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04

MULTICULTURALISM IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *A JEST OF GOD* AND *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE*

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Abstract

Canadian English literature occupies a very prominent place in twentieth-century multicultural literature. It has a rich background that confirms the country's history of immigration and cultural exchange. English, Scottish, Ukrainian, and French settlers came and became part of the land. It is believed that the Métis are indigenous to Canada. Multicultural literature of Canada represents the experiences, perspectives, and cultural practices of various communities. It is characterized by a rich diversity of voices, styles, and themes, which challenge dominant narratives and offer new insights into the Canadian identity. Intellectuals like Margaret Laurence, through their literary talent, uphold the concept of multiculturalism. Margaret Laurence, in her Manawaka series, very tactfully represents the people from diverse cultures, languages, and ethnic groups and their positions in society. Manawaka town has a macrocosmic society; it has the Scottish, the French, the Ukrainians, the Italians, the Chinese, and the indigenous Métis population. Every citizen of Manawaka makes the Manawaka world more beautiful and more realistic in every respect. Every work set in Manawaka references the various communities within the town. The places occupied by minorities are in ascending order in the Manawaka series. Margaret Laurence expects harmony among all sections of society. This article deals with the multicultural aspects in A Jest of God and in A Bird in the House.

Keywords

Manawaka, Multiculturalism, Métis, Ukrainians, Indigenous, Settlers, and Culture, etc.

Full Article

Margaret Laurence is a prolific literary figure; she wrote about the predicament of women and underprivileged people in her writings. Her writing can be differentiated as African writing and Canadian writing as per the subject it deals with. She started writing from a very young age; in her college days, she wrote for the Winnipeg college magazine and for the local newspaper thereafter. Margaret Laurence went to Africa with her husband, a civil engineer. The local African literature attracts her, and she translated African poetry and short stories into the English language. This stay in Africa has a tremendous impact on her literary career. While studying the culture and tradition of Africa, she became conscious about Canadian culture and Canadian people. She began to focus on Canadian themes, creating her work in an imaginative prairie town called Manawaka, which is inspired by but not identical to Neepawa. The first novel, *The Stone Angel*, was published in 1964, followed by *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1971), and *The Diviners* (1974). While studying these books, one may observe that the author has

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minutely worked on the description of underprivileged members of society; she also underscored the predicament of minorities and their exploitation. Margaret Laurence not only portrayed the plight of a Metis family but also talked about the Ukrainians, the Chinese, and economically downtrodden Scots.

Canada adopted the multicultural policy in 1971 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, as the population of Canada is from diverse cultures, ethnic groups, and linguistic groups, and they live together with reverence for everyone's tradition and diversity. The intellectuals, artists, and literary figures of the time support the idea and reflect it in their works. As we know, Scottish, Irish, and French migrants arrived in Canada and settled there. They came with their language, culture, tradition, and religion. Following the British and French colonization of Canada, conflicts arose with the Indigenous peoples, and the Métis were subsequently marginalized, becoming a minority and an underprivileged group within Canadian society. Metis was nearly devastated after that. Individuals from various countries and cultural backgrounds migrated to Canada and gradually became integral members of its society. All this background makes Canada a nation of multiculturalism.

> Multiculturalism is far better handled by writers of fiction than writers of laws. {Whereas} the administrator tries to push hundreds of thousands of people into a single category, the imaginative writer, the novelist, does the opposite, seeing how one individual can contain a hundred cultures (Prabhakar, 55).

Margaret Laurence in the Manawaka series handled the theme of multiculturalism very skillfully. *A Jest of God,* the second novel in the Manawaka series, deals with the internal struggle of protagonist Rachel, a spinster teacher of 34 years old living with her hypochondriac mother. She is alienated from everyone, and she is anxious about her future and her mother's health. Rachel is always thinking about the people and their opinions about her. Rachel is struggling with isolation, and she is in search of identity. At the same time, the novel also explores the multiculturalism, religious diversity, and cultural hierarchy in the mid-twentieth century in Canada. As the novel is set in Manawaka, it contains a mix of Scottish, English, Ukrainian, Métis, and other immigrant communities with their distinct cultures, traditions, and languages.

Manawaka is dominated by Protestants; Rachel Cameron and May Cameron represent Protestant, Presbyterian traditions in Canada. This traditional ethos believes in controlled, formal behaviour bound by social appearances. Rachel says, "Mother thinks the whole thing is weird in the extreme" (Laurence, AJG, 33). Rachel's mother, May Cameron, believes that excess in any form spoils everything in life-whether it be excessive emotion, speech, or freedom. This reflects a typical Presbyterian middle-class mentality, which she unconsciously instills in Rachel. On the other hand, Rachel's colleague and friend Calla Mackie, who represents the Pentecostal faith, introduces a different spiritual ethos-emotional, excessive, and rooted in a more egalitarian community spirit. Calla's openhearted belief contrasts sharply with Rachel's constrained piety. Rachel shares her experience in Tabernacle Church in the following words. "I've gone with her once or twice, against my better judgement. The congregation sang hymns in a jazz-like rhythm, and individuals rose to testify, leaving Rachel so embarrassed that she did not know where to look. How can they make fools of themselves like that, so publicly?" (Laurence, AJG, 12) Rachel visited Tabernacle church with Calla, but the experience was totally shocking for Rachel; the way people worship God is entirely unfamiliar to her. The way people express their emotions openly and sing together in the congregation is entirely new to Rachel and stands in contrast to the Presbyterian tradition. Margaret Laurence very minutely describes the people of different faiths in Manawaka.

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Another instance of multicultural representation is found in Lee Toy, the Chinese proprietor of the Regal Café. He lived the life of secrecy in Manawaka, above his cafe. Rachel's father told her that his wife is in China; she lives on the money sent by her husband. The problem is the Canadian laws don't allow her to come to Canada, and the laws of China don't allow him to go there. In the conflict between two countries, immigrants are the ones who suffer.

Margaret Laurence, with her characterization, mingles the story in such a way that it is impossible to avoid them; it is also true about the present novel. Nick Kazlicks, a school acquaintance of Rachel, meets her; he is a high school teacher in Winnipeg. He represents the second generation of Ukrainian people in Manawaka; their settlement is three miles away from Manawaka along the gravel highway. It is a common belief among the Scottish people that "The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be mightier than anyone but God" (Laurence, AJG, 83). The Scottish strongly believes that they are of higher rank than the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians are treated as others and marginalized in Manawaka. It is believed that Ukrainians came to Canada from 1890 to 1914. They were assigned to lower-status jobs and ridiculed for their traditions and language. Rachel very frankly admits that she envied people like Nick, whose last name means Ukrainian, because she doesn't know anybody from that side of the track. It shows people of Manawaka are discriminated against because their land and their origins will decide their status.

Nick, the second generation of Ukrainian, shared his grandmother's experience of immigration from Ukraine by ship; the experience was a greatly traumatic one. Many people immigrated during that period to Canada; those who voyaged in one ship developed kinship among themselves. They maintained their relationship throughout life and conserved their culture, tradition, and language in Canada. They settled in different parts of Canada. Though Nick was born in Canada, society has not accepted him as truly Canadian; to the Scots, he remains an outsider or a foreigner. This discriminating treatment really makes Nick annoyed. Rachel, as a representative of the Presbyterian, agrees that her ancestors also came to Canada in the same way and with the same purpose, but they came earlier than the Ukrainian. The sensitive Rachel felt sorry for the Ukrainian for the treatment Ukrainians get in Manawaka.

Although the relationship between Rachel and Nick ultimately fails, it serves to blur the rigid social boundaries that define Manawaka, symbolizing a progressive movement toward a more inclusive and multicultural society. It should be agreed that it was only because of Nick that Rachel got a boost to start her new life without anyone's assistance. Nick was the real hero in the life of Rachel Cameron.

A Bird in the House is a collection of eight short stories interconnected with characters, places, and settings. Margaret Laurence is completely convinced that the Métis are the real owners of Canada. They are the insiders and not outsiders in the land. The invaders came and intruded on their land and imposed their culture, language, and history on the indigenous people. But today all should come together and stand for Canada as our country, forgetting about animosity for each other. The earlier three novels manifest about Metis and other minorities as unmentionable and destroyers of white culture. They are a threat to civilization; the minorities are criminal, inferior, outsiders, and subordinate, whereas settlers are civilized, superior, and owners of the land.

A Bird in the House moves ahead, and the disparity between the settlers and the indigenous people becomes narrower, at least a step forward in the union of the two strata of society. Dr. Ewen MacLeod attempts to challenge the prevailing social conventions of Manawaka through his compassionate actions. Margaret Laurence's short story *The Loons* centres on Vanessa's encounter with Piquette Tonnerre, her older classmate who suffers from tuberculosis of the bone. Owing to her chronic illness, Piquette rarely attends school, and her academic performance remains minimal. Recognizing her difficult circumstances, Dr. MacLeod decides to take Piquette

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along with his family on their summer vacation to Diamond Lake, believing that a period of rest and change of environment might improve her health and perhaps enable her to form a meaningful companionship with Vanessa. It is revealed that Piquette's mother had abandoned the family early, leaving no female presence in the Tonnerre household. Consequently, the weight of domestic responsibilities falls entirely upon Piquette, rendering her emotionally and physically exhausted. For her, the invitation to accompany the MacLeods represents not merely a respite from hardship but also a fleeting opportunity for social inclusion and recovery. When Grandmother MacLeod came to know about it, she cancelled her trip to the Diamond Lake, as she believes that Métis are "neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring" (Laurence, ABH, 108-109). Grandmother MacLeod is discriminating against Piquette because she belongs to an indigenous family; the societal atmosphere in Canada at that time is represented with this incident. The settlers are not ready to live with them.

Dr. Ewen and Vanessa were disappointed, as Piquette did not become friendly with them; being a Métis girl, she always remained aloof from them and always guarded from them. The social agonies are so deep that it is almost impossible for her to join the MacLeod family. Vanessa expects that being indigenous, Piquette may give additional information about wilds and birds, but nothing happens. In this story the loon birds are compared with indigenous people, as the loons are disappearing from Diamond Lake due to the increasing number of people constructing farmhouses; the birds are migrating north. Nearly all the loons are at the step of extinction at Diamond Lake in the same way indigenous people and minorities are declining in Canada.

After a few years, Vanessa met Piquette again; she had married an Englishman and seemed happy with her life. Piquette acknowledges that Vanessa's father is the only man who acts compassionately toward her in Manawaka. But the bad luck followed Piquette once again; her marriage did not last long, and she came back with her two kids to Manawaka. The tragedy breaks her down, and Piquette becomes a habitual drinker. One day Piquette and her two children perished in a fire at the Tonnerre settlement. Piquette is a character in Manawaka who experienced all types of exploitation from all around her. Piquette illustrates the plight of women in minorities of Manawaka.

Leslie Monkman remarks, "In each Manawaka narrative, the Métis family of Jules Tonnerre becomes the focus of suffering and death, acceptance and endurance that are integrally related to the experience of each of Laurence's heroines" (Monkman, 57).

Margaret Laurence wants to bridge the gap among the indigenous, minorities, and the settlers, but the disparities among them will take some time to overcome. There are few like Dr. MacLeod who want to bring together all, but there are people like Grandfather Connor and Grandmother MacLeod who believe in the superiority of their origin, their culture, and their traditions.

Conclusion

It represents the characters from various ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds and their dominance and oppression in the town of Manawaka. It also highlights the contribution of these groups to the development of the town. The Manawaka series explores various aspects of minority life, including their way of living, social position, and occupational roles. There is a kind of progression in the significant roles of characters from minority communities. Margaret Laurence in Manawaka fiction not only gave voice to the troubles of women in the town but also focused on the characters from minority communities. She expressed gratitude to them. It is necessary to include these kinds of characters in any study of the Manawaka series.

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