

A STUDY OF AFRO-CANADIAN IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF MARGARET LAURENCE

Shadan Jafri

Department of English
Agra College
Agra, India.

ABSTRACT

Canada and India are former colonies of the British empire and are now important members of the Commonwealth. But one can easily perceive the distinct ways in which Europe in general and England in particular had their impact on the social, political, cultural and literary milieu of the two countries. The major part of Canada is peopled by immigrant Europeans who settled down in its vast land by waging a fierce struggle against the hostile landscape. Then there are immigrants from other countries such as Japan, China, Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and other south Asian countries, though their number may be much smaller as compared to the European settlers. The Canadian society also has minority settlements of the natives who have become exiles in their own land. Canada has two official languages, English and French, and the Federal Government proclaimed the policy of Multiculturalism within a bilingual framework in October 1971.

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The question of equality of status of women in all walks of life vis-à-vis the patriarchal mode has been brought into the main focus by strong feminist movements and dynamic activists and their organizations. Canada is ahead of in the field of socio-economic, technological and industrial advancements. It is, in fact, economically, educationally and technologically, one of the frontline developed countries of the world. But this immigrant nation has its own share of problems and tensions which are exhibited through its long-continuing question for national identity especially at the cultural and literary level. It is so because the natives there had hardly any established and resilient literary tradition of their own except in some folk forms—legends, myths, set of beliefs, songs etc. and these too were not given their due by the ‘master-immigrants.’ The identity crisis of the protagonists in Margaret Laurence’s fiction is a microcosm of problematic of complex Canadian identity at the national level. In this connection, Margaret Laurence’s views reinforce the dilemma of the complexity of this psycho-social and psycho-cultural Canadian construct: “If our upsurge of so-called nationalism seems odd or irrelevant to outsiders, and even to some of our own people (what’s all the fuss about?), they might try and understand that for many years we valued ourselves insufficiently, living as we did under the huge shadows of two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia. We have only just begun to recognize ourselves, our land, our abilities. We have only just begun to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths.” (Heart of a Stranger 217) Margaret Laurence (1926-87) has been called “Canada’s most successful novelist” by Joan Coldwell “the most

significant creative writer in Canadian literature.” (The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature vii) Laurence has been lionized as the quintessential Canadian writer. There are two major reasons for Laurence’s importance to Canadian literature: first is her stature as an artist in her own right, and second is the degree to which she, as “den mother,” fostered the success of her “tribe” of Canadian writers, as she called them.

In fact, her importance to the development of Canadian literature cannot be overestimated. Laurence’s stature is reflected in the impressive amount of material published on her work. Margaret Laurence is, of course, most famous for her Manawaka cycle of Canadian fictions – *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). *The Stone Angel*, as the first of her Manawaka texts, made a powerful impression on Canadian readers and critics. W.H. New judges *The Stone Angel* “one of the most illuminating literary experiences in recent Canadian fiction.” (*Margaret Laurence: The Writer and Her Critic* 135) George Woodcock asserts, “*The Stone Angel* established Margaret Laurence as a leading Canadian novelist...the publication of *The Stone Angel* was hailed as marking the appearance of a new and original literary talent on the Canadian literary horizon, and rapidly made Laurence the most important novelist in that vitally formative period of Canadian writing – the late 1960s and early 1970s.” (*Introducing Margaret Laurence’s The Stone Angel* 15, 110)

Laurence’s Manawaka cycle of Canadian novels resonated in the Canadian mind, establishing her as the quintessential Canadian writer. Her African work is highly significant. Canadians do not think of Laurence as an author of African texts, although she deserves that title, because the fame of her Canadian fiction has overshadowed her earlier African writing. While she did write five fictions set in Canada, she wrote an equal number of books about Africa. Her first book, *A Tree for Poverty* (1954), was the first translation or publication of Somali folk literature, appearing two decades before the Somali language developed any orthography. Her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), her first collection of stories, *The Tomorrow – Tamer* (1963), her first memoir, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* (1963), and her first and only critical study, *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatics and Novelists, 1952-1966* (1968) were all written about Africa, where she lived from 1951 to 1957– a year and a half in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, later Somalia, and five years in the Gold Coast, soon to become Ghana. Dorez Xiques concludes that her African Texts form “a significant part of her legacy as a writer and need to be placed beside her Manawaka fiction.” (*Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* 311) Indeed, Laurence published her first four African texts before she published a book set in Canada. This experience, at a critical point of decolonization in Somalia and Ghana, influenced her Canadian writing greatly. Clara Thomas states that “Her experience of Africa, between 1950 and 1957, acted as a kind of dynamic culture shock, a catalyst, on the talents of Margaret Laurence” (*The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* 17) and Patricia Morley claims “The way to Manawaka lay through Ghana, Nigeria, and the searching desert sun” (*Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home* 39).

Laurence’s African texts have been so overshadowed by her subsequent Canadian books that many readers and even scholars are still unfamiliar with her African writing. Only recently has it begun to attract the critical attention it deserves, and even then it is often considered in isolation from her Canadian writing. Indeed, it is dismissed as “apprentice work” by certain Canadian critics. As Clara Thomas declares - “The writing of *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* marked the end of the apprenticeship

experiences that the years in Africa had given her; the book was her acknowledgement of that apprenticeship and her farewell to it.” (The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence 33) Other critics value the African writing in its own right. In his after word to *This Side Jordan*, George Woodcock judges, “*This Side Jordan* proved to be more than a mere apprentice’s exercise by the audacity with which it handled the vital conjunction in the mid-twentieth century of the African tribal consciousness and the European rational and individualized consciousness” (*This Side Jordan* 284). Most significant is the influence of her African work on her Canadian writing. Because critics, especially Canadian critics, often regard her Manawaka cycle in isolation from her other writing, the important connections between the two bodies of work, and indeed the influence of her African writing on her subsequent Canadian fiction, have not been fully appreciated. I argue, however, that her African experience made her a great Canadian novelist. Her experience of living in Africa led her to perceive Canada as a post-colonial nation, and her observation of African women led her to perceive how women can be colonized under patriarchy. Writing of emerging independence in her African fiction inspired her to write about the self-empowerment of women in her Canadian fiction. Margaret Laurence’s work as a creative writer can be conveniently divided into two parts, particularly according to its physical landscape, i.e. firstly, her African writings (early writing) and secondly, her Canadian writing (Manawaka fiction). The categorization has, however, been done only for the sake of convenience; otherwise these two form a unified whole from the point of view of themes incorporated therein and the visions and insights that emerge there from. The central metaphor of ‘Journeying’ and ‘Travel’ provides a unity to these two categories of Laurence’s work, as this metaphor provides the much-needed ‘distance’ for envisioning the reality in its proper perspective. Five books are the product of Laurence’s seven years’ (1952-59) sojourn in a ‘strange’ continent Africa and her continuing interest in its people and their social, political, cultural, religious and literary identity in the context of the foreign rule and colonial experience of the local population. Her African writings and Canadian fiction are closely related. In addition to decolonizing her mind, her African writings together with the Canadian, “represent a seamless fabric, a steady growth and maturation of a way of seeing which was first formed in Neepawa, Manitoba” (Margaret Laurence 33) during the formative years of her life. African experience, for Laurence, acted as a catalyst and crucible for much of her later fictional and non-fictional writings, as she arrived at a deeper understanding of the identity-crisis at the level of individuals and nations (particularly those experiencing colonial rule or emerging fresh as independent countries) from her varied experiences in Ghana and Somaliland and which are perceptively portrayed in her African writings. Margaret Laurence published her first African book *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* in 1954 and called this work a labour of love. She takes the title for her English translations of Somali poetry and prose from two lines in a Somali gabei which seem to suggest this literature in its entirety. “For a nomadic people with few possessions and no written language,” Laurence writes, “oral literature is both refuge and riches, truly ‘a tree for poverty to shelter under.’” (*Heart of a Stranger* 77) She has worked from literal translations, paraphrase and dramatic renditions where facial expressions and gestures helped to convey the original meaning. In rendering this first translation in English of oral Somali literature her deep sense of a literary value system and her sensitivity to other people and culture is evident from her acknowledgement in the preface to the 1965 edition of *A Tree for Poverty*. In this connection, Patricia Morley has rightly observed: “In this connection, Patricia

Morley has rightly observed: “In commenting on the folk tales, Laurence writes of the pride, courage and humour of the ordinary Somali herdsman in a land where individualism and independence are necessary for survival.” (Margaret Laurence n Appreciation 11)

Laurence’s anti-imperialist stance and respect for others’ freedom and different point of view are perceptible in her travelogue *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* (1963) which was also published with a new title *New Wind in a Dry Land in America* in 1964. George Woodcock calls it one of the finest and most evocative travel books ever written by Canadian. He sees it as an intermediate genre between the novel and the ordinary travel narrative. He, therefore, links it to her fiction by theme and structure: “Her novels are all in a sense travel books, vividly descriptive in terms of environment, involving a great deal of journeying, both inner and outer, and coming at the end to those self-transforming realizations, that are the destinations of all internal voyaging.” (*Journal of Canadian Studies* 9-10) Various character-sketches in this novel memoir read like stories with themes of gender-discrimination, different facets of imperialism, racial-discrimination, exile-syndrome, etc. in the first chapter “Innocent Voice,” when on her arrival in Somaliland, Laurence was addressed as ‘Memsahib,’ she records her reaction thus: “The whole performance amused and distressed me. I could not face the prospect of being called ‘Memsahib,’ a word which seemed to have connotations of white man’s burden, paternalism, everything I did not believe in.” (*The Prophet’s Camel Bell* 14) Again in the second chapter “Footsteps,” she reinforces her commitment for human dignity and bias against the imperialist stance “Every traveller sets foot on the shore with some bias. Not being a scholar in Arabic literature or anything else, I had no specific pre-conceived ideas of what the Somalis would be like, or ought to be like. My bias lay in another direction. I believed that the overwhelming majority of Englishmen in colonies could properly be classified as imperialists, and feeling about imperialism was very simple—I was against it. It was born and had grown up in a country that once was a colony, a country which many people believed still to be suffering from a colonial outlook, and like most Canadians I took umbrage swiftly at a certain type of English who felt they had a bestowed superiority over the lesser breeds without the law.” (*The Prophet’s Camel Bell* 16) The latter half of the *Camel Bell* is devoted largely to individual portraits drawn from three cultural groups: Italians, British and Somalis. Each is shaped so as to reveal the persons’ and by implication the community’s essential dilemma of loneliness or a psychic exile which Woodcock terms as “many solitudes.” The perceptive sketching of these characters caught between their old world and a new one reflects a novelist’s skill in embryo form in Laurence.

In *The Tomorrow Tamer and Other Stories* (1970), Laurence depicts the winds of change blowing across Ghana and their consequent effect on the lives of the individuals and also culture constructs. The opening story of the collection ‘The Drummer of All the World’ has ‘the Whiteman’s burden’ as its theme. The story begins with a typical imperialist stance: “My father thought he was bringing salvation to Africa. I, on the other hand, no longer knew what salvation is.” (*The Tomorrow Tamer and Other Stories* 1) In this story, Matthew the narrator has a romantic view of Africa as is also the case with David Machie in the story ‘The Rain Child.’ In fact, both of them are sentimental pastoralists and cannot accept people as they are. But the story which is based on the vehement conflicts inherent in the pastoral paradigm, is the little story ‘The Tomorrow Tamer.’ It depicts the inevitable conflict between the forces of tradition and modernity. In narrative terms, the story is quite simple: a bridge is to be built over the river Owura which will link the old and primitive village

Owurash caught in the mesh of ancient gods, goddesses, rituals and superstitions with the outside world. Since the bridge is a product of the Western technology and also its symbol, it becomes suspect in the eyes of the villagers. They fear that the river-god may be offended and bring disaster for all Kofi, the young man, who is the first to be allowed to work with the invading labour force, becomes the high priest of the bridge in due course. But in his pride of achievement, he climbs to the highest beam of the imposing structure. Standing erect on the steel, the ambitious young man gazes even higher into the sun. blinded by the sudden brilliance, he loses his balance and plunges to his death in the waters far below. At this movement, in the story, Laurence writes: "As for the people of Owurash, they were not surprised. They understood perfectly well what had happened. The bridge, clearly, had sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river." (The Tomorrow Tamer and Other Stories 103) thus Kofi's death, though tragic, enables the new values of the technological era to be assimilated into the old through the assumption that it signified a symbolic sacrifice to the river god. Another story 'The Perfume Sea' indicates through the delicately structured relationship of Mr Archipelago and Doreen, the winds of change affecting individuals, and their strategy to come to terms with the altered reality. At the end of the story, the line of women outside Mr Archipelago's shop signifies the journey of the African women towards self-actualization and self-assertion as one of the significant major themes in Laurence's major fiction. Once again, Laurence raises the question of the incompatibility between the European and the English cultures in Ghana, as also the inadequacy and insufficiency of the white colonial vision of 'the other' and its inability to either understand or accept the validity of the 'other' in two other stories of the collection: "A Fetish for Love" and "The Merchant of Heaven." Laurence, thus, explores the identity-crisis at a wider scale, of the cultures i.e. the need to respect and accept the equal claims of 'the other's more fully and without any impression of condescension. In this respect, she exhibits her total agreement with Mannoni who emphasizes the need for "awareness of the world of others, a world in which others have to be respected." (Prospero and Caliban 108) another story 'God-man's Master' can be interpreted in terms of the dependent complex of the colonized as conceptualized by Mannoni. At the end of this story, Godman surrenders, submits and succumbs whereas Caliban in Shakespeare's The Tempest rebels. God-man sees only its fall. Once free, Caliban regains his dignity, whereas God-man, even when forced into freedom, barely manages to acquire a semblance of dignity with the help of his flamboyant robes.

Thus, in these stories, Laurence uses the reality of the American situation to understand the intricacies of the colonial situation. Operating on two polarities, she acquires double consciousness and experiences 'double exile,' to use Griffiths' metaphor. "A colonial writer," asserts Griffiths, "is exiled culturally from the sources and traditions of English as used in England and linguistically from the landscape and people he writes about." (A Double Exile 9) But this exile in the case of Laurence has proved a stimulant rather than a handicap because though white-skinned, she is not a colonial either physically or psychologically. Through her sensitive and perceptive approach, she exhibits her deep commitment to the life-affirming values of both the cultures and therefore easily escapes the poverty of a single focus. More importantly, she brings freshness and richness to her vision of human freedom and human predicaments by making her African stories universal parables by relating them to the ancient myths and folklore of the African culture as well as the significant parameters of the Old Testament and Muslim theology.

This Side Jordan (1960) like The Tomorrow Tamer is set in Ghana in the 1950s, in or near its capital Accra, "this city where you could feel tomorrow being reached for." (This Side Jordan 268) At that time, the country was in the process of achieving its independence; and Laurence as the chronicler of the psycho-social scenario, brings out the psychological pressures consequence by the colonial experience on both the Africans and the British. In her only African novel, Laurence juxtaposes and balances two sets of characters. One type is the White British and the other Black African; and she proceeds to examine the effects of the colonial encounter on both the colonizer and the colonized. The novel, in the main, objectifies the sense of double exile and dispossession (rootless-ness) that in different ways is felt by the British as well as the Africans as a consequence of the colonial mind-set. As the country is progressively moving to attain freedom, Africanization of British interests becomes both necessary and inevitable. Some of the British, whose services may not be required in the new dispensation, must go back to their home country England. But that is where the problem arises: their colonial experience in Africa has made them misfits and rendered those exiles in their own mother country and their psyche is paralyzed and fractured. Being exiles in Africa and England, they become double exiles. "What'll happen to us? Where will we go?" (This Side Jordan 129) This is not only Cora Thayer's problem, but of many of the Britishers.

The Africans too are not free from the trauma of exile. They also suffer a sense of being exiles in their own land. The colonial experience has uprooted them just like the British. The protagonist in a large cast Nathaniel Amegbe, is in fact, voicing a collective sentiment when he says in response to his uncle's remarks that someday he will know where he belongs: "I belong between yesterday and today." (106) But his uncle's observation in response to this confusing view is quite pertinent. "But that is nowhere." (This Side Jordan 107) And Nathaniel replies: "I know. Yes, I know." (This Side Jordan 107) This theme of ambivalence and ambiguity regarding "the self" engendered by the colonial experience is one that emerges as a major preoccupation in Laurence's subsequent Canadian writing too, as she perceived in the African situation an analogue for the similar situation obtaining in Canada wherein too the question of identity was rendered problematic, inter alia, by the colonial outlook prevailing there. Frantz Fanon in *Black Poets and Prophets* analyses the effect of master culture or colonizing culture on the colonized culture, the effect that takes place in several subtle ways. He observes that the colonizing culture aims at "deculturation through the process of systematic elimination of a *raison d'être* of the colonized. (*Black Poets and Prophets* 17) It often distorts the past of the local colonized culture and tries to render it unusable. The consequence is the emergence of conflict and a feeling of inadequacy as also a sense of insufficiency and inferiority in the psyche of the colonized.

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