

Woman as the compulsive Alazon in Margaret Laurence's The Diviners (1974) and Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock (1963)

Dr. Chetna Gupta

Associate Professor, Department of English SPMR College of Commerce, Jammu

*'For a Woman, an indifferent and callous
Husband is a Sisyphian Boulder, an
Indifferent god hurls upon her to make her
toil with'.*

As in the works of Indian and Canadian Writers, particularly the women novelists, Canadian writers as well have focused upon the social flux which took place very rapidly in the post Second World War period. This flux got symbolized by the representation of a radical change in the representation of the fictional female in the works of Indian and Canadian writers, especially the women novelists.

In the novels of Canadian Women writers who wrote their works in the last three decades of the twentieth century, the portraiture of women protagonists was done to depict these fictional females as existentialist rebels, contemporary *alazons*. For these female characters, domination by males and patriarchal exploitation became the main scourge for the wife, the lover or the mistress. Such gender discrimination and exploitation became highly detestable. The works of Margaret Laurence as well as Margaret Atwood, two very popular Canadian feminist writers became famous for readers because of a 'distinctiveness of utterance and a sureness of tone.' (Dhawan, 12) Laurence and Atwood dispensed with a stereotyped representation of women in their novels. Canadian feminist literature written in the seventies and the eighties, a decade of the previous century has been stimulated by 'a renaissance of interest in literature and culture.' (Reddy, 23). An itinerant and exclusive focus rests upon women's writing in Canadian literature written during the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), is a brilliantly complex novel that touches a responsive chord in every woman's heart. The central protagonist in *The Diviners* is Morag Gunn. Morag grows up in a small Canadian prairie town and gradually evolves into a rebel, a cynical and romantic *alazon* who in spite of a failed marriage and a heartbreaking affair is able to survive and negotiate the chaotic and turbulent waves of her sea of existence. Morag's female self attains the status of an explorer with an identity which seeks to rediscover itself as something new in the history of feminist literature. This sought to be narrated in *The Diviners*. Such an attempt is reflected in terms of time, culture, family and most important of all in memory. Margaret Laurence's novels get epitomized by the famous Manawaka series which comprises *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angels*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, and *A Bird in the House*. All these works reflect the female personality in quest of an identity, an identity which in symbolic terms could be defined as an existential oasis. *The Diviners* is no exception. *The Diviners* also belong to the Manawaka series and can be categorized as a work of postmodernist fiction, a fiction in which the problem of human identity especially the female identity, gets equated with the figure of a woman who struggles hard to attain the existential properties of a 'survival'.

In *The Diviners*, Morag Gunn herself is the narrator-protagonist who makes her growing up in an ordinary Canadian town as a kind of a hardening process, an existential predicament. Right from her childhood, Morag survives by simply becoming a fighter and a cynic, a romantic woman in a world that simply wanted her extinction and detested every part of her personality. It is Morag's self-reflexive

consciousness, her loneliness and her solitude, once forced upon her ultimately become the heroine's instruments of reconstructing her identity of willing and living a life enriched by dignity and an ability to give and receive love.

After marriage, Morag suffers from marital incompatibility and psychic disorientation as her relationship with her husband fails to produce any positive outcome. In context of the man woman relationship, and a changed socio cultural and environmental factor, Morag launches herself on a symbolic journey of self-renewal. As in the novels of Margaret Laurence. *The Diviners*, also present the heroine Morag Gunn as possessing a female identity which functions as a weapon of survival, an existential oasis in a world of male domination and patriarchal brutal realities. Morag, continuously struggles for a purposeful, meaningful renewing identity and in this difficult task she obtains an inspirational impetus from river-watching, a favourite hobby of the heroine which she goes on practicing for years together. The very opening lines of the novel reflect Morag's existential antithesis in the shape of an identity that struggles to identify itself with the paradoxical flow of the river current:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, watched, trying to avoid thought, but this ploy was not successful (The Diviners, 3)

In these lines, the reader is presented to a female self, as a self, which tries to reconstruct itself and during this existential reconstruction remains all the time eager to convey the idea of identity. Like the flow of the river water, Morag envisions her identity in terms of the one is the same, "in this place, this time as that time and that place, past or future; it is that by which one is identified" (Laing, 70). Morag's self gets imprisoned in a quagmire of forlornness and in authenticity, directly related to the present and manifesting itself identity in "opposition to social pressures and does not exist until presented." (Kreilkamp, 33). All this happens amidst the structural manifestations of the past. Morag suffers from a failed marriage, psychic and emotional

upheaval, and finally becomes hypersensitive and neurotic. Eventually, she realizes that she must focus upon the inner potentialities of herself, which would enable her to negotiate the inner complexities of her psyche and psychological state of mind.

Anita Desai's maiden novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), presents Maya as an individual and an interesting scenario of bleakness, emptiness, desolation and angst. Like Maya, the gulf between Morag and her husband goes on widening and gradually evolves into a longing for live, life and beauty, something reminiscent of utopian dreams and ambitions. In speculating about the future, Morag reflects about her fate in true apocalyptic fashion. While watching the flow of the river, Morag speculates inwardly and withdraws into her inner self. Like Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, and in *The Diviners* as well, the narrative moves steadily towards "the discovery of the self, the landscape across which the journey takes place", and this landscape is the interior landscape "which transcends all local, regional, nationalistic or cultural concerns". (Reddy, 25) Morag wages a fierce battle with her own self and her husband Brooke, who as a husband tries to impose upon his wife his one-dimensional persona. Like Gautama, husband of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Brooke, husband of Morag in *The Diviners* also fails to cater to his wife's desires, dreams and ambitions. The interior landscape of Morag's mind and psyche gives her the lesson that the basic and natural human desire to live and love always get and antithetically placed and usually remains in serious conflict.

Maya, unlike Morag fails to resolve the crippling dichotomy between the actual and the ideal and her suicide comes as the apocalyptic finale. In her suicide, we witness a warm, sensitive human being bidding adieu to a harsh, debased, system. Maya's cry of pain gives her inner anguish:

Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll sleep again. There is no rest any more---only death and waiting. (Cry, the Peacock, 84).

These lines reflect the disillusioned and spiritually thirsty Maya, who embraces death and melts to

nothingness. The world of mind and spirit directs the gaze of Morag and Maya inwards, the former resists the Narcissistic plunge, while the latter takes the plunge and gets destroyed.

Morag relives her past simply to obtain a better understanding of her family members. She makes out of it an existential paradigm by which the heroine's female identity analyses itself as an exercise in metafictional reconstruction of her identity. The river-watching and Morag's watching the flow of the river current becomes very clear in the beginning of the heroine's narrative. Morag helps her own Self to extricate herself from an existential morass and thus free herself from the inhuman clutches of a callous and brutal husband. By freeing herself from patriarchal tyranny, Morag could live the way she desired, in a free and unfettered manner with an identity of her own.

An existential-cum-psychological dichotomy exists and operates between Maya and Gautama. Even as a married couple, the two are poles-asunder making communication a big casualty in their married domestic and family life. Maya also fails to exercise a meaningful and successful communication with her husband in order to fulfill her psychological and emotional needs. Maya virtually qualifies to be the modern Cassandra as she already has a premonition about the eventual tragic end to her marriage as well as her marital existence. An astrologer had made Maya believe that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of their marriage. The ominous prediction also suggests the death to be produced "by unnatural causes" (CP 30). What could be more inhuman, unfortunate and intolerable from a young wife's perspective than her husband engrossed in his professional documents, while she goes on pinning for him, in her bed with her 'soft willing body' and a 'lonely wanting mind'. Maya's expressionistic, loaded semantics of her mind and soul, finally function as an existential curse, a failed dream which even the institution of marriage in the Indian traditional context, closely approximates to the peacock's cry of pain and anguish.

Cumulatively, it can be said that *The Diviners*, presents a highly appealing and comprehensive picture of Morag's struggle in a world of harsh realities. Morag is not an ordinary heroine, she has been labeled as "a Woman-Hero" (Vahia, 94) because she "faces the problems like divorce and

personal loses, more like a man than like a woman." (Vahia, 95) by facing the problems of her life in a manly-manner, especially problems related to her identity, thus Morag learns to make her mark by becoming a creative writer. Patricia Morley has rightly observed that *The Diviners* "is not 'for women's liberation nor against men.... both sexes obviously are subjects to loneliness, alienation, financial worries, pains, joy. Yet, women experience these things differently in our culture, in any culture and Laurence is very good at revealing differences".

From her very childhood, Morag detests being submissive and being treated as defeated. At the same, she also feels scared when she realizes what she is up against in her surroundings. Morag is very intelligent to realize that for a woman, weakness invites bullies. Consequently, she becomes determined not to be beaten by life. When the entire narrative in *The Diviners* is considered and reflected upon, the reader can easily discern two levels on which Morag remains in the limelight. At one level, the author shows her heroine in the process of growth from a child to a forty seven year old woman and at the other level she is shown as involved in a struggle to be a writer, to be born and to grow. Finally, Margaret Laurence in *The Diviners* conveys the important message that for a woman living in a male dominated society; the only way of salvation lies in putting in sincere efforts and to accept the circumstances and the struggle for freedom. Laurence herself believed in these cardinal facts of positive femininity and considered it not only applicable to women but to all human beings. For Morag Gunn, the main objective finally becomes to be a strong, decisive and creative woman. Her pride does not allow her to be isolated and as a University teacher she desires to be popular among boys, she wants dates in order to avoid feeling downgraded, devalued and undesirable.

Climatically, it can be said that the only positive outcome of Morag's ten years of marriage is the birth of a creative writer in her. In the very beginning of the novel's narrative, the narrator-protagonist Morag says, "If I hadn't been a writer, I might've been a first-rate mess at this point". (TD 4). Although feeling frightened and insecure, Morag Gunn always remains ready to fight life in order to create something, strongly believes that if she is to have a home, she must create it. Morag Gunn as a woman-

hero feels completely at peace with herself if not with the world till the very end, and the label of a 'Woman-Hero' becomes the best term that can be applied to such a female protagonist of Canadian fiction.

Maya and Morag do want harmonious relations with their husbands, but the strong desire for harmony gets characterized by dissonance, despair and finally an unfathomable chasm which fragments their lives. A sense of betrayal in love and marriage, attitude towards the born as well as the unborn child and above all the predicaments of sensitive women in a changed socio-cultural context, in which the female finds herself suffering neurotic states and psychic disturbances in a male-dominated world. *The Diviners* can be defined as a masterpiece of an incentive genius in which the issue of female identity is first problematized and then validated within a social context, an ideology and an experienced and lived value system, something we witness in the feminist oriented Manawaka series of Laurence's fiction. Maya, unlike Morag, fails to resolve the crippling dichotomy between the actual and the ideal and her suicide comes as the apocalyptic finale to her self-reflexivity.

[8] Vahia., Aditi. "Women-Heroes in the Manawaka Fiction of Margaret Laurence". LITERARY VOICE: Images of Woman in Fiction since 1970, 3(February 1996): 94.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dhawan, R.K. ed; Canadian Literature Today (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995) 12.
- [2] Laurence, Margaret. *The Diviners* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1974) 3. II Further references are incorporated as TD with page number within parenthesis.
- [3] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd; 1961) 70.
- [4] Kreilkamp, Thomas. *The Corrosion of the Self* (New York: New York University Press, 1976) 33.
- [5] Reddy K.Venkata. ed; *Critical Studies in Commonwealth Literature* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994) 23.
- [6] Desai, Anita, *Cry, The Peacock* (London: Peter Owen Ltd. (1963) 84. All further references are incorporated as CP with page number within parenthesis.
- [7] Morley, Patricia, *Margaret Laurence* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981). 160.