there can't be any place in the society, unless she performs her duty as the good woman. In such a state, the coolness and silence of nature along with the presence of river and mountains are inspiring forces for her that would lead into her liberation and resistance. Through *A Jest of God* Laurence depicts her protagonist's dissatisfaction and loneliness in small prairie town. For these protagonists the small town is a symbol of restriction and boundaries, and they want to free from boundaries.

But, as the depth of human mind and misery cannot be fathomed and understood easily, Laurence tries to devise a spiritual connection with nature that will help her go beyond the usual torments of life. In other words, human mind cannot calculate exactly the psychological and social pains inflicted upon humanity, because it is not yet scientifically very strong specially with regards to ordinary people, but there can always be a will and determination among all people to overcome the deadliness of life and find a window of calmness and meaning in the everyday life.

Conclusion:

The literature of a nation represents people's experiences and the places where those experiences occur. For Laurence, the land has an important role in shaping the characters' personality. Laurence's protagonists see the landscape as transformative places. Landscapes like the water and the sky is full of contradictions; it is calm and rough, intimate and alien. For Laurence's protagonists the outer landscape causes inner contemplation and brings liberating moments.

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