

PROBLEMATIZING THE CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THIS SIDE JORDAN*

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence, a leading Canadian Women writer meticulously strives to reconstruct the identities of the African and European cultures in Africa in the last half of the twentieth century. Laurence's African writing speaks of the African culture, colonial cultural hegemony and the repercussions of cultural mix. There is the blending of her sharp awareness about colonizer's ruthlessness and colonized people's timidity. It also presents the political structure of Ghana and creates an impression that the conflict between ethnic groups is inevitable and understanding and celebrating the cultural treasures of 'others' would create a peaceful ambience for survival, whereas the dominant groups strive for the same in the alien soil creates tension among the ethnic groups.

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The present paper is focused on African setting and multicultural aspects in a colonized land of Africa in *This Side Jordan*. This fictional work also portrays an impressive gallery of unforgettable cast of multicultural and multiethnic characters from the native Africa and the overseas colonizers. Fiona Sparrow states that “the exceptional quality of her West African fiction is not something that needs to be proved”, we cannot ignore either those considering the African years merely “her apprentice years, [which] prepared the way for Manawaka”.

During her stay in Africa, Laurence has written four works of fiction and non-fiction. *This Side Jordan* is the first fiction from Laurence's African writings. Her first publications reflect her life with her engineer husband (later divorced) in Somaliland (1950–52) and Ghana (1952–57). Her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), dealt with how old colonials and native Africans suffered through the exchange of power as Ghana became a nation. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963; also published as *New Wind in a Dry Land*) is an account of her life in Africa. *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963) is a collection of African stories.

In the real sense, Margaret Laurence is the blending of her sharp awareness about colonizer's ruthlessness and colonized people's timidity. Being a Canadian, she herself was a colonized because as stated earlier Canada was the colony of England and France, and being the representative of English Company, she was a colonizer. She has the double identity of a colonizer and a colonized. With that identity she has an acute sense of the blessings and privileges of being a colonizer and pains and agonies of being a colonized.

These two selves of Laurence have enabled her to look at these two opposite worlds of separate entities, culture, tradition, their feelings, ideas, etc.

The hero, Nathaniel Amegbe is an African school teacher, who torn between his duty to his tribe and the aspiration of bright future of his country. In the anticipation of his country's future in the modern world, he names his son "Joshua" as a sign of hope that he will claim and enjoy his homeland. *This Side Jordan* anticipates many of the political and racial issues that were to plague Ghana over the next fifty years. Evocative and poignant, it is a subtle study of the effects of colonialism, culture clash, and the resilience of hope in new political identity.

Set in Ghana, this novel is also a story of the struggle of men and women- African and English are alike- who belong "between yesterday and today", people who despite lifelong efforts, have remained "this side of Jordan", the Jordan of confident, self-knowledge and secure placement in today's world and way of life. The sketchy plot is carried in four strains: by the three British couples of varied age groups who hate Africa but cling to it with the desperate knowledge that they have no place in England and rapidly losing their last foothold in Africa; and, above all, the young African schoolteacher, Nathaniel Amegbe, who represents the problem of inadequately educated and only partially westernized African youth.

In *This Side Jordan*, Margaret Laurence presents the political structure of Ghana and creates an impression that the conflict between ethnic groups is inevitable and understanding and celebrating the cultural treasures of 'others' would create a peaceful ambience for survival, whereas the dominant groups strive for the same in the alien soil creates tension among the ethnic groups. Margaret Laurence's *This Side Jordan* depicts us the amount of love and affection shown by her towards the African culture and customs. "In this novel, Laurence juxtaposes and balances two sets of characters, the one, White British, and the other, Black African, to examine the effects of the colonial encounter on

both the colonizer and the colonized." Her stay in Africa had given her a unique opportunity to exhibit the hidden heritages of Africa - culture, custom, traditions, rituals, folklore, myth and beliefs. The celebration of colonized culture and the focus on its ancestral systems of culture and society is the magnificent and humane attitude of Laurence which she considers the unique function of literature. The novel deals with the conflict between the two groups white administrators and the native Africans. While Ghana was moving towards the status of independence in the 1950's there was a chaotic situation in the place. In Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home Patricia Morley puts, 'This Side Jordan portrays two social groups (white colonial administrators and Africans) coexisting in Ghana in the 1950s as the country moved towards political independence'.

The British expatriates, managers of a well-established textile company, are threatened by the planned changeover to African management. The characters of the novel encounter various conflicts in order to survive in the social setup of the African region - Ghana. These conflicts of multifarious dimensions constitute the structure of the novel. The novels of Laurence present her major concern towards the fellow beings. In This Side Jordan also she has presented the agony and suffering of the people. During her stay in Africa, she was very much moved by the massacres of Ibo tribesmen. While the Africans were at the lower stratum of the social order the whites were dominating the social hierarchy. The novel presents us the conflict between these two polarities in a vibrant manner. The novel is a sensitive portrait of social change in West Africa and the pressure it exerts on individuals and groups. Her African experience had given her the greater insight to bring out the agonizing experiences of the subjugated groups of people in Canada also. She writes about the people who are leading an ordinary life and those who are insignificant in the society. In contrary to their social order, Laurence depicts us the heroic endeavors of these people in the ancestral past. She venerates the arts, traditions and culture of the marginalized groups.

The novel is a prophetic vision of an African – Nathaniel – to bring salvation to the people of Africa through his son Joshua – by crossing the river Jordan. Nathaniel was a teacher at Futura Academy with a noble vision to unite the people of Ghana and to liberate them from the British hegemony. The novel begins with the dancing of Charity – a Negro woman – with a White settler – Johnnie Kestoe at Accra, a few miles away from James Town. On seeing her enthusiasm to dance with the white man - Johnnie, Victor Edusei, a rebellious African, wanted to offer a new life. Victor Edusei challenged Johnnie that Africanization would replace the Britishers from the esteemed positions that they have occupied so far in Africa.

Nathaniel wanted the Africans not to be apes and dogs of the coast eating their filth and living godless in caves. His uncle Adjei made him realize the significance of the African culture, tradition, custom and ancestry. Oscei Tutu, OkomfoAnoye, Nana Prempeh were their ancestors and who were exiled by the British colonizers. Atopere was referred to the 'dance of the death' by the African people.

The novel ends with the realization of Nathaniel's dream of African Independence. He finds his son to be the biblical Joshua. He named his son Joshua with a view to leading his people crossing the river Jordan and thus emancipating the populace of Africa. This Side Jordan accounts the aspirations of the African protagonist – Nathaniel, a Negro teacher in Futura Academy – and envisions his prophetic vision to unite the people to search for the pride roots of Ghana, city of gold, on the banks of the Nigeria. Nathaniel had the undaunted sprit to escalate the position of the people of Ghana and wanted the Africans not to be ape and dogs of the coast eating their filth and living godless in caves. Nathaniel concerns in This Side Jordan: There must be pride and roots, O my people. Ghana,city of Gold ancient empire,Ghana, you will rise again Ghana, empire of our forefathers, rise again to be a glory to your people. We in West Africa had civilization in the past. Great civilizations Ghana was a great civilization. It will rise again to bring glory

to the people. He was born in the forests of Ashanti and lived in the suburbs of Accra. The emancipation of the people of Ghana seem to be the primal motive of Nathaniel for which he confronts with conflicts of various dimensions.

Nathaniel – who had fled from Asante – was against the superstitious practices of Africa. His father Kyerema, the drummer to a chief, had known the speech of the Ntumpane and the Fontom from. He had the proud face and cruel eyes of a warrior of Asante. He prayed to Tono, god of the River, Lord of the forest. Nathaniel had embraced Christianity and he violently stood against the rituals and superstitions of the Africans. 'This Side Jordan is Nathaniel Amegbe's ambivalence and ambiguity in regard to his identity arising out of the colonial mentality. Nathaniel Amegbe is similarly afflicted and finds himself caught between two worlds, "one dead and the other powerless to be born," to use Arnold's well-known phrase.' While Aya – his wife was about to deliver a baby after two miscarriages, he admitted her in a hospital against the African culture.

In Nathaniel's dream, he prayed for rescue from the devil sasabonsam to the gods of Africa – 1. Onyame, giver of sun, 2. Nyankopon, shooter of life's arrows, 3. Tano, God of the river 4. Asaaseyaa, old mother earth, mother of the dead. They did not answer to his plea instead they had died long ago. When Nathaniel prayed to Lord Jesus, the Redeemer, King Jesus came riding on the milk horse and he crossed the river Jordan with the Lord Jesus. Jesus had been arrayed like a king of Ashanti. Nathaniel had great inclination towards the religion of the colonizers. He attached little importance to the gods of Africa. In contrast to this he considered Jesus the God of the colonizers - as a saviour. Margaret Laurence reiterates the fact that the Lord of the colonizers will save the lives of the colonized. She brings out the cross - cultural aspect in this particular part. Nathaniel says:

All night long my soul wrestled with the devil. Yes, My soul wrestled with the Sababonsam in the night. My soul wrestled with the devil, whispering down in the night. And I was falling, I was drowning. Down, down, down. ----

Onyame, the Shining One, Giver of Sun, help me. Nyankopon, Soul of Nyame, Shooter of Life's Arrows, help me. AsaaseYaa, Old Mother Earth, mother of the dead, ---- Jesus, my Redeemer, hear me (if you are there). Jesus my Redeemer, be there. Here me. For I am drowning Save me. Jesus I beg You (if You are there). ---- King Jesus came riding on a milk-white horse. And He crossed the river of Jordan.

His association with the modernity of the west makes him to wrestle with the African rituals, superstitions and irrational practices. In him, the confluence of the African heritage and western modernity is found. Victor Edusai – the classmate of Nathaniel, was a rebellious person who received a degree from the London School of Economics and studied both Journalism and Accountancy. He spent six years in the United Kingdom. Having seen the immoral behaviour of Charity who had the desire to dance with white men in 'African Highlife' at the centre of Accra to claim her association with the whiteman, he was desirous of offering her a fulfilled life. Victor challenged Johnnie that africanisation would drive the whites from the administrative positions to the inferior status. Victor considered Ghana as a dead body lying unburied and the suppression of blacks by blacks would take place even after the independence. He added that even civil war would take place. He had his strong pessimistic attitudes towards the independence of Africa. Whereas Nathaniel had the optimistic approach, Victor looked at Ghananian independence a void. The pessimistic approach of victor is exemplified through his animosity towards the Ghana. His pronouncement on the African civilization as infertile and Ghana as a dead body lying unburied and the domination of the blacks by blacks seems to be highly pessimistic.

When Nathaniel's uncle Adjei visited his house, there was a discussion on the future of Africa. In response to this Adjeiemphasises on the forgotten cultural practices. Adjei is very rebellious in his attitude towards African culture and heritage. He

enumerates the aristocratic lineage of the African countries. But Nathaniel has no hope for that. He says, '[...]no! Old tales, all of it. Our souls are sick with the names of our ancestors. Isei Tutu, he who made the nation, and OkomfoAnoye the priest, he who gave the nation its soul, and Nana Prempeh exiled by the English – I know, I know them all. I respect them, although you do not believe it. I honour them. But they will not save us. They are dead, dead, dead, and we are alive'. Nathaniel considers the African gods and traditions are dead and they will do nothing for the wellbeing of the people. He intends to be a rationalist though he is not fully admitting the colonial culture.

This Side Jordan has two narrators; the initial part of the novel is told by an African, Nathaniel Amegbe and the last part by a European, Miranda Kestoe. The novel opens with a dance party in a nightclub called Weekend in Wyoming, where the European colonizers and some African people. They are enjoying the party with drinks and dance. When Cora, James Thayer's wife, is invited to dance by an African boy, who had initially invited Miranda Kestoe without noticing her advanced pregnancy, Cora feels nothing but hatred and disgust for the poor young man who dare to ask her for dance. On other hand, when Miranda was being invited by the same young African, she does not feel any wrong in dancing with the young African guy who is very courteous. It is Miranda who is very generous, kind and loving by nature, innocently believes in humanity, as she had viewed almost all of life from the old watercolor world of Vicarage, but at the same she is forced to become aware of the colonizers vs. colonized opposition.

When Miranda meets Nathaniel Amegbe, she shows her interest in West African civilization, culture and art. Amegbe initially gets confused and becomes more cautious of the sincerity and the greatness of her mind and intentions and allows himself to be persuaded to take her to the market place, just as Laurence herself had explored the Hargeisa market, creating embarrassing situations for their guides who could understand the comments of the market people.

Nathaniel finally takes Miranda to market and trying to lead the way, the two get lost “into the whirlpool of humanity that swirled unceasingly around the small square”. While seeing these two there in market together the natives were passing the comments of the *mammies* at their stalls, heavy with sexual connotations hinting at the relationship between the two. Despite her genuine interest in the real Ghanaian life, Miranda was forging her way towards those other stalls determinedly. There were the fetish objects sold to make *ju-ju* (or juju, is a term formerly used by Europeans to refer generically to traditional West African religion. The term can refer to objects used for different rituals, their magical power to the person performing the ritual.) for those rites which Nathaniel could still remember from the past. But Miranda is quite unaware of the rich heritage of Africa.

Miranda- a white woman is fond of rich African culture. Her fascinating interest in learning the drums and African language laid the foundation of cultural communion. The process of Africanisation makes the colonizers to feel insecure in the land of strangers. The resistance of native people to the colonial rule is studied through the course of novel. The native proverbs, sayings, songs reveal the native culture and customs. As the British bring with them their own religion and culture, natives are hostile to such an alien religion and culture. The novel ends with the reconciliation between the cultures of colonizers and colonized. It portrays two social groups white administrations and Africans coexisting in Ghana in the 1950s as the country moved towards political independence.

The novel identifies and redresses the genuine issues of African society. Laurence simultaneously presents the struggles of African people against the white European colonizers and the oppression of indigenous racial groups by the white Europeans from the perspective of a colonizer and colonized. Laurence’s novels show the victimization of Ibo community in Africa and indigenous racial group in Canada within the context of a colonial and postcolonial era respectively. Laurence’s African writings faithfully reflect the aesthetic tradition of the African Ibo culture. The study of *This Side Jordan* of Margaret

Laurence exemplifies the multiple dimensions of multiculturalism with his artistic and aesthetic competence. Laurence finds some common egalitarian issues in the aesthetics of different cultures which can invariably constitute a cultural mosaic.

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