



## TRANS-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE FICTIONS OF MARGARET LAURENCE & MARGARET ATWOOD

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### ABSTRACT

*There is hardly a country in this industrialized world today, where one can find an ethnically homogenous population. The aftermath of colonialism, the creation of refugees- often the result of ethnic conflicts- and the movement of people in search of greater economic, political or social opportunities have contributed to the worldwide mix of people. Canada is such a country, affected by the growing diversity due to the process of colonization, post-colonization and a zest to grow as an emerging modern country. Canadian federal policy of Multiculturalism invites the right of having a sound existence of varied cultures rather than being imposed its mainstream culture on all other cultures of immigrants. One can see the impact of multiculturalism in every field of Canada, whereas the artists and literary men have portrayed the multicultural face of Canada in their respective work of arts. Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence are the two leading female writers of Canada in the last half century of twentieth century fictionalized the cultural plurality of Canada from their own perspectives.*

**KEY WORDS:** Culture, colonization, transition, multiculturalism, nationalism, etc.

Culture is an integral part of a human society and its nation. Then the question arises: what is culture? The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as a “particular form or type of intellectual development in a society generated by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlook.” At the wide canvass, culture is taken as consolidating the way of life of an entire society and includes codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, social customs and folklore of a nation. Every country has a typical and distinctive culture of its own. However, when an independent country becomes a colony, the native culture goes under a change. This is the case with the countries like Kenya, Nigeria and India. When these countries came in contact with western culture, a process of change in culture was initiated, and this journey made the traditional culture of respective countries destroyed. While Indian

literature had cross cultural encounters with the English studies, Canada has been undergoing a cultural metamorphosis with the mix of second races and people from all over the world.

Immigrant literature, native writing and cross- cultural studies are the burning issues in contemporary Canadian writing which sincerely portray a picture of multicultural Canada. The issue of multiculturalism has acquired importance and urgency in view of the problems inherent in a mix of people with different ethnicities and religions, living together. This paper negotiates the issues like nationalism, multiculturalism and cross-culturalism in the writings of Commonwealth country like Canada. At the initial stage, Canadians have been anxiously discussing whether Canada has a national identity. This anxiety leads them to the gross reality that Canada has ‘two solitudes’ one is of English

Canada and other Quebec Canada. This fact of two prominent provinces with different and distinctive cultures compels to define Canada is primarily a multicultural nation.

Multiculturalism is a perspective on a way of viewing human life. Multiculturalism provides ample scope for pluralism and great values like human dignity, human solidarity, and a deep sense of rootedness, selflessness, self-effacing humility, autonomy, liberty, critical thought and equality. Multiculturalism provides space for a society wherein different communities can forge a common identity while retaining their distinctive cultural provenance. It envisions an ideal society wherein diverse communities can live together and participate as equal partners in nation building enterprise. Human beings from the very inception of the world have been culturally embedded in the sense that exists in a culturally structured world wherein they derive sufficient meaning and significance. Briefly speaking, multiculturalism celebrates cultural plurality.

Literary artists have a tremendous role to play in shaping the cultural image of a country. A serious artist will never consider that his piece of art is outside of cultural parameters of his nation. The artist's work will naturally reflect the dominant culture of his nation. The multiculturalists present their experience of the cosmos in whichever art forms they are proficient. The earliest Aboriginal Canadians, for instance, have presented their experience of God and their emotional turmoil through cave paintings and cliff paintings. Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* talks about the cultural identity by means of cave and cliff paintings.

Margaret Atwood is a renowned female writer of the last half of the twentieth century Canada. She has very applauded creations in her credit. *Surfacing* (1972) is the most popular and widely accepted novel of Margaret Atwood. In *Surfacing*, Atwood points out that Canadian culture, unlike the American, is really a collection of regional, aboriginal and ethnic subcultures. She takes pain to point out that what is natural is not

wilderness as labeled by the colonial masters. *Surfacing* is novel rich in interpretation as it depicts the binary existential experience in Canada where land undermines man, wilderness contends with civilization, and isolation and alienation compel a search for identity. It is the story of a commercial artist who has been summoned from the city to search for her father on a remote lake in Quebec. The novel is written in first person narrative and the narrator is young, attractive and very ruthless in her observations as she travels into the familiar Canadian wilderness of her childhood with her three friends.

Coming back to her childhood surroundings with city friends, the cultural divide between them gets further underlined. Her wishing that they weren't there with her stems not only from an innate desire to be alone with her roots and her past, but also because they can never understand why she had to come:

*"They're doing me a favor, which they disguised by saying it would be fun, they like to travel. But my reason for being here embarrasses them, they don't understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs."*

This journey becomes the means for Atwood to show that 'natural' is not always 'wilderness' as described by 'cultured' people. In this novel it seems that the protagonist is haunted by memories of her childhood and the culture she imbibed then is in conflict with her more modern values and culture that she has imbibed in the city. Her attempts at denying her earlier culture led to feelings of guilt inside her, as she becomes acutely aware of the differences between her and her friends. She illustrates this cultural disparity between the protagonist and her friends at the very early stage of the novel, her parental house seems weird to her friends and normal to her and she fears they might get bored because there's no T.V. or any entertaining device.

When she is reminded of the fact that her husband is left her, she talks a lie to Paul. Her parents are not being reported that their daughter is divorced by her husband simply because divorce is considered as unusual matter in their culture. Divorce and abortion are words belonging to a different culture, and back in her childhood surroundings they give rise to feelings of guilt that threaten to engulf or totally submerge her. The guilt is overwhelming as she recounts the different ways in which she has let her parents down. A young girl brought up without much exposure to society and men, she is an easy prey to a married man's lust, who wants to abort the baby when she becomes pregnant. That becomes a turning point as after the abortion she does not return home and is literally set to brave the bad world on her own. The abortion lies at the root of her guilt as she views herself as a murderer.

Margaret Laurence strongly attempted to record the cultural implications in her African and Canadian writings. *The Diviners* is the last novel of the Manawaka series, published in 1974. The novel received a wide applaud from all over world. It is treated as the best composition of Laurence. It was also an attempt of Laurence's self-revelation and an exploration of Canadian past. The life journey of the protagonist Morag Gunn, for over the five decades, is never regarded as a solitary quest. It is pluralistic vision of the writer addresses the universal issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, culture and environment. Laurence is concerned with the injustices, prejudice, discrimination and oppression suffered by those who are marginalized by the dominant agents of the society. Gabrielle Roy opines, "It is a search for water, truth, identity, words, but beyond all that, for whoever or whatever compels us to endless search."

The novel has an autobiographical stance as the protagonist is also a creative writer. It approximately explores the socio-cultural scenario. The story of the novel on one hand portrays the picture of Morag's development from her childhood to her being forty-eight years old woman of action

where she divorced her patriarchal husband and she is caught up in her daughter Pique's tormenting and restless behavior on the other. She lives in a rural Ontario beside a river that appears to flow on both ways because of an influential wind. The river serves as an emblem of time and memory.

The novel has a twisting of past and present which stands as the counterpoints to one another. Morag recalls her unpleasing and uncomfortable childhood in Manawaka, where she was raised by a garbage collector and his wife after the death of her parents. She also remembers her adulthood and the sheltered life in Toronto as the wife of English professor, her rebellion and flight to Vancouver and Britain, where she developed as a writer, her return to Canada, her roots and her lasting love for Jules Tonnerre.

The first section of the novel "River of Now and Then" depicts Morag's grief on the departure of her daughter to the west. She has left a note on typewriter machine. The sudden disappearance of her teenage daughter triggers off her memory of the snapshots she had taken of her past. Though the snapshots are in a mess but clear enough to serve as effective monuments of a bygone past. It also reminds the death of her parents. Only after the death of her parents Morag's journey was started in an outer world.

"Memory bank Movies" is the second part of this novel which presents the childhood days of Morag in Manawaka. She was born as a white but now she is an adopted child, living with Prin and Christie Logan (fostering parents of Morag) garbage collector of the town. Morag does not like the profession of her fostering father. She considers that the profession of a scavenger is humiliating. Though she deeply loves to Prin and Christie Logan, she suffers from shame and discrimination on having scavenger as her fostering parent. She feels that she is from another planet. Morag meets her classmate, a Metis youth, Jules Tonnerre with whom she has a relationship. At the end of school days, Jules makes an enquiry about her future plan. Morag tells him that she will be going away, away

from the hold of this family that she wanted to set herself free from the present contemptuous experience. She wants to make her own identity. She happily answers: "Going to Winnipeg this fall. To college and I'm never coming back"(The Diviners p. 181). She takes an admission in Winnipeg university. But, there too, she finds herself homeless, only eager to move away.

Part three that is named as "Memory bank Movies" portrays the university life of Morag. In Winnipeg University, she encounters with her English Professor, Brooke Skeleton, son of an English school master in India. Morag had a lot potential of literary creation. When she used to share her literary interest with that English professor either in the class or outside, it resulted into an admiration and later on love. Eventually the love affair turned into the marriage proposal. They get married and settled down in Toronto. Later on, Morag realizes that she is reduced up to a house maid. She does not have even a single chance to get away from her busy house schedule. She is being monitored by her husband. She was trapped on both ways physical and intellectual.

During her stay in Toronto she became friendly with Ella Gurson. The friendship between these two has a special background. Both of them are outcasts, one in the terms of class that is Morag (an adopted child of a scavenger family) and the other is in terms of ethnicity, Ella (a Jew of Polish origin). The point that connects the two together is their interest in literature. The writings that they have submitted to college newspaper are from their respective background. Ella's poem speaks about her people's tragic episodes during the Second World War and Morag's story was about a farmer's survival during the draught. Morag, the protagonist endeavors to establish herself as a writer and her daughter, Pique's search for her ancestral roots compose the core of the novel.

Margaret Laurence strives to reconstruct the lost identities of the cultural groups. These cultural groups constitute the Canadian culture as a whole. It is an attempt of Laurence to portray a realistic

picture of Canadian culture by means of her writings. These cultural groups are striving for social recognition, rebelling against the brutality of racial discrimination and experiencing the barbaric disturbances between the ethnic groups are the core issues in this novel. The novel traces the lost historical impressions of the indigenous group – the Metis, in the folktales and songs, and their struggle with the Sutherlands for survival. This novel reveals Laurence's strong desire to exhibit the historical imprints of the indigenous Metis.

In 'The Diviners' Morag's life with her parents, Louise and Colin Gunn, is recreated in the novel through six snapshots. Louise and Colin, both of them were white European descendants. The technique of using the snapshots makes it very easy to recall the whole past of Gunn family. The photographs of her parents and her own childhood make Morag to recall her past. These snapshots show her life within the confining limits of society and the traumatic incident of her parent's death. It shatters her idyllic world and her faith in God. It deeply makes an impact on her life. She becomes homeless and unwillingly accepts her being an adopted child in Logan family. It triggers off her journey of searching her own self, locating herself either in her parent's ethnicity of white European that is Scots-Presbyterian or fostering parent's being scavenger.

Morag's quest of her identity is neatly revealed at the end of the novel when she realizes the importance of her fostering father, Christie. He constantly used to narrate the stories of Metis people. His tales play very important role in the search of Morag's identity. To retrospect the hardships encountered by the Metis, Christie Logan narrates the tales like Christie's First Tale of Piper Gunn – the escape of the people from the Bitch – Duchess; Christie's tale of the Battle of Boursillonwood, Christie's tale of Piper Gunn and the Rebels, Skinner's tale of Lazarus' tale of Rider Tonnerre, Skinner's Tale of Rider Tonnerre and the Prophet, Skinner's tale of Old Jules and the war out



West and the Skinner's tale of Dieppe depict the conflict between the Scots and the Metis.

Christie tells the tales of settlement of the Scots and the Metis in Canada. In his first story, he narrates the hardships faced by the Metis in Canada:

Among all of them people there on the rocks, see, was a piper, and he was from the Clan Gunn, and it was many of the Gunns who lost their hearths and homes and lived wild on the stormy rocks there. And Piper Gunn, he was a great tall man, a man with the voice of drums and the heart of a child and all the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction (The Diviners p. 59).

Piper Gunn and his wife Morag with others landed on the Hudson Bay in their ship from Sutherland and both of them were living there. There was a quarrel between the half breed and Indians and they began to slay each other. Piper Gunn's people started to migrate from there too and landed on the Red river. When the half breed wanted take this part of Red river, a battle broke out between the Metis and the half breed in which the chief of Metis, Riel was hanged and Metis lost their land again. A Metis rider, the Prince of Braves, fought against the English and the Scots who had come take away Metis land. And when the government men from Down East had come to occupy the Metis land, the Old Rider Tonnerre sent a prophet who was also a Metis. The prophet captured the fort along with the people. Jules had joined the prophet in the battle for Metis. Though they were accompanied by the Indians, the Cress and the Stonies, they lost the war and Jules was hanged finally. It was narrated through the tales that there was a rivalry between the Scots and the Metis in finding a place in Canada. After a long struggle they both managed to find their own space, though the Metis were finally humiliated with defeat by the Scots. The settlement of both the Scots and the Metis has been portrayed in a marvelous narrative structure of this novel.

The Metis had great respect for their ancestry. The rivalry between the Scots and Metis makes the Metis to feel hatred towards Canada. While Morag, a Scot, sings the song in praise of Canada in school, Skinner Tonnerre, a Metis classmate keeps quite though he had sweet voice. The marginalization of them in the socio – cultural framework of Canada had made the Metis resort to such behavior while this was position in Canada, the Metis are given prominent place in this novel. The protagonist finds fulfillment in her association with the Metis and Pique's search for her ancestry leads to know the historical elegance of the Metis through the folk songs.

Morag's acceptance of Christie as her father is a crucial moment in the novel and the character growth of Morag herself. Christie Logan is such a character who has multiple identities. Although he is perceived as a clown, a fool, a failure but to Morag he is a hero. He is portrayed as the man of honesty, wisdom and full of compassion. According to Leo A. Johnson's analysis of "The Development of Class in Canada in the Twentieth Century" (1972), 'Christie can be considered a laborer, a sub-class of the blue-collar workers, as he definitely is not a mechanical worker, considering he initially manipulates a wagon and its horse Ginger, much to Morag's despair'.

Laurence has shifted her point of view from intolerance to tolerance; from hatred to love and contradictions to understandings. *The Diviners* is the novel of cultural mosaic it includes representatives of various classes and cultures. It has the characters like Colin Gunn, Morag Gunn, Brooke Skeleton are from British descendants, Jules, Piquette, Valentine Tonnerre are from Red Indians (Metis), Ella Gerson from Jews, Miklos from Greeks, Julie Kazlick from Ukrainians, upper class, Christie and Prin are from lower middle class, etc.

Thus, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence have endeavored to portray the picture of cultural assimilation as an unavoidable phenomenon of twentieth century Canada. Their

writing clearly underscores the facts of the influence of colonial and postcolonial circumstances in the process of an emergence of Canada as a multicultural nation.

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