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Spiritual Ascension in the Novels of Margaret Laurence

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Abstract:

Laurence had showed the progress towards spiritual vision in her novels through the protagonists. They largely depend on society for their insights; their interaction with around them must be seen as important to an understanding of their progress towards spiritual vision. Her strong female protagonists Morag Gunn of *The Diviners*, Stacey MacIndra of *The Fire Dwellers*, Rachel Cameron of *A Jest of God* and Hagar Shipley of *The Stone Angel* seem to live beyond fiction and their strengths and weaknesses reflect the contemporary women in society. They struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration. Spiritual vision according to Laurence is imagined as a freedom to love, to share, to meet and touch. The protagonists of the novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve spiritual vision at a certain stage either in the thirties or in the nineties of their lives. It explores how all the Female Heroes of the four novels try to attain spiritual vision though they live in a different environment and society. The novels taken for analysis are Laurence's Manawaka Novels: *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers*, and *The Diviners*.

Keywords: Spiritual vision-alienation-social integration

The paperentitledSpiritual ascension in the novels of Margaret Laurencehas set out to analyze the fictional works of the Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence. It pays particular attention to spiritual vision attained by the protagonists of the novels. It answers the question how an individual comes to term with his/her social environment and his/her Selves. Isolation, freedom and responsibility and quest for spiritual vision are the central themes of Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence. Laurence says alienation and spiritual fragmentation afflicting society and she feels that the attaining of spiritual vision is the only remedy for it. Her heroines are fighters who suffer, weep, err, wound and despair. They are early feminists. The protagonists of the novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve spiritual vision at a certain stage in their lives. It explores how all the Female Heroes of the four novels try to attain spiritual vision though they live in a different environment and society.

Margaret Laurence, born Jean Margaret Wemyss has been the pioneers of contemporary Canadian Women's fiction in English. She is a prominent novelist, editor, critic, and author of short stories, non-fiction, and books for children in the twenty first century Canadian literature. Her deep insights and dauntless nature reflected in all her novels. Her novels have contributed substantially to the definition of a national identity in Canadian Literature and to its international reputation, signposting a specific landscape and culture as an important location in the world. She was born on July 18, 1926 in Neepawa to a pianist and a lawyer. She studied in Winnipeg's United College. After her graduation she worked as a reporter for *Winnipeg Citizen*. She married Jack Laurence, a civil engineer in 1947. After marriage the couple moved to England and to Africa. The African endeavor led Laurence to translate *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose*, the first collection of Somali works to appear in English. Her first novel *This Side Jordan* (1960) and a collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow Tamer* (1963) are also written in Africa. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), Laurence's travel Memoir is also completed in Somalia. She completed the novel in 1957 after she returned to Canada.

Laurence's literary achievement today lies in the four Canadian novels dominated by the town of Manawaka. She started writing her first Manawakan novel *The Stone Angel* in the year 1957. It is hailed as a Canadian Classic. She finished the novel in 1962, after separating from her husband and moved to England with her two children. Next to *The Stone Angel* (1962) Laurence wrote *A Jest of God* (1966) which chronicled a woman's inner turmoil and it is filmed as *Rachel, Rachel*. Laurence's next Manawakan novel *The Fire Dwellers* (1969) is written in 1969 which relates an individual's concerns about aging, parenthood, war, and nuclear proliferation. While writing the first three Manawakan novels, Laurence also published seven short stories. The last Manawakan novel *The Diviners* (1974) is a *Kuntslerroman* in which the protagonists Morag, endures anxiety and adversity and she survives to achieve personal fulfillment through the cultivation of talents. Apart from these novels Laurence wrote books for children. They are: *Jason's Quest* (1970), *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *Six Darn Cows* (1979) and *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980). Laurence's other works are *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966* (criticism) (1968), *Heart of a Stranger* (critical and autobiographical essays) (1976), and *Dance on the Earth* (memoir) (1989).

Laurence had earned many awards, prizes and honorary degrees. Her story *A Gourdful of Glory* was awarded *The President's Medal* and her novel *This Side Jordan* earned the *Best Beta Sigma Phi First novel Award*. She received a *Governor General Award* for *A Jest of God* and again for *The Diviners*. She was made a *Companion of the Order of Canada* in 1971 and received a *Molson Prize* in 1975. In 1977 she became a *Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada*. She was serving as *Chancellor of Trent University* since 1980.

Laurence had possessed international acclaim for realistic fiction that focuses on individual's quest for self-realization and spiritual vision. She is famous for the evocative power of her depictions. Her earlier fiction is set in Africa whereas her most respected and popular

works were set in the fictitious Manawaka an imaginary land. Her protagonists are from Manawaka, Manitoba, a small Scots-Irish community on the Canadian prairies that Laurence derived from her native town of Neepawa. Laurence died on January 5, 1987.

The Manawakan Novels of Margaret Laurence indulge in the process of self- discovery and self- definition. The Manawaka novels, which share a location in the life of the small prairie town of Manawaka, based on Neepawa, Manitoba, Laurence's home town, are *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964); *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966); *The Fire-Dwellers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969); and *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974). Her collection of short stories, *A Bird in the House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), also uses the Manawaka location and some of the same characters.

Laurence had showed the progress towards spiritual vision in her novels through the protagonists. They largely depend on society for their insights; their interaction with around them must be seen as important to an understanding of their progress towards spiritual vision. Her strong female protagonists Morag Gunn of *The Diviners*, Stacey MacIndra of *The Fire Dwellers*, Rachel Cameron of *A Jest of God* and Hagar Shipley of *The Stone Angel* seem to live beyond fiction and their strengths and weaknesses reflect the contemporary women in society. They struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration. Spiritual vision according to Laurence is imagined as a freedom to love, to share, to meet and touch. The protagonists of the novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve spiritual vision at a certain stage either in the thirties or in the nineties of their lives. It explores how all the Female Heroes of the four novels try to attain spiritual vision though they live in a different environment and society. The novels taken for analysis are Laurence's Manawaka Novels: *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers*, and *The Diviners*.

Hagar, the protagonist of the novel *The Stone Angel* attains spiritual vision in her Ninety years old. There is an in depth analysis of the question of how the protagonist in this novel comes to term with her spiritual vision, Self and the Environment in which she lives. Hagar Shipley, as a daughter, wife and mother is not open and she did not express her heart to the fullest to others. She failed to bring the quality of love and did not receive satisfaction or joy from her family. Only at the age of ninety she mourns for her son's death. Finally, when she wants to reconcile she fled domestic confinements thrice: from her father, from her husband, and lastly from her eldest son Marvin. In these escapes she tried to find herself. She realized her flaws at the age of ninety, at her death bed. Through speaking the truth freely to others and self-discovery in compassion she attained a measure of self -knowledge, freedom, and spiritual vision.

A Jest of God explores and contextualizes the problems faced by the protagonist Rachel Cameron and her plight to reach out to the spiritual vision. She is lonely and emotionally

confused and longs for affection. Hers is a powerful exploration of loneliness, desire and the pain of disappointment. Rachel's quest like her sister protagonist Hagar, is a search for freedom, spiritual vision, and joy. Fear is her vital enemy. Isolation leads fear. She feels insecure. Being a spinster she is afraid of what the town people think of her present state. At last she wins partial release from her fear, a new understanding of her relation to her and an acceptance of the mystery of human personality.

The *Fire Dwellers* analyses the difficulties encountered by the protagonist, a house wife named Stacey MacIndra, Rachel's married sister. She struggles to attain and to realize spiritual vision in her Forties. And it deals with the domestic and other problems Stacey however finds little serenity in a seemingly self-destructive world that appears intent upon its own eradication. Bombarded with news images of mutilated people in riot plagued cities and napalm-blasted villages she suffers a nightmarish anxiety that she is powerless to protect from children from senseless brutality. The violence of the outer world disturbs Stacey a lot. She is not comfortable with her husband who has grown sullen after twenty years of carrying the family's financial burden, nor from her young lover. Although Stacey thinks of suicide, she eventually ends her affair and resolves to endure her predicament, determining that "there is nowhere to go but here." Stacey's fears both personal and social are mainly generated by her society where she lives. Stacey is one of Laurence's survivors. She wrestles a modest victory from a society which she finally accepts on her own terms. Stacey realizes that trap is the world not her four walls.

The *Diviners* explores in detail, the essential and enigmatic problems of self-identity and spiritual vision by the heroine Morag Gunn. It has an autobiographical stance as the protagonist is also a creative writer. It approximately explores the socio-cultural scenarios. It also explores how an independent woman Morag Gunn who refuses to abandon her quest for love attains spiritual vision in her late Forties. Stacey is worried due to the fears bred in her by the violence around her and the numerous cramping patriarchal ideas of womanhood which she has internalized. She has a fear for death before her children are grown up. Stacey's quest is partial as her sister Rachel, in *A Jest of God*. Finally she comes to terms with her life, acknowledges herself as a woman and realizes that she should live her life as her own not as others'.

This paper shows a general tendency to consider Laurence as a writer conscious of self-discovery, personal and social integration, self-realization and spiritual vision. It aims at discussing her view of women in contemporary society. Laurence is interested in people with different histories and heritages, Scots-Canadian or Métis or Ukrainian-Canadian, who share the same surroundings and landscape and physical conditions. In the interaction between these people, both their different traditions and the land they share are seen as significant. In all of the novels and stories, women are represented dealing with conflicts and frustrations. On reaching this main purpose the apprehension of Laurence's view of spiritual vision critics also hope to have shown Laurence as a novelist intensely worried of universal issues like alienation, identity, realization and spiritual vision. Spiritual vision comes with personal freedom and inner peace.

Laurence's heroines have been restricted by convention and inheritance. Moreover they are confined to live in a small town. But they have a wonderful self-determination and self-control. And it varies for the individual. This quality is not enough to understand others completely. Laurence's novels have shown the process of becoming. She is concerned with human condition. This paper shows Laurence's interest in the growth of the human spirit into self-knowledge and freedom. Laurence is conscious of freedom of the individual personality. This study contributes substantially to the definition of an identity to Canadian Literature and proves Laurence's modernist writings.

Laurence's novels mirror contemporary women in society. This paper revolves around the progress of the protagonists' spiritual vision. The purpose is grasping the author's view of spiritual /inner vision and its growth through the critical analysis of her novels. In this contemporary society one encounters various experiences of alienation and spiritual progress. The women as depicted in the modern literary works spectacle reality.

Laurence showed how the protagonists progress towards spiritual vision in between all their domestic and inner problems. In this Modern Era, spiritual vision is the need of this hour. It alone grants a benevolent perspective to any human being. It brings dawn in the mind of the heroines and keeps the dusk aside. If one shares love and affection and support others, there will be a smooth running of life in this world. Sharing and caring is a necessary thing in this contemporary society. Presently old age home is popular among people because of lack of misunderstanding and adjustment. These novels depict the inner turmoil of both men and women where women's is portrayed in a great manner as it mirrors the reality. Why one should have the ability to reach out and touch others? Due to personal and social problems everyone is isolated from his/her self and society. Spiritual vision could be attained only when one has some human warmth and the ability to reach out and touch others. By portraying the progress towards spiritual vision of the heroines Laurence focuses as truthfully as possible.

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