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Mapping Identity and Memory: Female Self-Discovery in Margaret
Laurence's *The Diviners*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intertwined themes of identity, memory, and female self-discovery in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, the culminating novel in her Manawaka cycle. Centred on the protagonist, Morag Gunn, the narrative traces her journey toward self-realization through a fragmented interplay of past and present, memory and storytelling reconstruction. Drawing on feminist literary theory and autobiographical criticism, this study examines how Laurence portrays Morag's evolving identity as a woman, writer, and mother against the backdrop of Canadian cultural and historical contexts. The paper argues that memory in *The Diviners* functions not merely as a recollection of the past but as an active, shaping force in constructing identity. Furthermore, the novel's nonlinear structure and meta-fictional elements reflect Morag's internal struggle to reconcile the personal with the collective and the private self with the demands of societal roles. Through this analysis, the paper positions *The Diviners* as a seminal work in Canadian literature that offers a powerful narrative of female agency, resilience, and the transformative power of storytelling.

Keywords: Manawaka; Self-discovery; Female identity; Memory; Cultural; Feminist; Protagonist; Self-expression.

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), the final instalment in her Manawaka series, stands as a cornerstone of Canadian literature. It encapsulates the thematic concerns that run throughout Laurence's oeuvre and presents a rich, complex portrait of female identity. Sunita Sinha said about Laurence,-

"One of the Canadian's best loved writers", Laurence more than any other writer of her time, seemed to enjoy her life by writing these remarkable novels, throughout her writing career, she brought her readers to Manawaka, recreating the world in which her heroines, Hagar, Stacey and Rachel grew up in. Through these novels, Margaret Laurence showed how the apparition

of power by women could be conducted according to principles of self-interest (*Post-Colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives* 72).

The protagonist, Morag Gunn, is a novelist who retraces her life path to understand herself as a woman, writer, and mother. Margaret Laurence explores the intricate interplay between personal history and identity formation through an introspective narrative that blends memory with fiction. This paper examines how *The Diviners* utilizes memory as both a narrative device and a thematic focus to chart Morag's journey of self-discovery, with particular attention to feminist literary perspectives, the role of storytelling, and the Canadian cultural milieu. Some notable Canadian authors who have delved into these themes include Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Dionne Brand, Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, and many others. Their works often examine the complexities of women's lives, societal expectations, and the struggle for equality, making significant contributions to both Canadian literature and discussions of gender issues globally.

Memory as Narrative Structure

One of the most striking features of *The Diviners* is its nonlinear narrative structure, which mirrors the fragmented and recursive nature of memory. Rather than presenting Morag's life in chronological order, Margaret Laurence utilizes flashbacks, memory sequences, and meta-fictional reflections to allow readers to experience Morag's past as she re-experiences it. "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future" (*The Diviners* 477). This structure reinforces the idea that identity is not static or singular, but fluid and constantly evolving. Morag's memories, particularly those tied to her childhood in Manawaka and her adoptive father, Christie Logan, form a foundation upon which she builds her sense of self. These memories are not just passive recollections but actively shaped and reinterpreted through her writing. In this way, Margaret Laurence highlights the performativity nature of memory and its capacity to reshape identity. The novel's structure thus becomes a map of the self, charting the emotional and psychological landscapes that Morag must traverse to understand who she is. In *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence employs memory not only as a thematic concern but also as a foundational narrative strategy. The novel's nonlinear structure, characterized by sudden shifts in time, memory flashbacks, and introspective musings-reflects the fragmented nature of human recollection. This narrative approach emphasizes the central argument that identity is not a fixed entity developed through a linear sequence of events, but a complex, layered construct continually reshaped by the act of remembering. Morag Gunn's memories are deeply connected to places and people-Manawaka, Christie Logan, and her early encounters with Jules Tonnerre. These recollections are not presented objectively; instead, they are filtered through Morag's consciousness and shaped by her emotional responses and current understanding. Laurence thus dramatizes the act of remembering itself as an interpretative process, filled with gaps, revisions, and selective emphasis.

The novel's frequent use of what Laurence terms "Memory bank Movies" (*The Diviners*) further highlights the constructed nature of memory. These segments, stylized as internal visual flashbacks, allow readers to see how Morag replays and often reconfigures significant events from her life. The "Memory bank Movie" (*The Diviners*) device blurs the boundary between past and present, collapsing temporal distance and emphasizing how memory continues to exert influence on the present self. Moreover, memory functions as a literary map that guides Morag's quest for identity. Each recollection serves as a point on her internal journey-a journey not toward a definitive sense of self, but toward a more nuanced understanding of the multiple selves she inhabits over time. In this sense, Laurence's use of memory mirrors the feminist rejection of linear, teleological narratives that prioritize resolution over process. Instead, *The Diviners* values fluidity, circularity, and the coexistence of contradictions in shaping identity. By foregrounding memory as both theme and form, Laurence invites readers to consider how narrative is an act of remembering, editing, and reinterpreting lived experience. Through Morag's conscious engagement with her past, Laurence illustrates that the path to self-knowledge is

neither straightforward nor conclusive, but rather a continual negotiation between history, imagination, and narrative agency.

Female Self-Discovery and Feminist Themes

At the heart of *The Diviners* is a feminist exploration of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. Morag's journey of self-discovery involves breaking away from traditional gender roles and forging her path. She resists the expectations placed upon her as a woman, whether as a wife to Brooke Skelton, a mother to Pique, or a writer in a male-dominated literary world. Laurence portrays Morag as a complex and often contradictory character, which serves to humanize her and challenge monolithic portrayals of femininity. Through Morag, Laurence critiques societal norms that confine women to restrictive roles and emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-expression. Morag's decision to raise Pique as a single mother and her eventual acceptance of her own life choices underscore a feminist affirmation of agency and self-definition.

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* is deeply invested in the project of female self-discovery, portraying the life of Morag Gunn as a continual process of negotiation with societal expectations, personal desires, and cultural identity. Laurence uses Morag's experiences to critique patriarchal norms and to champion feminist ideals such as autonomy, creative freedom, and non-conformity. Morag's self-discovery begins with her rejection of imposed gender roles, particularly in her marriage to Brooke Skelton. Her sense of confinement is palpable as she reflects on the power dynamics in their relationship: "You think you own me because you pay the bills? You don't own me. Nobody owns me" (*The Diviners* 221).

This declaration underscores Morag's growing awareness of her need for independence, not only financial but also emotional and intellectual. As a writer, Morag insists on shaping her narrative, resisting traditional female archetypes. Writing becomes her act of resistance and self-definition. Laurence emphasizes this when Morag observes: "She had to write. Not for fame or fortune, but because she had to. It was the way she stayed alive" (*The Diviners* 311). This quote reflects a key feminist belief, that women must claim their voices and assert their creative identities as essential to their survival.

Motherhood, too, becomes a space for reimagining female identity. Morag chooses to raise her daughter Pique outside of traditional structures, embracing single motherhood as an act of agency. While society may view this as deviant, Morag sees it as essential to living truthfully. In a moment of introspection, she admits: "The choices we make are never entirely free, but the choosing is" (*The Diviners* 364). This insight reflects the nuanced feminist perspective that, while women may be constrained by social structures, they can still exert agency within those boundaries. Laurence also avoids presenting a simplistic or idealized image of female empowerment. Morag is often uncertain, conflicted, and self-critical. Yet this complexity is central to the novel's feminist message, that selfhood is not about perfection, but about persistence and self-interrogation. As Morag says: "Maybe being oneself is always a matter of degree" (*The Diviners* 390). This line captures the fluidity of identity and the continuous journey toward self-understanding that defines both the novel and feminist thought. Through *The Diviners*, Laurence presents a powerful portrait of a woman navigating the intersections of art, motherhood, love, and independence. By embedding Morag's story in richly feminist themes and affirming the value of female self-expression, Laurence contributes to a tradition of literature that empowers women to tell their own stories on their terms.

The Role of Storytelling:

Storytelling, both as a theme and a practice, plays a crucial role in Morag's identity formation. As a writer, Morag uses fiction to make sense of her past and to assert control over her narrative. Her work becomes a means of survival, a way to process trauma, and a vehicle for self-discovery.

"Laurence's heroine as a wanderer who, at the same time, is not free, but a captive to an overpowering force" (*Major Canadian Authors: A Critical Introduction To Canadian Literature in English* 245). Laurence uses meta-fictional elements, stories within stories, reflections on the writing process, and blurred lines between fiction and reality to underscore the power of narrative in shaping identity. The novel suggests that storytelling is inherently tied to memory, as both involve selection, interpretation, and reconstruction. Through her writing, Morag not only preserves her memories but also reclaims them, transforming pain into art and confusion into coherence. This process of narrative reconstruction mirrors the broader feminist project of giving voice to women's experiences and rewriting cultural narratives from a female perspective.

Cultural Context and National Identity

Set against the backdrop of mid-20th-century Canada, *The Diviners* engages with questions of national identity and cultural belonging. Laurence situates Morag's journey within a distinctly Canadian context, marked by tensions between urban and rural life, English and Scottish heritage, and settler and Indigenous histories. Morag's relationship with Jules Tonnerre, a Metis man and Pique's father, brings to the forefront issues of cultural hybridity and marginalization. Although their relationship is fraught and ultimately unsustainable, it represents a meaningful attempt at cross-cultural understanding and complicates the boundaries of identity. Pique, as the daughter of a white mother and a Metis father, embodies the novel's exploration of mixed heritage and the challenges of belonging. Laurence thus weaves together personal and collective histories, suggesting that individual identity cannot be disentangled from the cultural and historical forces that shape it. In doing so, she contributes to a broader conversation about what it means to be Canadian and how literature can serve as a space for negotiating identity. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* is not only a narrative of personal transformation but also a profound meditation on cultural context and national identity. Set in mid-20th-century Canada, the novel situates Morag Gunn's individual story within broader questions of Canadian identity, regionalism, colonial history, and cultural hybridity. Laurence weaves these themes into the fabric of the novel to highlight how identity is shaped not only by personal memory but also by the collective memory of a nation.

Morag's upbringing in the fictional town of Manawaka, a composite of small-town Canadian life, reflects the tensions between personal aspiration and communal conformity. The town represents a microcosm of Canadian conservatism, particularly in its treatment of gender roles, class divisions, and ethnic prejudices. Morag's adoptive father, Christie Logan, is mocked for his eccentricity and lower-class status, yet he imparts to Morag a love of stories and language. Alien Heart says about Margaret Laurence in her Interview-

In her Canadian novel the protagonist is always female: does that feature indicate the influence of feminism or is it a result of her sense of the need for self-reliance imposed by the early death of her mother? A frequent theme in that fiction is the lost father and the quest for a surrogate. Are these two features related to each other and her frequent depiction of domestic strife? (*The Life & Work of Margaret Laurence* 176).

Through this dynamic, Laurence underscores how Canada's national character has historically been shaped by marginal voices: "Christie, the scavenger, the fool, the outsider, but the one who gave her language" (*The Diviners* 52). This line emphasizes the value of non-dominant narratives in the formation of both personal and national identity. Laurence also critiques the colonial legacy embedded in Canadian society, particularly through the novel's engagement with Indigenous identity. Morag's relationship with Jules Tonnerre, a Métis man, confronts readers with Canada's fraught history of racial and cultural marginalization. Their daughter, Pique, embodies a mixed heritage that challenges the binary definitions of identity. Laurence writes: "Pique, whose bloodlines do not obey the categories, who must define herself anew" (*The Diviners* 403). This statement situates Pique, and by extension,

modern Canada, as a site of cultural negotiation rather than purity, mirroring Canada's struggle to forge a cohesive national identity in the face of its multicultural reality.

Laurence also highlights the contrast between English Canadian identity and other cultural traditions, such as Scottish heritage, as seen through Morag's ancestral reflections. The novel explores how immigrant legacies influence national character, yet also limit it through nostalgia and idealization. Morag often reflects on the myths of her Scottish ancestors, only to realize that these stories do not fully account for her experience as a modern Canadian woman:

"The old stories no longer suffice. She must write her myth, in her land" (*The Diviners* 289). In this way, Laurence asserts the importance of creating new narratives rooted in the realities of contemporary Canadian life, particularly for women and marginalized communities. Furthermore, Laurence employs the natural landscape, rivers, prairies, and wilderness as a metaphor for national identity. These settings are not just backdrops but active elements in Morag's self-understanding. The river, especially, symbolizes both continuity and change, echoing the Canadian experience of forging identity through constant movement and redefinition. In *The Diviners*, national identity is neither static nor monolithic. Laurence resists simplistic definitions of what it means to be Canadian by foregrounding diversity, displacement, and the interweaving of histories. Through Morag's personal story, Laurence invites a broader reflection on how nations, like individuals, are shaped by memory, narrative, and the ongoing struggle to define oneself about others.

Conclusion

In *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence presents a richly layered exploration of identity, memory, and female self-discovery. Through the character of Morag Gunn, the novel interrogates how personal history, storytelling, and cultural context inform the construction of the self. Laurence's innovative narrative structure and feminist sensibility make *The Diviners* a powerful meditation on the transformative potential of memory and the enduring importance of narrative. Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood offer distinct but interwoven perspectives on the Women's Question from the assertive independence of Morag Gunn, to the subtle resistance of *The Handmaid Tales'* Offred, to the raw transformation of the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing*. Together, they speak to the many forms of female strength, voice, and resistance. Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood offer distinct but interwoven perspectives on the Women's Question, from the assertive independence of Morag Gunn, to the subtle resistance of Offred, to the raw transformation of the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing*. Together, they speak to the many forms of female strength, voice, and resistance. As both a personal and a national story, the novel continues to resonate as a landmark work in Canadian literature and feminist writing.

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