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\*ROSE THOMAS

Associate Professor

Department of English

B.A.M College, Thuruthicad, Kerala

India

rosethomas.2012@rediffmail.com

\*\*Dr ASHA SUSAN JACOB

Associate Professor

Department of English

St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala

India

Rites of Passage: From Somaliland to Canada—A Study of

Margaret Laurence

#### ABSTRACT

Canadian writer Margaret Laurence's works include the anthology, *A Tree for Poverty* (1954), which consists of her English translation of Somali oral poetry and prose tales. Through her Somali sojourn, Laurence gained both depth of literary experience and breadth of understanding of forms and techniques, paving the way for the flowering of her artistic craftsmanship in her Canadian fiction. The paper demonstrates how her experiences in Somaliland and exploration of Somali oral folk literature together contribute to make Laurence a great Canadian writer. It also enables a fuller understanding and appreciation of the themes and techniques in her Canadian fiction.

Key words: Somali; Oral Tradition; Myth; Survival; Identity; Narrative Technique; Voice

Laurence's confrontation with the disconcerting effects of colonial experience in Somaliland enhanced her comprehension of the colonial mentality occasioned by the British Colonial experience in Canada. The enervating experience in Canada, kindling ambivalence and ambiguity, has been crucial in hindering the process of acquiring a holistic identity in Canada. In her Manawaka works, Laurence, through her protagonists' quest for self-realization and individuation, discovers the processes of voicing an integrated identity in Canada by coming to terms with the past and ancestors, and reconciling it with the present. Laurence succeeds in providing, in fictional terms, metaphoric analogues to contend with the sense of discontinuity and dislocation consequent to the Canadian Colonial experience. The impact of her Somali experience on her Canadian works is undeniable in terms of theme and technique. Patricia Morley notes in her Preface to *Margaret Laurence*: "The way home for Laurence lay through . . . the scorching desert sun of Somaliland" (3).

The growth of Laurence's understanding, and acceptance of the Other, discernible in her treatment of the Metis in her fiction, especially in *The Diviners*, can be traced back to her accounts of her first encounter with the Somali culture. In Somaliland men and women are forced to lead sub-human lives in a harsh land, burdened with the agony of having to submit to barbaric traditions. The horrifying and self-destructive effects of colonialism in Somaliland inculcated in her a profound compassion for the Other and instilled in her the need to acknowledge and accept the mythic and cultural heritage in its entirety which permits the inclusion of the Native Indian and the Metis and not just the White inheritance. The degraded situation of the Metis has been treated with compassion, peripherally in *The Stone Angel* and *The Fire-Dwellers* and gains greater significance in *The Diviners*. Laurence's socio-political convictions induced her to reinforce through her writings the need for the Canadian Other cultures, the Native Indian and the Metis, to have a legitimate place in the Canadian cultural scenario; a need which she explicitly voices in her Manawaka writings.

Laurence's perception of an entirely alien culture, but with a history basically analogous to her own, played an important role in her later Canadian fiction. Laurence's translation of Somali prose and poetry predates her African fiction. Though in her 1970 Preface to *A Tree for Poverty*, she confesses to the limitations of her amateurish translations from Somali oral culture which she had begun in 1952, the historical and literary significance of Laurence's translations is indisputable. The experience of living in Somaliland and translating the Somali poems and tales, confirmed her convictions about the survival of men and women with dignity and grace and their need for freedom of the

spirit. Survival, so crucial in the African desert life, is integral to the Canadian predicament and runs as a major theme in Laurence's Canadian works, especially in *The Stone Angel*. Hagar's situation in the Canadian prairies is analogous to that of the desert life of the Somalis. Hagar's description of the Canadian prairie summer--"the sun that grinds bone and flesh and earth to dust as though in a mortar of fire with a pestle of crushing light" (*Stone Angel* 54)--is similar to the scorching sun of the Somali desert during the *jilal*, "steeped in heat, stifling and dry" (*The Prophet's Camel Bell* 53). In *Heart of a Stranger*, Laurence states:

The theme of survival--not just physical survival but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others—that is, I have come to think, an almost inevitable theme for a writer such as I, who came from a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work and Puritanism and who grew up during the drought and depression of the thirties and then the war. (8)

Laurence, profoundly moved by the suffering of the Somalis and awed by their indomitable will to struggle for survival, also perceives in their struggle, heroism and a spirit of freedom. It is this Somali experience which she later incorporates into her Canadian fiction, where her protagonists struggle heroically to survive with dignity and grace. Also, she relates these sublime qualities to the qualities of her own Scottish-Irish pioneer ancestors: "[They] had inhabited a wilderness and made it fruitful. They were, in the end, great survivors, and for that I love and value them" (*Heart of a Stranger* 16). Laurence's moving account of a Somali woman and a child journeying with a pair of burden camels in the burning sun in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* depicts the Somali woman's stoicism and her heroic struggle to survive. It also reveals Laurence's deep compassion flowing through all her fiction and in her handling of pathetic characters like Kofi, Adamo, Godman Pira, Christie Logan, Piquette Tonnerre and Eva Winkler who suffer yet heroically struggle to survive. Somaliland, for Laurence, is a rich reservoir of insights and experiences. Clara Thomas observes in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*: "Laurence's experiences in Somaliland "confirmed and established her perceptions and convictions about the dignity of men and women, their qualities of survival, and their need for freedom of the spirit which have been central to all her work since" (32).

Laurence, like the Somalis, enjoyed story-telling. Translating Somali poetry, a language without orthography, enhanced her skills at writing, making her a poet in prose. Her translations of Somali and Arabic folk tales developed her skills as a storyteller. The acting skills of her translator, Hersi Half-Tongue, influenced her to become a dramatic

writer. Becoming curiously interested in Somali oral literature, she engaged herself in translating folk-tales, the short lyric love-poems, sung to distinct tunes known as *belwo*, and also the highest literary form, the *gabei*, a highly disciplined and developed poetry describing Somaliland and the life of its people. Laurence writes in *Camel Bell*:

Although they have no written language, the Somalis are a nation of poets. In the evenings, around the camp fires, the men sing and tell stories far into the night . . . and often several *gabei* poets will spend hours chanting their own poetry, listened to by a large audience. . . Although the life of the Somali camel-herder is drab and harsh, in their poetry and stories one finds sensitivity, intelligence, earthy humour. (190)

It was from the *gabei* that Laurence mastered the very synthesis that helps sustain the lucidity and felicity of language in both her African and Canadian fiction. The fusion of myth and reality in the *gabei* generates a unique splendour and verisimilitude. The *gabei* also helped her in finding diverse fictional modes for her fiction. Literary Somali is a superstructure erected on the foundation of everyday speech. A vast number of words are never used except in poetry, and these have a subtle and precise meaning. Often an amazing amount of information is compressed into one word.

In the *gabei*, alliteration is a major structural method. Laurence, influenced by this literary convention, employs alliteration and assonance to a considerable extent in her prose, enriching it with a poetic quality, as in “Death and life meet and mate” (*This Side Jordan* 113). This kind of heightened prose runs in Laurence’s later Manawaka fiction also: “The swallows dipped and spun over the water, a streaking of blue-black wings and bright breast feathers. How could that colour be caught in words?” (*Diviners*12).

Somali folk lore, songs and poems taught Laurence that the Somalis possess amazing courage and a sense of pride and humour amidst disconcerting and disillusioning circumstances. It is this toughness and defiance which help the Somalis to survive in adverse circumstances in a hostile land, a parallel evident in Laurence’s Canadian works. Laurence quotes an excerpt from the introduction to *A Tree for Poverty* in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*: “Love and war are among the most favoured themes for *gabei*. With the war *gabei*, the poetic form reaches considerable heights of drama and emotion. The Somali is a warrior by tradition and inclination as well as by necessity . . . The war *gabei* are composed with great spirit” (191). The remarkable bravery that characterizes the Somali in tribal battles is conveyed in the lines:

Ye tribesmen gathered here, my song is of sorrow

And of that man, the faithless, for whose sake

My lungs were parched with a desperate call to war—

‘Awake and arm, oh Habar Habuush men!

The spear of vengeance is thrust at your kinsman’s heart! (*Camel Bell* 194)

Laurence’s essay, “Man of Our People” depicts the Metis hero, Dumont, and her essay, “The Poem and the Spear,” celebrates the Somali leader Hassan. The heroic legends of Dumont inspired the myths of Jules Tonnerre in Laurence’s Manawaka novel, *The Diviners*. In “Man of Our People”, Laurence traces parallels between the predicament of the Canadian Metis led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, and that of the Somalis led by the Sayyid. She also explains their relevance to *The Diviners* in her introduction to “Man of Our People”:

This review article does include many of my own feelings and views . . . about a Nomadic tribal society clashing with an incoming colonialist power, the aftermath of which is still with us, and cannot be shelved or shrugged off. . . Canadians who, like myself, are the descendants of various settlers, many of whom came to this country as oppressed or dispossessed people, must hear native peoples’ voices, for they speak not only of the soul-searching injustices done to them but also of their re-discovered sense of self-worth and their ability to tell and teach the things we all need to know. (*Heart of a Stranger* 222)

Laurence’s fascination with the Somali predicament, their oral tradition and the gabei form is revealed in Jules Tonnerre’s songs of heroic tales of battles fought in *The Diviners*:

The Metis they met from the whole prairie

To keep their lands, to keep them free

.....

They fought like animals, fought like men.

“Before the earth will take our bones,

We’ll load our muskets with nails and stones”. (481-482)

This first translation of Somali poems and folk-lore into English, in fact, amounts to a study of the range, style, themes, modes and oral traditions of Somali literature. The

book is comparable to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century archaeologies of folk-culture, the oral traditions of central and Western Europe. Laurence's introductory essays indicate that without a proper understanding of oral traditions, native cultures will remain subjugated and silenced. Canadian studies desperately need writers to show Canadians how the tales and communal traditions of their own indigenous peoples do invest a culture with dignity and grace. Laurence's opening essay in *A Tree for Poverty* emphasises the need for an entire repository of rhetorical skills to convey the performance of such texts. She says that some of the stories were retold to her in English by truly gifted storytellers. Their dramatic presentation of these folk tales conveyed the spirit of the stories and influenced Laurence's own gift for storytelling. In *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, Laurence describes the shamanistic performances of Hersi, a Somali worker who became his community's story-teller each night around the campfires.

While writing down these stories from Hersi's dramatic performances, Laurence became aware of their significance to the Somalis. These tales with their local reference were of value to Hersi and his people not only because they were entertaining but also as they drew attention to mythic heroes of the past, which helped to uphold the pride and honour of the Somalis. The Somali oral literature which was rich and imaginative had an ancient lineage and history. Laurence's Somali experience taught her the power of myth, its dynamics in the development of the individual. It also led Laurence to the realization of how vital it was for a culture to become aware of its own inheritance and to value it in order to have a true sense of its identity. This inspired her to work on the theme of possessing the land and its ancestors and also of valuing the indigenous mythic-cultural inheritance towards gaining self-perception in her Canadian fiction. Smith posits that, "A sustainable notion of nation requires a historic territory or homeland for a people, a common public culture . . . it also requires common myths and historic memories" (qtd. in Cogley 38). The oral tradition with its folk tales, myth and ancient songs, serves also as a model for her renditions of Metis oral traditions through Jules Tonnerre's tales of mythic heroes in *The Diviners*. These legends of valour serve purposes which lead ultimately to the realization and voicing of an integrated Canadian identity.

Laurence, in *A Tree for Poverty* and *The Prophet's Camel Bell* demonstrates how the tales and poems are performed in an oral culture, drawing out their social and ethical significance in that culture and shows how such oral traditions are intimately bound to the identity of a particular community. Critics on oral culture assert that oral narratives serve a mnemonic purpose. Cogley notes ". . . narrative structures, with their repetitions and stock devices which enabled early oral cultures to remember key points about their present and

their history, also facilitated . . . the notion of large-scale identities such as nation” (*Narrative* 38). Thus her encounter with the Somali culture which she recounts in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* along with her earliest literary achievement, her translation of Somali poems and folk-tales undoubtedly paved the way for her final epic masterpiece, *The Diviners*. Throughout her writing career, Laurence has been concerned with oral traditions, proverbs, holy words, invocations, chants and songs, rituals, shaman songs, diviners and their words from around the world. In *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, she elucidates her perception and her lifelong concern:

Every culture in the world passes on knowledge to the next generation, but the nature of that knowledge suits the survival requirements of each particular place . . . Our basic outlook came from science, theirs [the Somalis], from faith. We put our confidence in technical knowledge. They appeared to put their confidence in ritual. (138-139)

Her Somali experience created in Laurence an interest in Indian shamanism. Mircea Eliade describes a shaman as a “specialist in the sacred” (qtd. in Ross 93) who acts as a mediator between the world of humans and the invisible powers. Through shamans, the dead may be reached. Indian shamanism is a ritual which helps in releasing suppressed psychic and physical energies. In *The Diviners*, Jules Tonnerre who is essentially life-affirming, functions as a shaman in helping Morag re-establish a connection with her past which has weakened through her years with Brooke Skelton. During sexual union with Jules, after her confrontation with Brooke, Morag feels: “In her present state of mind, she doesn’t expect to be aroused and does not care if she isn’t, as though this joining is being done for other reasons, some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from” (292). Later, he asks her, “I’m the shaman, eh?” (294). Contact with Jules becomes a kind of shamanistic ritual for Morag. It helps her to come to terms with the unconscious forces and fears within her. Release from her inner terrors ultimately leads her to the realization of her identity.

Two elements of Somali folk tales that Laurence discusses are a sense of the dramatic and a sense of humour. With reference to the dramatic element, Laurence focuses on the significance of timing to create suspense by prolonging the revelation, besides deploying repetition as a ritual to intensify suspense and dramatic effect. She acquires a sense of the dramatic from the Somali story tellers, making her own fiction remarkably dramatic. In her African and Canadian fiction, she employs dialogue and dialect for dramatizing events. For instance, the breakfast scene in *The Fire-Dwellers* is highly dramatic, with its intermittent dialogues, interior monologues and radio news broadcast,

while Stacey, the house wife heroine voices the agony of her burdened, stifling life, struggling to find an identity of her own, amidst a world on fire:

THIS IS THE EIGHT-O'CLOCK NEWS BOMBING RAIDS LAST NIGHT  
DESTROYED FOUR VILLAGES . . .

Mum! Where's my social studies scribbler?

I don't know, Ian. Have you looked for?

It's gone. I gotta take it to school this morning . . .

Stacey, the party starts at eight tonight. Be ready, eh?

Sure, yes, yes of course. Duncan, eat your cereal. . .

EIGHT-THIRTY NEWS BOMBERS LAST NIGHT CLAIMED A DECISIVE  
VICTORY. (86-89)

Somali poetry, especially the *belwo*, is highly musical. Laurence learnt the importance of sound and rhythm in writing while translating these poems. It developed her literary skills and taught her the craft of writing. *Belwo* usually centres on an image. Familiarisation with *belwo* developed Laurence's mastery of metaphor, a distinctive feature of her writing. Even the incidental description in *The Fire-Dwellers* is evocative, rich with melody and metaphor: “. . . some yawning yellow-toothed fishwife, fleshwife, sagging guttily in a print dress sad with poppies, is sweeping up last night—heel-squashed cigarette butts, Kleenex blown into or bawled into ashes” (10).

Voice is one among the most frequently recurring words in Laurence's works. Finding “the true narrative voice” is of paramount importance to Laurence. New comments: “Perhaps more than any other writer of her time, she seemed to have mastered the rhythms and cadences of the Canadian speaking voice” (*Margaret Laurence* 1). Laurence's achievement in discovering the true narrative voice in her Canadian fiction may be attributed to her endeavour in reproducing African voices. Laurence developed her own voice through the ventriloquism of translating Somali folk literature. This, in turn enabled her to capture her characters' idiom in her Canadian fiction. Laurence asserts: “Our task is not to reject the past but to assimilate it, to take the language and make it truly ours, to write out of our own familiar idiom and of our deepest observations of people and our place of belonging on this planet” (“Ivory Tower” 255). It is Laurence's experience of translating Somali literature that enhanced her skills at capturing her characters' individual

idiom in her Manawaka works. From listening to the dramatic narrators of Somali, she developed an excellent ear for the individual voices of her characters. Later, in *The Diviners*, she recreates the idiom of the master story teller, Christie Logan. Her ear, acutely sensitive to the rhythms and nuances of speech was even further trained through her attempts at Somali translations. Laurence's narrative skill, eloquence, lively dialogue, stylistic perfection and richness of language discernible in her Canadian works can be traced to her Somali experience. Through *Long Drums and Cannons* and *A Tree for Poverty*, her two admirable African enterprises, Laurence discovers her own voice.

The Somali translations taught Laurence a great deal about language and metaphor, characterization and dramatization and enhanced her own creativity. In her review of *A Tree for Poverty*, Micere Mugo states: "Metaphorically, Laurence's voice in *A Tree for Poverty* is the voice of the forerunner 'crying in the wilderness' pointing 'out the way' " (87). Thus her journey through Somali oral literature becomes eventually the voice of the forerunner of her fiction signalling the way to the captivating world of her Canadian writings.

Laurence's Somali translations and sojourn through Somaliland gave her a profound understanding of the alien culture and helped her tremendously in her later fictional ventures in theme and technique. The Somali experience proved pivotal in Laurence's maturing into the chronicler of Canadian Prairie life and Western Canadian identity.

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