

A Literary Journey: Imagining Africa in Margaret Laurence's Canadian Prairie

Andreea Raluca Topor (Constantin)
Teaching Assistant, Romanian-American University
PhD Candidate, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Canadian author Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is worldwide known mainly for her Manawaka cycle, and secondly, for her Africa-set writings. Crossing spatial and fictional borders, Laurence underwent a series of transformations, leading to a self-discovery as a woman writer and to a re-configuration of her experience abroad in her published fiction and non-fiction.

My paper aims to argue my academic interests in her work and to bring forward Margaret Laurence's prominence in Canadian literature and also to demonstrate that her work, whether set in Africa or Canada, represents an entity connected by the portrayal of the "full humanity of the most neglected and forgotten among us" [3, viii].

Key words

Margaret Laurence, prominence, biography, main writings, Canada, Africa

Canadian author Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is considered "a founding mother of Canadian literature" [3, viii], or "the First Lady of Manawaka" as the Canadian National Film Board called her in the movie dedicated to her life. She was one of the most loved English-Canadian writers for at least thirty decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s, often referred to as "the 'godmother' of contemporary Canadian women's writing" [4, 199], twice winner of Governor-General's Awards (in 1967 for *A Jest of God* and in 1975 for *The Diviners*) and possessor of Companion of the Order of Canada (1971). Her work is still read and enjoyed nowadays and people from all over the world research her writings thoroughly.

This paper aims to discuss Margaret Laurence's work and prominence, starting from those biographical elements which marked her writing. Secondly, I want to explain my academic interests in the Laurentian writings and thirdly to describe the writer's impact on myself, one of her many readers.

Margaret Wemyss was born on the 18 July 1926 in the Canadian prairie, in the small town of Neepawa, in Manitoba, but Manawaka, the imaginary place she created, outreached the renown of the original. At the same time, as Laurence lived abroad for a long period, she imprinted upon our minds, another unique space, her work depicting some African countries and the changes they were facing before and during their independence movements. Her entire work is an inner and outer journey, inner into her own soul and outer to Somalia, Ghana, and Great Britain in order to discover that Canada was the place where she really belonged both in life and in fiction.

Laurence's childhood, was unfortunately unhappy and several tragic events marked her entire life. Peggy (that is how Margaret was called in her early years) lost her mother, Verna, aged thirty-four, when she was barely four years old. One year later, her father remarried his sister-in-law, Aunt Margaret, and then had a son together, Peggy being part of a bigger family, her biological mother, "[her] other mother" [12, 41] not forgotten, and Mum, her aunt/step-mother fulfilling an important role.

In 1935, Peggy's life was again put to test, when Robert, her father died of pneumonia, leaving behind a young wife with two children to bring up alone, Peggy, eight and a half and, Bobby, one and a half years old. Because of these events and the Depression, the three family members' life totally changed and they had to move into the maternal house with the grandparents.

This brings us to the author's ancestors, the Simpson family, on her mother's side and the Wemyss family, on her father's side, who are present in her literary destiny by means of their Irish and Scottish roots, respectively. Although she took pride in both, Laurence attributed a fantastic aura to her Scottish background, borrowing this ancestry to one of her most memorable characters, Morag Gunn (*The Diviners*), author and heroine coming to terms with their pasts, whether real or fictional.

In her essay "Road from the Isles" (*Heart of a Stranger*), Laurence confessed that at a certain age, "the disenchantment set in" and "gradually [she] began to perceive that [she] was no more Scots than [she] was Siamese" [7, 160]. As an adult she still travelled to Scotland trying "to discover some feelings of ancestry there, something that would convey to [her] a special personal meaning." [7, 160] It was only after this journey to Scotland, a journey that Morag fictionally made, too, that she realized that where she belonged was the small prairie town in Manitoba where

she was born. Furthermore, as the information was not accurate whether her family had belonged to the Lowlanders or the Highlanders, the young woman opted for the Highlanders as they “seemed more interesting and more noble to [her] in every way.” [7, 160].

As a young woman, Laurence left the small, stifling prairie town in order to forge a better future, to be independent, to pursue her already emerging literary dreams and to find love. She went to college in Winnipeg, at the age of 18, to discover “quite literally, a whole new world” [11, 242]

Her journey to faraway places had started at an imaginary level, while still a child, skimming through her father’s collection of *National Geographic* magazines whose incredible places were taking shape, years later, in the real Africa. Marrying Jack Laurence, a civil engineer, she had the opportunity to travel for real. Accompanying her husband, the Laurences lived between 1950 and 1952 in the former Somaliland where Jack was supervising the building of water reservoirs, called *ballehs*, into the Haud, and between 1952 and 1956 in the former Gold Coast, where Jack was involved in a massive engineering project of constructing a deep-water harbour in Accra, the capital city.

For “a good many years” Africa had been home to “a stranger in strange lands” [7, vii], and although oppressed by the colonizers, Africans applied the verse from Exodus which impressed Laurence so much, “thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger” [qtd. in 7, vii] and accepted the Canadian couple. For Margaret personally, the African experience was, firstly, a life exercise for a young woman in her twenties that “taught [her] more about [her]self and even [her] own land than it did about anything else”, giving her “a new perspective on home” [7, vii]. Secondly, Africa was a source of inspiration, offering Laurence a setting to write about, saving her from “an autobiographical first novel” [7, 2], impeding her to write about Canada earlier than it would “have been the right thing for [her]” as her “view of the prairie town...was still too prejudiced and distorted by closeness” [7, 2]. Africa was also the place, where her son David was born, event which was fictionalized in her first book *This Side Jordan*. Finally, her relationship with Africa was what she called “a seven years’ love affair”, but it had to end at a certain point, as it had not become “a lifetime commitment”, nor turned into “the close involvement of family”. [10, 29]

When Laurence started to write about her own background, she was surprised to see how the language her characters were using belonged to her prairie ancestors or

contemporaries, how actual places, people, landscapes from her past were unconsciously coming back to her memory. Probably the most important reason behind the author's change of setting was the feeling she had that she "had written everything [she] could out of that particular experience" and that she "very **much** wanted to return home in a kind of spiritual way" [14, 68]. And she did return home when the Manawaka world came into being, in 1964, thus discovering the setting where "[her] eyes were formed", "[her] way of viewing" [7, 237]. Her four novels and the short-story collection, span over three generations, starting from her grandparents' up to the author's, demonstrating what "Canadian-based and gender-inclusive material" [17, ix] should mean, listening to her "compulsion to set down [her] own background". [5, 54]

After several returns to Canada, for shorter or longer periods of time, Jack receiving another assignment abroad, Margaret decided to take their kids to London, in 1962, and then to, Penn, Buckinghamshire, starting from the following year. Their relationship was no longer so stable, and Laurence was too much of an independent woman. In addition, she had started publishing professionally and needed time on her own, needed that freedom which was not yet available to professional women in the '60s and also could no longer imagine her son and daughter living in the desert. This firstly led to a separation and afterwards a divorce, Margaret remaining alone until the end of her life.

After ten years at Elm Cottage, in Penn, where Laurence kindly hosted many "impecunious writers or ... would-be writers suffering from writer's block" [15, 4], she brought her children home in 1973. As she had already bought a house, when returning to Canada, she moved into the "shack", as she called it, near Peterborough, Ontario, on the banks of Otonabee River, which would inspire her in the setting of *The Diviners*. As writer-in-residence at Toronto, Trent, and Western Ontario she continued her support for young artists, played a key role in the founding of the Writers' union of Canada and edited the works of many younger writers.

After turning her attention to fiction for young adults, she died 5 January 1987 in Lakefield, Ontario while working on a very special memoir, *Dance on the Earth*, edited and published posthumously by her daughter Jocelyn.

Following the biographical course, it is considered that her work can be divided into two geographical areas as far as the setting is concerned, i.e. Africa and

Canada, her writings shifting from fiction to non-fiction, from novels to short stories, from adults to children's literature, from critical essays to numerous letters.

In very general lines, summarizing her prominence, we can speak about two important aspects of her writing. Firstly, Margaret Laurence's African creation managed to assure herself a place in the eyes of the Africans, "that is almost unique among Western writers" [16, 93] and secondly her Manawaka cycle was an element in the forging of a Canadian identity and an identifiable, specific Canadian environment. Above all, her whole work can be perceived as an entity connected by the portrayal of the "full humanity of the most neglected and forgotten among us". [3, viii]

Although she started her literary career at an early age, her professional publications are the ones which are generally taken into consideration. She translated a volume of Somali literature (*A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose*, 1954), wrote a novel set in Ghana (*This Side Jordan*, 1960) and a collection of short stories (*The Tomorrow-Tamer*, 1963), a memoir of her experience in Africa (*The Prophet's Camel Bell*, 1963), and edited an anthology of Nigerian writers (*Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*, 1968). Her Canadian work, the Manawaka cycle consists of four novels and a collection of short stories: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). To all these, we should add four books for children: *Jason's Quest* (1970), *Six Darn Cows* (1979), *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980), a collection of essays (*Heart of a Stranger*, 1976), other articles, reviews, notes, addresses and letters, which culminated with *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (1989).

My thesis aims to discuss the portrayals of the "other" in Laurence's books, to present those protagonists who could not "easily become either heroes or anti-heroes" [3, ix], as they are normal, ordinary fictional protagonists, mainly perceived as not being exciting enough in order to become representative figures, but whose presence shows her compassion for people, thus "rais[ing] the value of all sectors of society" [3, viii]. My role is to comment how the voice of the "other" makes itself heard throughout her books, as reflected in the dichotomies between clashing worlds that she depicts: the interactions between Whites and Blacks in the Africa-related writings, both men and women included; the racial (e.g. Metis) and ethnic minorities of the Manawaka society (e.g. Scottish, Irish, Ukrainian, German

and Icelandic etc.) vs. the white settlers; the rich founders of the community vs. the poor, lower class of the imaginary prairie town.

To this end, I will examine how her imagination swiftly shifted from one continent to the other, from one genre to the other, from one target reader to the other, in order to challenge readers' perceptions of identity, gender, race and ethnicity. Giving her credit for each and every piece of writing that she published will justify my fascination for this Canadian author and above all, will pay tribute to Margaret Laurence's contribution to the Canadian canon and to the promotion and recognition of African life and literature.

My personal contribution to the already existent criticism of Margaret Laurence's works is the analysis of her work as an entity and not in the common binary oppositions: fiction vs. non-fiction, Africa vs. Canada, white vs. Black or Metis. The assumptions I started from are the following: *Heart of a Stranger* and *The Prophet's Camel Bell* enable the complete understanding of Laurence's fiction and open wider horizons. Secondly, I realized that her gallery of portraits, especially those who were neglected for their racial and ethnic origin, can only be complete when following the writer's connections between Africans and Canadians. Thirdly, according to Morley, there is something more to adjoining the fictional and non-fictional genres which completes my arguments. The reason Morley offers is that Laurence's "travel narrative uses fictional techniques and is essential to our understanding of its author. It is one of her major works" [13, 34], thus perceiving the two genres as connected by the author's incredible talent.

On the other hand, the challenge of this approach is that the critique does not commonly analyse all these protagonists according to the community within which they are inscribed. In spite of critical comments which might be raised, I would suggest a different perspective. It cannot be ignored that the Black and Metis remain secondary characters throughout Laurence's fiction (with some exceptions), or that the issue of voice appropriation can constitute an argument against Laurence's portrayal of Black people or Half-breeds. However, from the viewpoint of the present-day Canadian cultural policies, I believe that a fair and balanced representation of Canadian identity, allows for a re-evaluation of the various voices articulated within these texts.

At a personal level, above the critical commentaries and the theoretical approaches, I would like to conclude with a few lines about the bond that has now been created between Margaret Laurence's work and me.

On the one hand, I was first very impressed by the Manawaka world and its female characters and I could not help getting involved into their lives, wondering at the same time, what I would do in a similar situation, blaming them, showing compassion for them, agreeing or disagreeing with their actions and reactions. I probably read the Manawaka Cycle at the appropriate age, almost the age of most of Laurence's heroines, when no answers can be found, no solutions can be given by anybody, be it author or friend, and the mere discovery that you are not alone in this world is sheer revelation. The girlfriend/wife, mother or daughter's worries and experiences of Laurence's novels seem to be mine, too, to a certain extent, if we ignore the temporal and spatial framework. I believe they can actually be every woman's dilemmas.

On the other hand, I read afterwards her African fiction, and then her non-fiction, and when choosing to take the difficult path in my analyses, not the white female characters who were so much at hand, but the difficult and ambiguous "other", I fell in love again with Margaret Laurence. I fell in love with her humanism, with her genuine concern for people, with her helpfulness, with her courage and first and foremost with her characters, portrayed "as faithfully as [she was] able to do" [8, 15], "characters [who] breathe" [9, 81], who "**are** free" [5, 51]. And I am STILL in love with her literature, whose "earthy, yet lyrical, compassion for mankind, for family, for friends, for her tribe of writers, for her fictional creations" [2, 286], swiftly emerges from her writings. As...

"...she spoke for us.
Our sister, Margaret,
Spared herself nothing." [6, 55]

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