



Representation of Metis Culture and Identity in Laurences The Diviners

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Abstract:

Mostly located in Canada, the Métis have a distinctive cultural history. Their ancestry combines European (primarily French, Scottish, and English) and Indigenous people. Originating in the Red River Valley (now Winnipeg), the Métis are one of Canada's three officially recognized Indigenous groups, along with the First Nations and the Inuit. Through the Manawaka series, Laurence explores the myths and historical facts about the Metis community of Canada. She presents the history of Manitoba town (named Manawaka) through the relationships of the Scots and the Metis community. By the stories Christie crafts for Morag about the Scottish side and the brave stories Jules tells Morag about the Métis side, she fictionalizes events in *The Diviners*. Finding one's roots and creating a community—or rather, several communities—of immigrants, British descendants, and Metis is a theme throughout the Manawaka cycle and the series' final book, *The Diviners*. This paper attempts to analyze the representation of the Metis community in *The Diviners*.

Keywords: Metis, identity, Manawaka, harmony, roots, heritage

Introduction:

In French, the word "Métis" means "mixed," referring to their mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. The language, which combines Cree and French, is distinctive to them as their customs and cultural practices. In the second half of the twentieth century, many Canadian writers made a conscious effort to reconstruct written histories by emphasizing the hidden facets of historical reality and incorporating the stories of the Indigenous people who had remained excluded from the mainstream discourse for so long. Reclaiming one's indigenous culture becomes essential to rebuild one's identity.

Margaret Laurence is a well-known Canadian author, born on July 18, 1926, in Neepawa,



Manitoba, Canada. Her Manawaka series, which includes *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), and *The Diviners* (1974), garnered her considerable recognition for their realistic depictions of Canadian life and their strong female characters. Laurence is empathetic toward the marginalized and disadvantaged and strives for their inclusion in society. In *Man of Our People*, she talks about the Métis leader Gabriel Dumont:

There are many ways in which those of us who are not Indian or Métis have not yet earned the right to call Gabriel Dumont an ancestor. But I do, all the same. His life, his legend, and his times are a part of our past which we desperately need to understand and pay heed to. (167)

Her recognition of true Canadian heritage and desire for the blend of cultures are evident here. Four generations of Métis are represented by the Tonnerre family in the Manawaka cycle. The Métis play a significant role in the protagonist's life in each of the Manawaka novels, either as victims or as destroyers. The Métis characters in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* are depicted with nuance and complexity, emphasizing their challenges and cultural history.

Main Thrust:

In Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners*, Morag Gunn, a middle-aged mother and writer, uses old pictures to navigate her past and present. Her struggle for self-discovery is entwined with her daughter Pique's search for her roots. The novel explores identity, heritage, and self-worth issues while focusing on Morag and Pique's growth and tribulations. Morag recounts her difficult upbringing by Christie and Prin Logan, her foster parents, and the death of her parents from polio. Growing older, Morag attends university in Winnipeg, then moves to Toronto, and marries an older professor named Brooke Skelton. Unfortunately, she is in a dominating relationship and her marriage is unpleasant. The story concludes with Morag attaining peace through self-discovery and completing her novel.

As last novel of the Manawaka series, *The Diviners* is important because it explores the memory of the Metis people's cultural displacement and their past. Laurence has attempted a comprehensive portrayal of the Metis in this novel unlike in the earlier works where the Metis are portrayed from an extrinsic viewpoint. The majority of Jules' portrait is created by the narrator Morag Gunn, an orphan raised by the community scavenger Christie and his partner Prin, who reside on Hill Street which indicates the area across the railway tracks. Her lower



social status makes her feel like an outcast in the society.

In this novel, Laurence demonstrates the rigidity of the socio-economic divisions where speaking with Metis is humiliating but discussing them is entertaining. Lemieux in the article "The Métis in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence: From Outcast to Consort" says, "The exclusion of others who are marked by difference (physical, cultural, racial, ethnic) forms the basis of sociopolitical reality in *Manawaka*" (182). It is believed that everything connected to the settlers is sophisticated or civilized, the Metis are primitive. In a hostile world, the Metis' only weapon is apathy or indifference, which is simply a strategy to avoid further humiliation. Laurence uses the school anthem as a symbol to depict the country's underlying politics, with natives becoming outsiders and settlers becoming insiders. The school anthem only honours the Scottish, Irish, and English ancestry - "THE THISTLE SHAMROCK ROSE entwine / THE MAPLE LEAF FOREVER!" (70) and excludes the indigenous ancestry.

The death incident of Jules's sister Piquette depicts a strong disagreement between the natives and the whites. It also projects the agony of people who have been tortured and treated as foreigners in their own country. Morag, as a reporter for 'Manawaka Sentinel', witnesses Piquette's burning death and recounts the events to Jules. "The air smelled of burnt wood. I remember thinking – crazy –but I thought Brois – Brules". "By Jesus, I hate you," Jules started crying in pain - "I hate all of you. Every Goddamn one." (275). In another incident, Jules shares the tragic news of his father's death and the town's refusal to allow a burial in the cemetery. Morag, coming from a different background, can only silently witness Jules' suffering without being able to share it.

While Jules' sister miserably fails in her attempt to blend in and get by the white society, Jules manages to survive through his music, albeit by conforming to the expectations of a white audience. His songs reflect his heritage, offering him a sense of freedom amidst discrimination and despair. Ironically, he is prepared to bow to the whims of the white audience while projecting an air of romance or Indianness to survive. For him, the masquerade is a necessary part of life: "One man circus. Satin shirt with a lotta beadwork, and sometimes a phoney doeskin jacket with fringes and a lotta plastic porcupine quills in patterns. That's what they like. [...]. It's a load of shit, but I don't worry much as long as they let me do the singing" (266)...

Laurence's narrative brings to light the untold stories from the perspective of the 'other,' highlighting the heroic deeds of Metis ancestors like Jules' grandfather and Chevalier "Rider" Tonnerre. These tales, including the Battle of Seven Oaks, the Red River Rebellion, and the North West Rebellion, reinforce the Metis spirit and provide a deeper understanding of their



history. Through these stories, Morag gains a deeper understanding of the past that cannot be ignored. Laurence highlights historical events involving Louis Riel, a prominent Métis leader in Canada. Louis Riel led two significant movements against the Canadian government: the Red River Resistance of 1869-1870 and the North-West Rebellion of 1885. In the North-West Rebellion, Riel, along with Métis, fought to protect their land and rights from government encroachment. Despite their efforts, they were ultimately defeated by the better-equipped government forces. Riel was captured and executed in 1885.

Laurence describes how different perspectives can shape the understanding of history. Louis Riel's leadership in the Red River Resistance (1869-1870) and the North-West Rebellion (1885) is depicted differently depending on the sources. The Métis saw Riel as a defender of their rights and land, while the Canadian government and the settlers viewed him as a rebel. The dominant historical narratives often favour the perspective of the victors, in this case, the government and settlers marginalize the Métis viewpoint. This kind of narrative tension is common in historical accounts, where the "official" version of events may not fully capture the experiences and perspectives of all involved parties.

Laurence beautifully illustrates the theme of hybridity in *The Diviners*. Pique, as the daughter of Jules and Morag, embodies both the Scottish and Métis cultures. The exchange of talismans—the Scottish plaid pin and the Métis hunting knife—symbolizes this cultural reconciliation and the blending of heritages. In *The Stone Angel*, trading the Scottish plaid pin and the hunting knife between John and Lazarus Tonnerre emphasizes this theme of cultural exchange and integration. These objects, now inherited by Pique, represent a tangible connection to her diverse ancestry and the possibility of bridging cultural divides. This symbolic inheritance highlights the potential for new generations to navigate and reconcile their complex identities.

The ending of *The Diviners* indeed carries significant symbolic weight. Pique's journey to Galloping Mountain to connect with her father's family represents a powerful act of reclaiming her heritage and identity. Her quest is not just a personal journey but a broader one that focuses on the importance of understanding and embracing one's roots. Pique's strong-willed nature and self-acceptance symbolize a new generation's effort to reclaim and honour the silenced histories of their ancestors. The mention of Pique's poem about Jules further emphasizes the theme of preserving and honouring the past. This narrative underscores the importance of self-hood in the face of dominant historical discourses. Pique's journey is a testament to the enduring strength and resilience of those who seek to reclaim their lost past and assert their identity.



Conclusion:

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* indeed serves as a profound exploration of ethnic identity and representation. By creating a fictional space for the Métis, particularly through the Tonnerre family, Laurence addresses the complexities and struggles of minority cultures. Her work highlights how the dynamics between these cultures create a sense of "difference," often marked by opposition and resistance. Through her narratives, Laurence challenges the dominant historical and cultural discourses that have marginalized the Métis and other minority groups. By giving voice to the Métis and re-presenting their world, she initiates an alternate discourse that revises perspectives and redefines reality. Laurence's efforts to locate sources of resistance and dismantle hegemonic authority are crucial in reconstituting ethnic identity. Her novels not only provide a space for the Métis but also engage readers about the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse cultural narratives.

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