A DIVINING OF MEMORY STUDIES IN MARGARET LAURENCE’S THE DIVINERS

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Laurence a celebrated writer has made use of the first-person narration, flashback and the associative memory narration excavating the past. The Diviners is accepted for its profound search of the functions of the role of the memory and its functions and the processing. It is due to the mesmerising effects of the memory that the narration becomes effective, stressing the incidents, highlighting the pleasant and hiding the rest. The protagonist Morag Gunn lives in a riverside farmhouse in Eastern Ontario. The assumption here is that human emotions are conditioned by environmental factors. The physical landscape affects and reacts with the mindscape of the characters. This is evident from very ancient times even in the epics. Through a series of flashbacks, she reviews her earlier life. Memory studies enable literary scholars to approach literature from a new vantage point that brings together various types of knowledge gathered by literary studies and memory studies. Every reader of this novel is bound to ask himself or herself, which story is the most significant, whether of the woman seeking independence or of the writer desiring self-expression. The main, powerful, and fascinating story of the struggles of an independent woman and her urgent need for love is told through extended flashbacks which Laurence calls Memory Bank Movies. This paper aims at tracing such interconnections of Memory and culture in Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners, a novel that has been based on Laurence’s studies in a summer home she established on the Ontobee River, which she named Manawaka cottage.

Keywords: Kunstlerroman, Memory Bank Movies, Snapshots, Tradition, Fragmentation, Divine

Memory Studies is a recent interdisciplinary tool in the field of literary and cultural studies. Writers have unwittingly been doing Memory Studies for the past few years. Apart from raising questions like how is memory represented in a work of art, what role does the physical memory play in the plot of the novel, etc. Memory Studies also analyses the role played by the memory in the imagination of a cultural community. As an outcome of this influence, the text becomes a place where different visions of Memory Studies and varying images of culture are played out. Therefore, critics study the environmental conditions of an author’s life, mapping out the influence of the place on the imagination demonstrating that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work.

Among the literature of various countries, Canada has its own way of treating the features of post modernism with its long-routed travelling into the path of history through the memory of the people, enabling a structural delineation of the embedded historical accounts and its powerful aboriginal thoughts and feelings. The import of bilingualism and multiculturalism has afforded Canada the inclusion of two dominant cultures namely the British and the French, along with the aboriginal. The major contribution of the writers is on sharing the heavy impact and the influence of international immigration in the recent years. Writers engage themselves in bringing an outlook on the environment, socio-political issues and largely the significance of the history that has been lost in the discussion.

Margaret Lawrence the widely reputed regional writer has been the nominee for the Nobel Prize in 1982. She has won innumerable prestigious awards like Beta Sigma, Governor General Award. She caters the need of post war nationalism with the imaginary creation of Manawaka partly based on her native town of Neepawa, Manitoba, which has become the region of all her novels. Laurence places in her novel, the fictional town Manawaka, which is simply a fictional town of her mind. Laurence’s works can be completely understood with an eye on her region and its physical, mental, spiritual, historical and the cultural features. Hagar’s pride in The Stone Angel, Rachel’s...
fear in *A J est of God* and Stacey’s frustration in *The Fire Dwellers* pertain to the Manawaka setting exhibiting the region’s original feelings. The same is the case with her other works with a profound felicitation of Manawaka and its features. The inner lives of all the characters of Laurence are observed with a deep knowledge and the understanding of the tradition of this region. The characters are seen struggling to get their inner freedom being bound by the primitive heritage of the impulse of the Stern Calvinism of Scottish Presbyterian Protestantism and also the aboriginal pride of tribality which are hedgerows of security. These females, the centres of importance of the novels of Laurence, seek liberty and self-realization passing through the process of alienation, wanderings, searching with the final solution of self-awareness and ample amount of self-knowledge. She portrays women to be under the restriction of attaining self-fulfilment with its strict traditional mode of life. Laurence proceeds from a minor level to major level developing experimentation, providing the voice and time as the backdrop in all her novels. The inner monologue of the characters voice, the narration mingling the past and the present are the repetitive symbols in her works.

Though this *kunstlerroman* novel *The Diviners* Laurence recounted the story of Morag Gunn of Manawaka, her growth as a writer of novels and is based on the fundamental premise of humans’ memories co-existence. *The Diviners* give her a chance to delve deep into her Scottish Presbyterian origins and heritage. In her essay titled “A Place to Stand On”, she has clearly stated

> I recognized that in some way not at all consciously understood by me, I had to begin approaching my background and my past through my grand parents’ generation, the generation of Scot Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town I called Manawaka. This was where my roots began. Other past generations of my father's family had lived in Scotland, but for me, my people's real past- my real past- was not connected except distantly with Scotland. (89).

Margaret Laurence appears to conclusively arrive at the realization that ‘past shapes us as much as we shape our past,’ though this may appear to be the case with the topical sentence with which *The Diviners* opens: “The river flowed both ways”. The protagonist of this novel, Morag Gunn reflects quite early in the novel: A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past,” but she asserts "everyone is constantly changing their past, recalling it, revisiting it” (60).

*The Diviners* partially provide an answer to this popular misconception. This gets illustrated from the fact that the past events in the novel are narrated in the present tense and the present events in the past tense. Laurence offers us a double perspective on her protagonist Morag Gunn. The first of these sees her from the inside, shares her thoughts, experiences, and feelings in the 'Memory bank Movies' and 'Snapshots' in the first three parts of the novel where the flashback technique has been innovatively used. It witnesses her coming to terms with her life’s realities and ironies through the act of writing, of giving significant shape to those realities through her books in the last two parts. But, through the use of the third person, Laurence makes us see Morag from the outside as well, i.e. from a distance one sees her life getting shaped by her experiences; one sees her not only composing the story of her life but also being composed by it—a product of the pressures working on her mind and being subjected to the patriarchal discourses of her day.

The novel is divided into five sections. There are eleven chapters in all, each beginning with a short account of the present where Morag is already an established novelist, going through the trials, of raising a teen-aged daughter Pique and writing her books at the same time. But the main, powerful, and fascinating struggles of an independent woman and her urgent need for love is told through extended flashbacks which Laurence calls Memorybank Movie. Other devices of shorter pieces, Snapshot, and Inner film, are also used to supplement the flashbacks wherever necessary.

Many of the expected sub-themes are also present: the sterility of internalized snobbery, born of small-town gossip and pettiness, which destructively haunts all the women protagonists. The fascination with the real outsiders in Manawaka society – the Métis, personified by the Tonnerre family “*those breeds* meaning half breeds. They’re part Indian, part French, from away back. They are mysterious. People in Manawaka talk about them. But they don’t talk to them”. The importance of children and childhood. The dangerous gap between sexuality and friendship. The potency of memory is reflected in Laurence's sustained and brilliant use of the flashback—not to substitute for a plot, but to substantiate it in the present tense of the novel.
Morag Gunn was not born in Manawaka; she is an outsider. Manawaka so possesses her imagination and hours that it is easy to overlook this and its importance. Morag has memories, and even a few concrete facts in the shape of photographs, that pre-date her arrival in Manawaka, that give her a different point of focus, a different perspective. Moreover, Morag is a real traveler; when she goes away it is not the brief panicked flight to western or eastern Canada; it is an international flight—she goes to Europe, she goes to Scotland, she goes back to the roots, before the very beginning of the culture of the Canadian plains. Morag also becomes successful. By the time she came to write The Diviners, Laurence, it seems to Sara Maitland, had two specific literary problems. One was that she was no longer able to convince herself, even in fictional terms, of the truth and authority of memory. The other was that her autobiographical involvement in her fiction was catching up with her.

The problem of memory was vital to Laurence’s fictional techniques. Her novels tend to be structured with a fairly short, tight, and thematically simple plot. The real time-scale of this book, for instance, is about five months—from spring to autumn of one year. During this time not, a great many actual events take place. The rest of the matter of the book is a sustained flashback; based subjectively on Morag's memory. This is Laurence's practice; it has inevitable difficulties of which not the least is that nothing can be known to the reader which is not accessible, in fact, and character, to the memory of the protagonist. There is always the lurking danger of either a self-indulgent or a single-dimensional text. To make this device work Laurence had created a series of women characters with enough intelligence and self-awareness for them to go convincingly inside themselves to unravel their truths, but with enough obvious prejudices and axes-to-grind to give a level of complexity and irony to the novels. But to give the novels the kind of realism and social location that she wanted she had to insist that the memories themselves contained real material. Memory is in all her previous novels, so far as one can guess, accurate and reliable.

It is clear however that by the nineteen seventies Laurence was no longer able to believe this—her ten years, work with characters whose lives overlapped must have forced upon her the realization that everyone saw things very differently, but she was also ten years inside an attempt to deal with her past and her memories by fictionalizing them, that is by reinventing them. How then was she to write a story which depended structurally on memory while telling what she believed to be the truth—that memory lied?

One of the hallmarks of Laurence's writing is the boldness with which she took on apparent literary disadvantages and turned them to her ends. When Sara Maitland wrote the afterword to The Stone Angel two years before she discussed this in more detail—particularly regarding the present –tense first-person narrative and the use of flashbacks. In The Diviners we see this again at a much deeper level; here we are not talking about literary techniques, but about profound personal questions. Her solution to the difficulty Sara Maitland had outlined above was an astonishingly bold one; she invented a character who had identified precisely this problem for herself. Now Morag, exploring Morag’s memories, can do the debunking of memory, on her author’s behalf—that is without Laurence having to obtrude herself into the text, and without losing the structure she was comfortable with or the immediacy of the subjective memory itself. Morag does this boldly:

A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past—everyone is constantly changing their past, recalling it, revising it. What happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer. (66)

But Laurence does not rely only on using her character as her mouthpiece; she also introduces a very effective literary technique for raising her questions about the validity of memory. Morag is assisted in her search for the truth, first by a collection of snapshots taken before her memories have begun. These snapshots are her only connection with her life before Manawaka and with her natural parents. But in Morag Laurence has created a character with sufficient self-knowledge and intellectual discipline to question her motivation, undermine her interpretations, and feel lost in her critical awareness. Having begun with the snapshots, Laurence then places Morag as one of the few households in which it would be most unlikely that family photos would be taken at all: this allows her to develop the idea of the photo- which "cannot lie"- into the idea of the Memory bank Movie-and movies, of course, are "made up", are fictions, can be edited, interpreted and their viewpoint is necessarily biased and incomplete. This whole technical jump preserves both the authority of the fictional text and Laurence's desire not to disassemble, but it also makes any possibility of continuing the Manakawa series highly implausible. It would be well-nigh impossible to think of another character who could have so sophisticated a relationship to her past as Morag and yet still be a credible product of Manakawa. On the other hand, once the idea of the earlier more straightforward approach to structuring the novel. Laurence’s courage in exposing and destroying the technical
basis for the whole sequence is, for Sara Maitland, one of the hidden driving forces of The Diviners, and one of its more easily overlooked magnificences.

What is immortal is also mystical, deep as implied by the art of water divining in the novel. The importance of water comes again when Royland, another character is introduced. The seventy-four years old Royland, who was out fishing for musicians, is a water-diviner by profession. Morag feels a similarity between her profession of the art of writing and his profession of the art of water-divining. As the novel ends Morag seems to have completed her journey while Pique has just begun. Laurence’s title The Diviners, though it stands for water divining also, implies Morag’s art of writing which is a form of divining too. Royland’s gift of divining is compared to Morag’s gift of writing – arts that can be learned and passed onto inheritors.

The language of Margaret Laurence exhibits a lucid quality, flowing like the river it describes, sinuous and poetic. Water imagery signifies life in the general as well as the cultural context of the nation. Morag’s recollection of her parents’ death is a sampling of how nature is used literally and metaphorically in the text: “I remember their deaths, but not their lives. Yet they are inside me, flowing unknown in my blood….,” Memories acquire the mystic depth of the river. Though a scavenger, Christie is a diviner in Morag’s eyes, divining the garbage. Morag first mentions Nuisance Grounds while explaining how she kept the old photographs:

They have jammed any-old-how into an ancient tattered manila envelope that Christie had given her once when she was a kid, and which said Mcvitie & Pearl, Barristers & Solicitors, Manawaka, Manitoba. Christie must have found it at the dump—the Nuisance Grounds, as they were known; what an incredible name, when you thought of the implications. (5)

As a way of conclusion, one may feel that there is nothing but memories in The Diviners. Morag, the protagonist, is a diviner of memories, Royland, to whose profession she compares her profession of writing, is a diviner of water, Christie, her foster-father, is a diviner of garbage, and finally Pique, Morag’s daughter is a diviner of her roots. Thus, the list goes on and on. And the metaphor of the Nuisance Ground as a burial ground, where one buries whatever is waste and is a nuisance, is poignantly made literal, the concatenation challenging the apparent innocence of the waste dump. Writing becomes a kind of rag-picking, a recovering of what memory has dumped as the nuisance of the past.

REFERENCES