

原 著

The Controversy about *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence

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Abstract

The Diviners by Margaret Laurence aroused a controversy. It was attacked as being pornographic and blasphemous. Her characters are people from the lower class, so their mode of speech is necessarily that of the lower class. She portrayed life as she honestly saw it, even the seamier side of life, when necessary. She did not hesitate to put in sex scenes if the story demanded them. Morag, the protagonist, is a woman who gets great joy from sexual union and enjoys sex equally with men. Because such a woman has not often been depicted in literature, she is very disturbing to readers who are used to reading about women always subordinate to men. They overlook how maternal Morag is and the truth which Laurence tells about life filled with pain and misery yet with the possibility of understanding. Morag was created from Laurence's own struggle for being a writer and a mother, surviving her divorce. She wrote about women's dilemma from the viewpoint of women.

I

Margaret Laurence (1925-1987) received the Governor General's Award for *The Diviners* in 1975, the fifth of her "Manawaka novels" set in "Manawaka" which is really Laurence's hometown, Neepawa, Manitoba. She devoted her energy to completing this work and she felt as if a gift of grace enabled her to write it. She believed that *The Diviners* is an honouring of her people¹⁾. But in the

following year, *The Diviners* was attacked in various school boards in Canada as being pornographic, blasphemous, not fit to be in the school library or to be taught, even at a Grade Thirteen level or in the first year of university. This paper attempts to reevaluate *The Diviners* and to prove the attacks are groundless by clarifying her intention and deep maternity in *The Diviners*.

II

Why did this "controversy" arise? Laurence depicted Morag, the protagonist of *The Diviners* as a woman who always finds joy in sexual union. At the same time she wants to be master of her own world and wants to be independent of any man. Because a woman with such a positive attitude towards sex has rarely been depicted, Morag was very disturbing for readers used to reading about women obedient and loyal to men, created by male writers.

Patricia Morley points out that the reason for these attacks was "moralistic backlash and a movement to the Right in the seventies after the hedonistic, revolutionary 1960s."²⁾ She says: "Morag's sexuality is threatening, her independence is threatening, and her language is threatening to them [her critics] and they fail to see and understand deep ethical and religious convictions."³⁾

Chambers points out that only Morag among the protagonists of the Manawaka works dared to love across racial lines and that is what made *The Diviners* so controversial within Canada.⁴⁾

Timothy Findley observes that these attacks are malicious propaganda from school boards and pulpits apparently defending the sanctity of the family from undermining the morals of the young: from pornography to blasphemy.⁵⁾ He also observes that the campaign against *The Diviners* took on the appearance of riotous comedy, as when its author was accused of being "personally responsible for the current increase in teenage pregnancies."⁶⁾

Laurence answers these attacks as follows: As for the use of four-letter words, she illustrates with the case of Morag's foster father Christie, the Manawaka garbage man, and shows that he should speak as a garbage

man in his own mode of speech different from hers or any other's. She says: "The writer's first, and perhaps only, responsibility is to be true to her or his own characters, human individuals that the writer cares about very deeply."⁷⁾

As for sex scenes, she says:

In terms of novels, I don't believe in writing sex scenes for the sake of bringing in a lot of sex. But if you are to wipe out sex entirely, that's wiping out one whole area of life. I think if you're writing truthfully about a character, you've got to deal to some extent with that side of their lives. As much as the novel demands and no more.⁸⁾

She also insists that the seamier side of life exists.⁹⁾

Gabrielle Roy, a writer who wrote out of the prairies as Laurence did, sent letters of encouragement to Laurence. She said there were not so many readers who understood that "sex scenes are not put in a book just for the lure but to point at the ambiguity and sadness and greatness of the human condition,"¹⁰⁾ and commented that the attacks rather proved that Laurence was a great writer, saying, "After all, it places you in the company of Flaubert, [D. H.] Lawrence and several others among the greatest."¹¹⁾

III

Morley observes the main factor causing such strong offence is in Morag's brief affair with Chas and she tries to give a reasonable explanation, seeing an ethical purpose in it "in the context":

Chas's sadism, and Morag's fear of becoming pregnant by a man she despises, should be nemesis enough for the moralist. Morag determines that this will never occur again. She has learned that body and spirit cannot be divorced,

and that her flesh carries responsibilities.¹²⁾

Young Morag had thought, when she saw her friend Eva's miserable abortion, that it was unfair that the woman always had to take the responsibility. But this time, Morag herself had to face the unfairness that she might be pregnant after the affair with Chas whom she despised. In *The Diviners* Morag's attitude towards abortion is depicted. When we examine *The Diviners* closely, we notice that Laurence repeatedly deals with the issue of abortion: Eva's abortion, Lilac's abortion [the protagonist in a story Morag wrote], Morag's fear of being pregnant and the dead body of a new born baby in the Manawaka garbage dump. In any case women were always in agony. Morag as a writer was terribly upset about Lilac's abortion and needed a few tablets of aspirin to hide her feeling from her husband. Laurence depicted woman's feeling towards abortion through Morag.

. . . if you had a friend who had just aborted herself causing chaos all round and not only to herself, no one would be surprised if you felt upset, anxious, shaken. It is no different with fiction—more so, maybe, because Morag has felt Lilac's feelings. (p. 230)¹³⁾

Laurence was a supporter of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League. She understood the psychological state of women who had or had to have an abortion: "I have never met a woman who has had an abortion flippantly or easily or without searching her heart and her soul."¹⁴⁾ She believes that no one has the right to force someone else to have a child and at the same time she feels anger at the unfairness that women always have to take the responsibilities:

Our society is too willing to place a life sentence upon a woman for an unwanted pregnancy, to make her 'go through with

it,' to tell her she can either have the child adopted or rear it herself for some eighteen years. . . . I am saying it is wrong not to have a choice.

I also feel it is wrong that only women are faced with this dilemma, . . . men for whom it is acceptable to have sexual experiences without the responsibility of caring for children. It has never been a recognized part of any culture for women to have the same right, to have sex without responsibility.

I do not accept any of this. I think it is outrageous that men are recognized as sexual beings whereas women are often left with either a burden of guilt over an abortion, or a burden of guilt over a adoption, or a burden not only of guilt but of eighteen and more years' work trying to raise a child alone with damn little help from anyone.¹⁵⁾

What Laurence insists on here is not allowing easy abortion but to give women a right to choose whether to have a child or not and that men should have equal responsibility with women.

IV

We have seen that Laurence thinks women should have a choice to have a child, that is, to have a right for abortion. We should not forget that this is supported by her deep maternity. Those who attacked Laurence overlooked how maternal Morag is, how she struggled to bring up her daughter and that her child always came first to Morag who was always divided between her child and her writing. We should also remember that one of the causes of the friction between Morag and her husband, Brooke was that she wanted to have a child and was denied this by him.

Laurence answers Graeme Gibson that it is necessary for a woman writer to be able to be

alone when she is working.¹⁶⁾ That was what Morag as a writer always wanted and hardly ever achieved. Thus Laurence's remark reminds us of Virginia Woolf's remark, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."¹⁷⁾ Laurence admits that she was influenced by Woolf's perceptions in shaping her view of life, but adds that, in her late twenties, she began to feel that Woolf's writing lacked the sense of physical reality which she herself needed. Laurence's following words about Woolf's writing reveal the essence of her own :

Her characters were beautifully, ironically drawn, but what was lacking was ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling, a few messy kids. Woolf's novels so immaculate and fastidious in ways that most people's lives are not. She says a great deal, but there is a profound way in which she doesn't speak to my own life.¹⁸⁾

So the Laurence who makes the above statement avoids depicting young attractive protagonists. As Blodgett observes that all her protagonists are frustrated women,¹⁹⁾ Morag is always frustrated between being a mother and being a writer. As Laurence says, "I do not have a great deal of affinity with the ivory tower writer whose work bears no reflection of the concerns of everyday life."²⁰⁾ She wrote of everyday life filled with pain and misery and yet with a possibility of people's understanding each other. Just because Morag is maternal, she is not free from everyday worries.

Just as Laurence says, "I had always wanted to bear a child with the man I loved", so Morag wanted a child first by Brooke and then by Jules. Laurence remembered the moment when her daughter was brought to her after birth as "a moment of revelation."²¹⁾ The birth of Morag's daughter, Pique was proudly proclaimed, "Pique Tonnerre Gunn

has entered her own and unknown life"(p. 305). This was the exhilarating moment which made all the misery and pain of later life worth enduring. And this proclamation reveals Morag's and Laurence's profound maternity.

I would like to quote the following long passage from *The Prophet Camel Bell*, her Somali travelogue, published in 1963, to show Laurence's maternity :

. . . and as we drew near, we saw one of the beasts [two burdened camels] slide to its knees, sunken in the apathy of thirst and exhaustion. Beside them, squatting in the sand, was a woman, a young woman, her black headscarf smeared with dust. She must have possessed, once, a tenderly beautiful face. Now her face was drawn and pinched. In her hands she held an empty tin cup. She did not move at all, or ask for water. Despair keeps its own silence. Her brown robe swayed in the wind. She carried a baby slung across one hip. The child's face was quiet, too, its head lolling in the heavy heat of the sun. We had a little water left in our spare tank, and so we stopped. She did not say a word, but she did something, which I have never been able to forget.

She held the cup for the child to drink first.

She was careful not to spill a drop. Afterward, she brushed a hand lightly across the child's mouth, then licked her palm so that no moisture would be wasted.

To her, I must have seemed meaningless, totally unrelated to herself. How could it have been otherwise? I had never had to coax the lagging camels on, when they would have preferred to stop and rest and die. But what I felt as I looked

into her face, was undeniable and it was not pity. It was something entirely different, some sense of knowing in myself what her anguish had been and would be, as she watched her child's life seep away for the lack of water to keep it alive.²²⁾

Demetrakopoulos quotes the above passage to show that Laurence is as much a master of the plain style as Shakespeare was of the Elizabethan. But she further comments on the passage referring to Laurence's maternity. She says: "In the last paragraph Laurence herself not only experiences this maternal anguish but also sees herself from the mother's point of view as a being light years away from her plight."²³⁾

Demetrakopoulos also refers to this travelogue as a good example of Laurence's feminine insights concerning women.²⁴⁾ At one point in this work Laurence wrote about the time a Somali woman asked her for something to reduce the pain Somali women suffered because of the clitoridectomy they underwent at puberty. I cannot discuss her African works further here, but I think her experience of seeing the plight of women who by this operation are deprived of joy in sexual union must have somewhat influenced her in creating Morag, her archetype of a woman, who gets great joy from sexual union.

V

Laurence says that war is a popular and time-honoured subject of novels, histories, poetry, films, painting, and sculpture, whereas birth and mothering have scarcely been subjects at all, or at least not recognized and honoured subjects of art and history and philosophy, until comparatively recent times.²⁵⁾ She also confesses with bitter regret that when she first submitted her works to the student paper, she sent them under a man's name.²⁶⁾ Later, she began to use her

own name, but she used only the initial of her first name to hide the fact that she was a woman. In one of her early stories, she used a male narrator. And in her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, she described a birth from the point of view of the child's father. She explains that it took her a long time to find her true voice as a woman writer.²⁷⁾

At that point I had borne two children, but women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's view. We had all read many women writers, of course, but I had found no one who described sex or birth as they really were for women. I, who had experienced such joy with sex, such anguish and joy in the birth of my children, not only didn't have the courage to describe these crucial experiences; it didn't even occur to me to do so.²⁸⁾

But ironically one male reviewer reacted with the words, "Why must we always have the obligatory birth scene in novels written by women?" This made Laurence angry. She asked why it was not all right for a woman writer to speak of the miraculous beginnings of human life. From that time on, she began a kind of self-liberation in her writing. After that, when she wrote about birth, she wrote only from the viewpoint of the mother. And she established her own writing style: writing about women's dilemmas from the viewpoint of women.

VI

Laurence's descriptions in *The Diviners* which caused the controversy resulted from the fact that she tried to depict her characters as faithfully as possible to what they really were. Almost all her characters are from a lower class; their modes of speech consequently are those of lower-class people.

She depicted sex scenes positively because

she believed they are also part of people's lives. She depicted Morag as a woman who gets great joy from sex and as a woman independent of any man. Yet she is a woman of strong maternity and she dares any hardships to bring up her child by herself.

Laurence did not yield to the malicious attacks on *The Diviners*. She fought against them through interviews on radio and TV, with newspapers and magazines, and by writing articles. This fight was not only for

herself but also for all contemporary writers and for the women who used to be suppressed as being subordinate to men. She tried to portray life as she honestly saw it, especially from the viewpoint of women which used to be neglected.

The fact that *The Diviners* survived these attacks and is widely read as a Canadian epic proves Laurence was right. As Laurence expected, the novel is now seen as an honour to the Canadian people.

Notes

- 1) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir. McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 214.
- 2) Morley P (1981) *Margaret Laurence*. Twayne Publishers, Boston, p 131.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Chambers R (1988) *The women of Margaret Laurence*. In : Verduyn C (ed) *Margaret Laurence, An appreciation*. Broadview Press, New York, p 211.
- 5) Findley T (1988) *Afterword*. In : Laurence M, *The Diviners*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, p 492.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir. McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 215.
- 8) Twigg A (1981) *For openers, conversations with 24 Canadian writers*. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B. C., p 265.
- 9) Ibid., p 266.
- 10) Roy G (1987) *Letters from Gabrielle Roy to Margaret Laurence*. *Canadian Woman Studies* 8.3 Fall : 52.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Morley P (1981) *Margaret Laurence*. Twayne Publishers, Boston, p 132.
- 13) Citations with pages are from Laurence M (1985) *The diviners*. McClelland-Bantam, Inc., Toronto.
- 14) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir. McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 35.
- 15) Ibid., p 36.
- 16) Gibson G (1972) *Eleven Canadian novelists*. Anansi, Toronto. p 196.
- 17) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir. McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 130.
- 18) Ibid.
- 19) Blodgett H (1981) *The real lives of Margaret Laurence's women*. *Critique, Studies in Modern fiction* : 6.
- 20) Laurence M (1978) *Ivory tower or grassroots?, the novelist as socio-political being*. In : New W (ed) *A political art : essays & images in honour of George woodcock*. Univ of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, p 16.
- 21) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir, McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 140.
- 22) Laurence M (1988) *The prophet's camel bell*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, pp 77—78.

- 23) Demetrakopoulos S (1982) Laurence's fiction, a revisioning of feminine archetype. *Canadian Literature* 93 : 43-44.
- 24) *Ibid.*, 42.
- 25) Laurence M (1989) *Dance on the earth*, a memoir. McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, p 4.
- 26) *Ibid.*, p 5.
- 27) *Ibid.*
- 28) *Ibid.*, p 6.

要 約

マーガレット・ローレンスの作品「占い者達」は、性的描写が露骨であるとか、冒瀆的であるなどと攻撃を受けた。作中人物は低階層出身であり、彼らの話し方もそれにふさわしいものである必要があった。また、作品中で必要であれば、ローレンスは躊躇なく性的場面を描写した。主人公モラーグは性を男性同様楽しむ女性であり、従来描かれてきたような男性に従属的な女性ではない。この作品を攻撃する人たちはそのような一面にばかり目を奪われ、モラーグが如何に母性的であるかを、また、人生は苦しみや惨めさに満ちているが、相互理解の可能性があるという、ローレンスが人生について語る真実を見落としている。ローレンスは女性の視点で女性の葛藤を描いた。