

**Multi-culturality, community and unconventional women: The study of “The Diviners”
by Margaret Laurence**

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Abstract - This thesis deals with multicultural issues at the turn of the twentieth century and non-conventionality of the female protagonists present in *The Diviners* (1974) by Margaret Laurence. She presented strong and empowered women in small multicultural communities from West. This study will focus, firstplace, to the different challenges of multiculturalism and will analyze the novel in the light of concepts such as the Melting pot, assimilation and interculturalism. This study will then focus on the issues of face-to-face community. Its objective will be to deconstruct the ideal type of face-to-face community and demonstrate how frictions and rejections are part of the daily life of the characters in the novel.

Keywords Multiculturalism, community, female emancipation, colonization.

The Diviners (1974) by Margaret Laurence is the novel that is sensitive to cultural diversity, community life and the potential female emancipation. Indeed, the protagonists evolve in environments where people are of various origins and where living in a small town has a lot of consequences in their life. Moreover, the main character is a strong and intelligent woman who makes proof of a great openness towards others. This paper is of the objective of questioning these three issues, namely multiculturalism, face-to-face communities and non-female protagonist.

The Diviners by Margaret Laurence tells the story of Morag Gunn, a young orphan who lives with her foster parents in a small established city of Manitoba. The novel follows his eventful life course from her youth to her adult life as a respected author.

The story begins at the beginning of the twentieth century, more precisely from the twenties. A few decades earlier, Manitoba suffered the massive arrival of immigrants, which is perceptible in the novel, because the families are of different and varied origins. Even if the arrival of family's immigrant women are already two to three generations old, the importance of the origins persists; however, no cultural group is in the majority. The small town of the novel is called Manawaka and it is about a small established town that has institutions such as a school and a newspaper. The city exists long enough for a social hierarchy to be established there.

Indeed, all the inhabitants, whatever their origin, hold a place in the hierarchy according to their income. Only the Métis family is totally excluded. The case of this family is special, because it is at the level of the race it is identified and thereby rejected.

The action of the novel takes place while massive waves of immigration are still ongoing, as in Manitoba in *The Diviners*. Nevertheless, these spaces bring together people from various origins and testify to the difficulties potential to live together. Multiculturalism is a phenomenon important in North America that people will advocate for and will praise its benefits while others will point out its dangers. Second, this paper will focus on the issues of

face-to-face community. Indeed, the community present in the novel is geographically small community, isolated and whose number of inhabitants does not exceed a few hundred people. Unlike the city, these individuals are exposed to others and do not take advantage of the anonymity found in urban areas.

This staging has the effect of fueling gossip, making strained relationships between individuals, oppressing some of the inhabitants and to impose roles on others. In short, this paper aims to deconstruct the ideal type of face-to-face community and demonstrate how friction and rejection are part of the daily life of these people. Lastly, this paper will also focus on non-conventionality of the main protagonists.

Multiculture issues

Multiculturality is a living phenomenon that takes place everywhere in the world. Its extent is such that a multitude of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and others devoted to studies of it. In America, these studies are all the more relevant and justified as an ever-growing number of ethnic groups are establishing themselves in the great immigrant lands of the United States and Canada. The different phenomena linked to multiculturality are very present in History of North America and inspire feelings often contradictory such as pride, respect and acceptance, but also fear, anxiety and exclusion.

Living in a multicultural society subjects its individuals to acceptance work which can sometimes be chaotic. Indeed, the multiculturality is often found at the center of a debate between adherents to radically incompatible points of view.

Several works from the corpus of Margaret Laurence show different problems linked to multiculturality. *The Diviners* tells the story of Morag who, after the death of her two parents, is taken care of by the Manawaka emptier, a small town in Manitoba. Morag grows in a community of people of diverse origins and tries to emancipate herself from them since she feels oppressed.

The novel shows the challenges of multiculturality at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence shows communities in which a multitude of people of various origins come together to live; *The Diviners* also presents a community established multicultural community in which people are part of different social classes. In the middle of it all bathes the protagonists who are both ambitious and intelligent women who smash to their way the stereotypes associated with women of their time. Morag in *The Diviners* is the woman for whom personal origin, Scottish, is fundamental and which yet are very open-minded about the contact with people of different cultural backgrounds. Morag mainly rubs shoulders with Irish, Scots

In her background, cultural diversity is evident, but no group can really claim to be the majority. In the novel, the story takes place in the west. City is Manitoba in the case of Laurence. It is therefore the Prairies that serve as the backdrop to the story of the protagonist.

In the view that multiculturality implies a forced proximity which sometimes generates quarrels, the story Laurence allows us to reflect on the following question: is it possible to hope that in the same place, people of various origins come to adjust to each other and can

live so harmonious? Supporters and opponents of multiculturalism could argue endlessly on this question which has no simple answer.

According to the outcome of *The Diviners* one might think that the author suggests hope by revealing the ups and downs of multiculturalism. Yet over the centuries that shaped America, hope has often manifested itself without ever taking hold.

In the text "*The Foundations of American Identity*," historian Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan affirms that even if the fear of multiculturalism is sometimes quite visible, it always ended up calming down: "Every immigration was considered dangerous because they could not be assimilated, whereas obviously they have gradually integrated and adopted the values and identity of America".

The Manitoba context

In *The Diviners*, most of the story takes place in Manitoba in a small fictional town called Manawaka. The protagonist Morag grew up there with her adoptive parents. Margaret Laurence does not confirm how long the family has been in Manitoba, but several pieces of evidence such as the enlistment of Morag's father in the military in WWI allow us to estimate their arrival between 1890 and 1914.

Morag's biological family immigration would coincide with arrival of massive numbers of immigrants to the Prairies in those years. Indeed, before the 1890s, the Canadian prairies were mainly inhabited by Amerindians, Métis, French Canadians as well as a handful of colonists by birth. Little by little, a displacement of colonists from Ontario as well as Britons interested in the agricultural potential of the prairies came to be established. The settlement of Manitoba was, at this time, full of excitement and the government is involved more than anything in expansion to the West.

Between 1896 and 1914, the number of immigrants coming to settle in Manitoba is growing dramatically, creating great diversity culturally. Several reasons justify this demographic growth extraordinary. First, many immigrants are interested in acquiring a farm because in the mid-1890s Manitoba was very competitive with the United States, which suffers from a notable lack of low-cost farms. The idea of prosperity is rightfully linked to agriculture since farming techniques are constantly improving and that the price continues to increase in the world market. In addition, Europe at the same time saw a difficult period when many people endured extreme poverty; the lack of land is indisputable, some face overt religious persecution while overcrowding in general country affects more than one. It is for all these reasons that many immigrants came to settle in Manitoba. Added to all this, in 1905 Home Secretary Clifford Sifton set up his "International recruiting system" to populate Western Canada. The Sifton's program is proving to be quite effective since a new wave of immigrants landed en masse. It is mainly composed of individuals from southern and eastern Europe who are among them Galicians, Russians, Croats, Slovaks, Ukrainians and several religious minorities.

This massive influx of immigrants is not happening peacefully. Several Canadians by birth or who have arrived for a long time feel threatened and anxious about these frequent and numerous arrivals.

Manitobans at the time were used to the way of life of society. English did not accept that such different people could come settle on their land. In their book on Manitoba, Ken Coates and Fred McGuinness claim that: "One paper greeted the immigrants as "Mr. Sifton's Grand 'Round Up' of European Freaks and Hoboes," and dismissed the Galicians as "ignorant and vicious foreign scum". Animosity is present and make itself felt. Despite the tensions, Sifton defends his plan and justifies the need for these immigrants. People worry and wonder on the future of the province under such conditions:

"The Anglo-Saxons who dominated the city recoiled at the strange languages and customs, the unusual smells and the unusual habits of the people. J.S. Woodsworth called them "strangers within our gates". Most wondered at how, or if, these "foreigners" could ever be assimilated to Canadian customs; for some, the simple answer was to close the gates and recruit only people of "proper" British stock. "

Towards the end of 1914, Ontario and British settlers continued to dominate the population, but they feel more and more besieged by more a dozen cultural and linguistic minorities. The judgment of Anglo-Saxons and their mistrust testify to the difficulties of living in a multicultural society.

The concepts of the "Melting Pot"

It was on October 5, 1908 that it was presented for the very first time the play "Melting Pot" by Israel Zangwill, a Jewish author born in London. The play tells the story of a young couple from totally opposite origins who despite all obstacles continue to love each other. David is Jewish and he is in love with Vera who is Russian and whose father is responsible for the death of his parents. David is an optimist who sees America as a new hope. He suggests letting go of the nightmares of old Europe and redirect his hopes to America. The coin became the strong symbol of a America that welcomes immigrants from ethnic backgrounds and religious and transforms them into "good Americans" with values common nationalities and which, in addition, fit into workplaces especially industrial. The concept of Melting Pot suggested by Zangwill had positive intentions. He saw America as the only place he was possible for all to regenerate into new individuals sharing the same dream.

What is wrong with the concept of Melting Pot of the Zangwill's play is that it suggests forgetting European origins and that it homogenizes all these cultural groups into one, that of new arrivals. In other words, it eliminates all forms of diversity.

David's perspective could be characterized as very idealistic since detachment from Europe is not so easy. Of course, he has good intentions, but the reality is quite different. In Manawaka, by example, the inhabitants attach a lot of importance to their origins Europeans and those of others, even after a few generations.

However, Zangwill's play has the distinction of having been the catalyst for reflection on the question of the Melting Pot. In his book *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors discusses, in one of his chapters, the Melting Pot theories and analyses its different applications in America.

What are the limits of the Melting Pot and to what extent is this concept useful? According to him, the play provides a very strong metaphor on which we debate about immigration and America's values took square. The different visions of the Melting Pot suggested by Sollors allow to question their legitimacy and to see how they take place in the multicultural communities of Manawaka in *The Diviners*.

Sollors first introduces Michel-Guillaume's reflections Jean de Crèvecoeur who in 1782 wrote *Letters from an American Farmer*.

Crèvecoeur wonders about the symbolic foundations of the man who chooses to settle in America. According to Crèvecoeur, the man from America is a new man who must give up his old ways in order to face the New World. The process of rebirth is primordial and necessary: "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds". In order to completely leave behind his old ways,

In Manawaka, for example, the Native American figure of Pocahontas would be totally rejected. Indeed, among the inhabitants of Manawaka in *The Diviners*, there are the Métis who in Manitoba are people with Amerindian and French-Canadian origins. The fate of the Métis in the Prairies was far from idealized or romanticized. Indeed, in Manawaka, they are excluded and rejected and mixing with Native Americans is not seen as something positive; it is rather perceived as something dirty and impure.

The phenomenon of assimilation

The definition of assimilation is sometimes wrong since, contrary to what one might think, it is not about the Melting Pot nor even a full incorporation process. Indeed, in his text "What is the canonical theory of assimilation?" Peter Kivisto talks about sociologist Robert E. Park and his numerous studies on the phenomenon of assimilation. Park proposed a fairly avant-garde vision of assimilation in the 1920s and 1930s which, by dissecting the phenomenon, abolished several prejudices and invited all members of the population to participate in the immigrant integration project.

At the time, when many journalists, politicians and academics take a radical and negative approach to the issue of immigration, Park sees America as a place that has the ability to integrate a large number of people. Several theorists, like Mayo-Smith or Sarah E. Simons, elaborated on the phenomenon of migration and have, for the most part, formulated theories based on faulty as well as several prejudices. For example, here is a summary of a Mayo-Smith theory of assimilation:

"Mayo-Smith portrayed this process as relatively easy, seamless, and inevitable, due in part to his mistaken belief that immigrants came to America as individuals and not as parts of larger communities or networks and that they had quickly abandoned homeland involvements and concerns. Immigrants were thus viewed as generally pliable and open to assimilation".

In that sense, Park stood out from his predecessors in several ways. First, he understood immigration as a phenomenon of group rather than as an individual phenomenon.

In the *Diviners*, although most of the characters are not necessarily newly arrived immigrants, it is possible to notice that a sense of belonging to their original group persists; but it is above all through the exchange of legends and tales, in short, elements from the cultural repertoire, that it is kept alive.

In the *Diviners*, just like in the rest of the Manawaka cycle, Margaret Laurence allows the reader to enter the homes of many families with different origins. Each time, it is possible to discover a world of legends and extraordinary stories. In the *Diviners*, the public places such as school, store, church or community hall are places where group homogeneity is required; it is obvious while the houses are the places where the characters leave free course to their ethnic habits. Morag and his adoptive father Christie share moments of complicity when he tells stories featuring Morag's ancestors. Jules, one of the little Métis town, tells Morag that his father told him several stories highlighting on stage his grandfather as well as Louis Riel, the head of the Métis rebellion. In short, it is possible to summarize that for Park, "Melting Pot" homogenization is not the same as assimilation. A surface homogenization is more in harmony with its possible ideal of assimilation.

In the *Diviners*, the work of integrating birth settlers is done more discreet since most families have been established for some moment already. However, it should be noted that Morag's relationship with Brooke, her husband, suggests a certain inequality between immigrants of origins other than English and the English immigrant. The relationship metaphorizes the work of unequal adaptation between the young woman of descent Scottish and native English. Indeed, Brooke imposes his ephemeral superiority and infantilizes the young woman who will soon be able to emancipate herself.

Interculturality

Robert Park compared immigrant integration work to work acceptance of inhabitants of birth in the sense that, according to him, if the immigrants must make the necessary efforts to adapt to the dominant culture, native-born inhabitants must also provide efforts to help them integrate. In this sense, it is beneficial for native inhabitants to notice the indisputable contribution of these people. In their text "Integration: from multicultural to intracultural", Serge Raynal and Louis B. Ferguson share challenges and needed solutions to the well-being of a multicultural society. They claim that in thought organization of a country, it is essential to enhance the interactions between citizens as well as relations with other peoples and that the aspect determining this success is cultural empathy. In other words, we must encourage people to take a respectful interest in other cultures without these losing their own points of reference:

The intercultural relationship comes to life when an individual enters into contact with different cultures and that it applies several actions leading to interculturality. According to Raynal and Ferguson, two fundamental actions are necessary in obtaining a successful and peaceful interculturality. The first lies in the fact of shaping "a new language from foreign cultural and conceptual elements". That is to say that in order to communicate, it is necessary to understand each other. To do this, it is essential to highlight the strengths of communication, to favor access to information and, finally, to prioritize the art of negotiation. The second action further stages the government which must, without falling into populism, be listening to his fellow citizens. In addition, it is up to the government to put in place means to prevent and limit errors in judgment and excessive behavior:

In the *Diviners*, Morag's character represents an excellent candidate for intercultural experience. Indeed, it demonstrates from an early age an interest in the characteristics of other cultures. Very early on, she showed an interest in their ancestors and their legends. At school, she recognizes the different origins of her classmates, especially Jules who would later become someone with whom she will have a unique bond. Which is interesting is the respect with which she observes others. While the entire Manawaka community perceives the Métis family as vile and unethical beings, Morag questions Jules about his origins and always seeks to know more about the legends that constitute its patrimony. It is the same with Brooke Skelton; it is with curiosity spontaneous that she asks him about his childhood in India.

The face-to-face community in *The Diviners*

The Diviners features Manawaka, a fictional small town in Manitoba which is strongly inspired by the birthplace of Margaret Laurence, Neewawa. Several of the elements characterizing this small town emphasize the complexity and importance of Canada's multicultural identity, but also highlight the difficulties of living in a small isolated community. The characters come up against otherness, rejection and prejudices. In other words, they are quickly aware of the different issues based on the construction of the other. Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnerre, the main characters, must deal with a community which, *a priori*, don't want them.

Manawaka is a small established city; a social hierarchy takes place there. Then they are geographically isolated. Indeed, they are small towns whose main economy is based on agriculture; large agricultural land therefore moves them away from the integration centers that are the big cities. In this sense, they constitute communities that can be qualified as face-to-face. That is, everyone knows, on the surface at least. Anonymity does not exist in these small communities where the arrival of a stranger is quickly reported. Often the face-to-face community is idealized; we associate unity, sharing, mutual aid and harmony. However, the reality is quite different. The face-to-face community can be oppressive and impose all kinds of constraints on its inhabitants. Many scenes in Laurence's novel demonstrate that it may turn out to be difficult to live in such an environment and allow to deconstruct the ideal of face-to-face community.

In Manawaka, several examples show that there is rejection of those who are different and do not meet the integration criteria. In this sense, Young does not see this ideal of community as

desirable; rather, it proposes a policy of difference which encourages understanding the other, their distinctions and opinions. Young criticizes the fact that the face-to-face community denies the idea of individuals independent of each other at the expense of the ideal of fusion. As this ideal of fusion involves expulsion and oppression, which is the case in Manawaka Young suggests, in order to counter this effect, this type of community: "A model of the unoppressive city offers an understanding of social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community". In Manawaka, most releases are based on prejudices and the effect of these is accentuated due to the fact that communities are far from urban centers. Young's idea to encourage the understanding of others in social relations and to abolish any form of hierarchy could be beneficial for both communities.

In Manawaka, the origin of the tensions between individuals seems to be rooted deep in the community and the social hierarchy is inflexible; the implementation of Young's difference policy is unlikely.

Relationships within face-to-face communities

With the idealized face-to-face community, we often associate the image of harmony, brotherhood and peace. It is not uncommon to imagine a peaceful community where everyone shares the same values and delights in life by this code. Yet in Manawaka and Hanover, it is not so. The face to face position of the inhabitants of the city is very important in the extent that it highlights the obligation to live in community, to be around the same people day after day, even if they are of different origins and do not necessarily have the same habits of life nor the same values. The cohesion of immigrants in Manawaka is not done peacefully and peacefully. The small town is a place of forced proximity for its different inhabitants giving rise to friction. The goal of coexistence and mutual aid is not done in a way natural and spontaneous for all individuals. Forced to cohabit with other people in a geographically limited place, observe, judge, comment and categorize. In short, relations with

in the community are much more strained than they can be let it appear. One of the first things people do is to gossip about others. In Manawaka, people talk about what the others do, wear or say. In this sense, one of the most distinct from face-to-face communities compared to the big city, where everyone blends in with the crowd, would be the gossip.

In Manawaka, Morag Gunn is strongly affected by the gossip. These put her in an awkward position that makes ambivalent feelings arise in her. It must be said that it collides very young to the cruelty of gossip. One of the most significant moments in this meaning is that of Morag's first school year.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze multicultural issues of the turn of the twentieth century in North America, the issues face-to-face community as well as the non-conventionality of female protagonists in Margaret's *The Diviners* (1974)

Laurence. It follows that, despite the differences in context and period, the novel presents many similarities in the face of these issues. The novel shares a few characteristics with regard to multiculturalism, in *The Diviners*, the characters have lived in western Manitoba

since several generations, they still attach great importance to their cultural background and that of others. However, they manage to live all together without losing their points of reference. Finally, the novel features characters strong and empowered women who challenge female stereotypes of the west. Women of Manawaka are rather housewives who mainly focus on domestic chores.

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