

**The Hometown Influence In The Lives Of The Protagonists Of Margaret
Laurence's Manawaka Novels: An Analysis**

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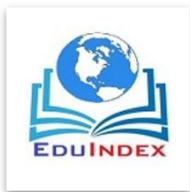
Abstract

Margaret Laurence, the Canadian novelist is familiar for her Manawaka novels. These novels exhibit the lives of the people of Manawaka, the fictional land that replicates Neepawa, Manitoba which is the birthplace of Laurence. The Manawaka novels include *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1972). These are considered as the classics of Canadian literature. Laurence registers how one's background plays significant role in shaping his/her personality. Manawaka's influence is evidenced in almost all female characters of her novels. At the initial stage, these women regard the influence as hindrance but in due course of progress, they realize the value of this influence. Through these novels, she reveals the positive and negative effects of the influences of a place that strongly affects the personality of people over several generations. She uses original songs and histories along with the prairie landscape that creates high impact on the characters. This paper analyses the influence of Manawaka in the lives of the characters of Laurence's Manawaka novels.

Keywords: Background, replica, influence, escape, progress, value, personality, responsibility, familial bond, strong.

Canada is identified as a huge country with diverse people. Canadian literature is set upon small town background that includes images of the wilderness and of rural life. Margaret Laurence is well-known for her short stories and novels. She is familiar for her Manawaka novels. These novels exhibit the lives of the people of Manawaka, the fictional land that replicates Neepawa, Manitoba which is the birthplace of Laurence. The Manawaka novels - *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1972) are considered as the classics of Canadian literature. She registers how one's background plays significant role in shaping his/her personality. Manawaka's influence is evidenced in almost all female characters of Laurence's novels. At the initial stage, these women regard the influence as hindrance but in due course of progress, they realize the value of this influence.

Through these novels, she reveals the positive and negative effects of the influences of a place that strongly affects the personality of people over several generations. She uses quite unusual details, such as original songs and histories along with the prairie landscape that creates high impact on the characters. This paper analyses the influence of Manawaka in



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the lives of the characters of Laurence's Manawaka novels especially *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*.

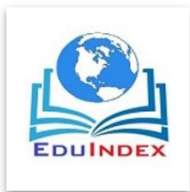
Laurence portrays women as protagonists who are all natives of the prairie town, Manawaka. Her novels are set in her imaginary town, Manawaka which serves as a model of her hometown. Each of her novels exposes the lives and the geographical landscape of the people of Manawaka. She elaborately pictures the development of the characters and their relationships through socio-political settings. In an interview to Bernice Lever about the choice of the small town background, Laurence expresses:

There are a number of Canadian writers who work out of urban situations, of course, and probably an increasing number, but my own feeling about this is that a small town, far from being limiting, is a kind of microcosm. Anything that happens anywhere, in some way or other happens in a small town. (6)

Writers like Walter Scott, Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson and R. K. Narayan have created mythical microcosms based either on their birthplace or on their own imaginary land. Laurence follows them with her Manawaka like Walter Scott's Waverley, Thomas Hardy's Wessex, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and R. K. Narayan's Malgudi. Canadian fiction has been famous for its regional richness. In *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, Clara Thomas insists that Manawaka is the most famous of these fictional lands. She stresses: But no town in our literature has been so consistently and extensively developed as Margaret Laurence's Manawaka. Through five works of fiction, it has grown as a vividly realized, microcosmic world, acting as a setting for the dilemmas of its unique individuals and also exercising its own powerful dynamic on them. Manawaka is also specifically, historically, and geographically authentic, dense with objects and true to its place and its development through time (156).

Laurence became popular as the first lady of Manawaka with her celebrated Manawaka novels. She has a prominent place in Canadian literature. Through her prairie novels, Laurence has raised the Canadian literature to a significant and valuable position. Her Manawaka series portrays the various locations of Neepawa exactly as spotted in the map. For instance, *A Jest of God* locates some of the landmarks of the Neepawa town like Doherty's stalls, Jarrett's bakery, the Queen Victoria Hotel, and Cameron's funeral parlour. The directions are clearly explained. One can easily trace the route through the River Street that goes down South, to the river Wachakwa and to the North, to the CPR railway across which the Main Street cuts. The residence of the Camerons is also referred as located in the Japonica Street. In *A Jest of God*, Rachel who returns home observes:

I turn at River Street and walk past the quiet dark brick houses, too big for the remaining occupants, built by somebody's grandfathers who did well long ago out of a brickworks or the first butcher shop. Long ago meaning half a century. Nothing is old here but it looks old. The timber houses age fast, and even the brick looks worn down after fifty years of blizzard winters and blistering summers. (17)



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The visitors to Neepawa are surprised to witness the places that are identical to those which appear in Manawaka. It has all settings like the brick house, the little house, the Regal Cafe, the Roxy Theatre, the River Street, Mountain Avenue, the cemetery in the hill, the river in the valley and so on. Laurence transforms the picture of her hometown, Neepawa into the miniature Manawaka which forms the setting of her famous Manawaka cycle that forms the base of her novels. Her transfiguration of Neepawa as Manawaka illustrates her artistic skill. She explains the correlation between her hometown and her fictional town in her first essay, "A Place to Stand On," of *Heart of a Stranger*. She confirms:

Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa - it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share. (3-4)

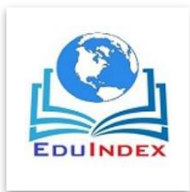
Laurence depicts her female protagonists in every possible familial and social role. Her protagonists are portrayed as mother, daughter, sister, wife, lover and friend. She makes them discover their individual identity. Her Manawaka families namely, the Camerons, the MacLeods and the Tonnerres appear and show their existence across from novel to novel. She successfully links one novel with another where the characters reappear claiming certain relationships. For instance, Stacey MacAindra of *The Fire-Dwellers* and Rachel Cameron of *A Jest of God* are sisters. She also explains how the people in them relate to one another exposing the lives of individual inhabitants. Dick Harrison in *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* asserts:

At the same time they are victims of the prairie's Manawaka culture-- its bigotry, its Calvinist self-repression, its dedication to a few limited and life-denying truths which may have sustained the pioneers but which stifle the next generation and isolate them from the life which should be accessible to them. (197)

Laurence's affinity with her homeland made her create the imaginary Manawaka for her Canadian novels. This fictional land adds colour to her novels. In *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, Clara Thomas states:

Manawaka is not Neepawa, but its geography, the details of its situation, its Landmarks, and its people depend on Margaret Laurence's experience of Neepawa and on her ability to store in memory and transmute what she knew and what she felt of it into a created fictional world. All the history of her town had been woven into the fabric of the Manawaka works . . . (174-75)

In Laurence's novels, the same lives are viewed from different perspectives. People grow up, marry, leave or die. The inhabitants are usually controlled by hard-working and God-fearing Scottish businessmen. This is evident in most of the lives of the people residing in Manawaka. Morag witnesses this sort of discrimination in the life of her foster father

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Christie. She comes across the death of Pique, Jules' sister upon which the residents turn deaf ears. This shows the sorry state of the poor and down trodden class. Manawaka is a tough place for most of its residents. People fear this as a place that threatens the inhabitants to leave permanently. Morag like the protagonists of other Manawaka novels try to escape but each time she tries, she is obstructed by some forces somewhere. Once she escapes Manawaka she is caught under the clutches of the authoritative hands of Brooke. She finds it very tough to pass on her days with him yet remembering the role wives of her hometown and the humiliations faced by the people of the lower stratum, she endures pain silently.

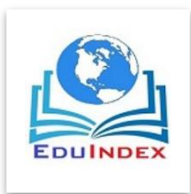
Stacey of *The Fire-Dwellers* escapes her hometown and elopes with MacAindra. Though she decides to forget the imprints of her birthplace and erase the footprints behind her, she steals with her the memories of Manawaka, her homeland along with the memories of her father, the town undertaker and her sick mother in the prairies. She yearns for the smell of the prairie land in the country where her nostrils are always filled with the smell of bombs and blast furnaces. Laurence has proved her efficiency in recreating the Canadian prairie through the lives of the characters. Stacey's thoughts, her memories, her fantasies, her conversations and her actions constantly interact with each other. She recalls her past and goes back to her nineteenth year. Alike other women, she too seeks solace from her past. She repents her deeds only when she realizes her responsibility as the mother of a teenage daughter. Each time she goes out of the familial bond, she is pulled back by the forces inherent in her through her ancestors to be a devoted mother.

Stacey decides to escape Manawaka and conceal her identity expressing her wish to settle in Vancouver. Morag also plans a life in Vancouver. They both try to settle in Vancouver, a place they consider as heaven. The difference Stacey observes between Vancouver and Manawaka is clearly exposed through her conflicts. It is clearly evident that society plays a vital role in the shaping of the character of any individual. It is important that an individual has to shape himself/herself according to the societal norms so as to survive in the society. Stacey's world is a complex one consisting of the mass media like Newspapers, Radios and Televisions. It is media that shapes her society. The interference of the media in life helps her to know the condition of the people around her. Her world is filled with chaos. In *The Fire-Dwellers* Laurence notes:

The buildings at the heart of the city are brash, flashing with colors, solid and self-confident. Stacey is reassured by them, until she looks again and sees them charred, open to impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones, shadows of the people frog – splayed on the stone like in that other city. (11)

Morag observes Vancouver as a place of reunion for the people of Manawaka as most of them seek shelter there. Once settled in Vancouver, Morag arrives at an understanding about life after meeting another person from Manawaka. She realises that Vancouver functions as a magnet for small-town prairie people. Morag writes:

"We all head west, kiddo. We think it'll be heaven on earth –no forty below in winter, no blast furnace in summer, and mountains to look at, not just grain elevators. So we troop out to



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the Coast, and every time we meet someone from back home we fall on their necks and weep. Stupid, eh?" You have to go home again, in some way or another. This concept cannot yet be looked at. (248)

Laurence's expresses how the past affects the future throughout the novel. Her lyrical writing gives life to the characters in such a way that they move alive in the minds of the readers. It explains the story of the past and the present and the place they occupy in the lives of women. Laurence successfully expresses the inner turmoil of women. She analyses certain concepts like liberty, survival, colonialism and other complex situations that recur in the lives of women. She travels into the mind of her protagonists and perceives situations through their eyes. She treats them as real. She shows little interest in the most radical and subversive elements. She follows the path of other novelists conventionally.

Women are always placed under the guardianship of men since the evolution of mankind. Woman as daughter is safeguarded by her father, as sister by her brother, as wife by her husband, as mother by her son. They are always placed under the protection of men. Their efforts to break the shackles at times go in vain as seen in the lives of Stacey, Rachel and Morag. But towards the end after numerous battles, they emerge at least strong if not victorious. Their desire to be independent is curbed by their familial bonds according to the norms of their Manawakan society. Wherever these women reside the influence of Manawaka persists in them. Their lives are highly influenced either by their own mothers or the other elderly women residing in and around the prairie land as seen through the characters of Rachel, Stacey and Morag. Thus the homeland influence highly affects the lives of women in all possible ways. Most of the time this influence is observed in a highly positive note that leads them to manage the struggles and hardships they encounter.

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