



**PRIDE, INDIVIDUALITY AND TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF MARGARET
LAURENCE'S *THE STONE ANGEL***

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Abstract:

*The female protagonists in Margaret Laurence's novels and short stories are outstanding in intellect and spirit and defy the boundaries of their assigned roles. The norm breaking is a way by which these women discover their individual selves. By accepting responsibility and by taking charge of their lives, these women approach the ideal of self-actualizing. Her novels depict the male chauvinistic society in which woman is viewed as a commodity, having no sense of realization of her own existence and individuality. Laurence's protagonists aware of effacement of their identity in devious structure of society, find difficult to struggle to give meaning to their existence to attain identity. They use different strategies like alienating themselves, finding somebody to share feelings, keeping extramarital relation, defying the authority, etc. to come out of their stereotype role in male governing society. In *The Stone Angel* emphasis is given on Hagar's struggle for retaining individuality and identity. She never allows anybody to control or rule her life. Her father is her role model and he is to give her perception. She inherits and learns pride from him which makes her despise the others and female weakness. Since she has imitated her father begins alienating herself from others to retain individuality and show her superiority. She alienates herself from her father even and then she leaves her husband shows isolation living with her son and daughter-in-law. It's only when there are last days of her life she realizes her fault. She feels affection and sympathy for others but the time is very little she has.*

Keywords: *Socialization, Pride, Individuality, Transformation and Superiority, etc.*

Commonwealth literature is widely discussed and necessary to be emphasized among many literatures for countries which were once colonized by British. In post colonial literature commonwealth countries have been trying to raise their voices to deny coloniser's superiority and to bring into notice injustices and brutalities once imposed upon natives. Colonial literature has been attempting to show their national identity in terms of history, culture, freedom once which had been distorted by the colonizers. Commonwealth countries are now free from the British rule. Commonwealth writers explored different subjects and issues in their own writings like Feminism and eco-feminism, Identity crisis, conflicts, alienation, self discovery, quest for identity, isolation, colour and power discourse, gender issues, etc.

Margaret Laurence is one of the celebrated commonwealth (Canada) woman novelists. She has been influenced by Susanna Moodie, Dorothy Livesay, Martha Ostenso, etc. Arguably, the female protagonists occupy an important position in the fiction of Margaret Laurence. The female protagonists in her novels and short stories are outstanding in intellect and spirit and defy the boundaries of their assigned roles. The norm breaking is a way by which these women discover their

individual selves. By accepting responsibility and by taking charge of their lives, these women approach the ideal of self-actualizing. Her novels depict the male chauvinistic society in which woman is viewed as a commodity, having no sense of realization of her own existence and individuality. Laurence's protagonists aware of effacement of their identity in devious structure of society, find difficult to struggle to give meaning to their existence to attain identity. They use different strategies like alienating themselves, finding somebody to share feelings, keeping extramarital relation, defying the authority, etc. to come out of their stereotype role in male governing society. In male centered society struggle of women for their identity is the vital issue in the writings of women novelists in commonwealth literature. Their writing shows that women have been subsided in all fields by men.

In postmodern era women have become conscious about their own predicament and gathered courage to rebel against established authority to assert their identity. Canadian women novelists deal women's status in the society. Women characters in their novels struggle to get rid from conventions which bind them to miserable status. Women in Canada have long been the objects of religious and social discrimination. Our male dominated literature has generally reflected, reinforced or romanticized this cultural stereotype and, consequently, the number of multi-dimensional, realistic, and independent women characters in Canadian fiction has been very small. Margaret Laurence significantly augmented this small company with her portraits of the twentieth-century Canadian heroine.

The four Manawaka novels, *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*, together with her collection of short stories, *A Bird in the House*, all engage in a detailed and specific way with the nature of the life of the prairies. Apart from influencing a whole generation of writers, Laurence has given women a distinctive voice. She has created a strong breed of women characters that possess a keen sense of self or battle hard to find it. Laurence primarily views woman as a victim of society, man, and her own fears and frustrations. She must search beyond her role-definition to find a personal identity and freedom.

The present paper studies *The Stone Angel* with the emphasis on Hagar's struggle for retaining individuality and identity. She never allows anybody to control or rule her life. Even in her old age she doesn't surrender to anybody instead she tries to dominate the lives of those people who come in contact with her. Novel opens suggesting that Jason Currie's wife died leaving behind a daughter, Hagar and two sons, Matt and Dan. Hagar is deprived of the motherly cuddling and touching that would normally have been given her. She would have imitated her mother in her youth to be her mother's daughter. Jason Currie whom Hagar inherits and follows is with full of pride. He is always engaged in showing his superiority, retaining his uniqueness from others. She inherits pride, stubbornness and tough-mindedness from her father whereas her brothers are frail like her dead mother. Jason never takes a back when there is show of superiority. Once fund was raised in order to build a new church, and in the congregation his name was mentioned second in the list, so he wished, "I and Luke McVitie must've given the most, as he called our names the first" (Laurence, TSA, 16). From him, she learns to reject any characteristics that are perceived as weakness, both in herself and others. Abhorring weakness means that Hagar over-accentuates characteristics which appear to embody strength. This necessity for strength extends to a pride of place in the community, pride in possessions, and pride of outward appearances. Because of Jason Currie's patriarchal beliefs and similar views echoed by the Manawaka community, Hagar equates weakness with women and thus, recoils from all things female. She also inherits difficulty in communicating her feelings and thoughts from her father and her society. From the imported stone angel that adorns his wife's grave to the inheritance he leaves to have the family plot attended in perpetuity, pride of position rules Jason's life. Like the stone angel that is bigger and costlier than all the rest, Jason sees himself as superior to the others in Manawaka who he feels are "a lesser breed entirely" (Laurence, TSA, 4). Hagar shares this pride from an early age.

Hagar does not go out for teaching. She stays at home and keeps her father's accounts, "played hostess for him, chatted diplomatically to guests, did all he expected" (Laurence, TSA, 45). When Hagar wants to take a teaching position, Jason attacks her with words of patriarchal ownership, he says, 'no daughter of mine is going out there alone' (Laurence, TSA, 44). When she tells him of her intention to marry Bram Shipley, he replies with insults and then silences to punish her disobedience. It is not usually a father that teaches a female child as we have seen Jason do; mothers usually play a large part in socializing their daughters. Hagar's female models are her mother and her Aunt Doll, but

both of these women are prevented from moderating Jason's overpowering influence on Hagar. Hagar imagines her dead mother as "feeble" (Laurence, TSA, 3) and "docile" (Laurence, TSA, 59). She says, "all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest. . ." (Laurence, TSA, 25). Hagar's mother cannot teach her that being female or maternal does not mean being weak, nor can she teach her to communicate effectively.

Hagar internalizes the misconception that being a woman means weakness and death. Not only is Hagar's mother an ineffectual model for the young girl, her other exemplar, Auntie Doll, is subservient and largely silent. As "hired help" (Laurence, TSA, 6) with no real say in the family, motherly Dolly Stonehouse is no match for a feisty little girl such as Hagar and simply sends her off to Jason. Critics, who examine Hagar's relationship with her mother and the women in her society, agree that she must learn to identify with valuable characteristics that society sees as female before she reaches wholeness.

She is given a finishing school education that prepares her only for life within doors because she is not welcome to communicate in the larger community. When, she wishes to teach away from home, she is told how unacceptable this is for a young woman. She is a woman, and society has seen woman staying at home and performing the chores. She is not enough tough and bold to stay outside alone in terrible society where lives cruel men. Most of the time man has made the opportunities of woman's helplessness for his benefits. Her father tells her "Men have terrible thoughts" and the farm boys will "paw" you (Laurence, TSA, 44). She feels cowed by the thought that men make society a dangerous place for an unprotected woman. When Hagar ignores the edict that, "There's not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent" (Laurence, TSA, 49), she is effectively silenced by ostracism from her family and most of the community. Women's voices are controlled by powerful males and any insurrection is punished by the community as a whole. Hagar goes to the Toronto Academy for young ladies in order to acquire all feminine attributes like "embroidery, and French, and menu-planning for a five-course meal, and poetry, ... and the most becoming way of dressing [her] hair" (Laurence, TSA, 42-43). Her father plans all this to make her a good hostess and a good upper-class wife. She rebels against this first by wanting to become a teacher and later by marrying Bram and thus marrying beneath her status.

Hagar despises feminine qualities and traditional role which become evident through another incident early in the novel. When Dan is delirious with fever and dying, Matt wants Hagar to put on their mother's shawl and make death less painful for Dan. Matt asks her to pretend as their comforting mother who is long dead when Dan was only four years old. Hagar refuses by saying:

But all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her—it was beyond me.... I was.... unable to do it, unable to bend enough (Laurence, TSA, 25).

This refusal can be interpreted that her pride does not allow her to stoop to the level of her feeble mother who died in childbirth. Following this, she wishes to maintain a safe distance. Also, she does not want to show openly her mark of weakness (sorrow and tears) and her fear of death. Hagar's pride isolates her and inhibits her relationships with her brothers, her sons, her husband, and others that might have been a comfort to her. Taylor comments that "Hagar loses the fullness of her potential self when she cuts herself off from others" (Taylor, 162) and we see this first with her brothers. This attitude marks her reactions to the deaths of Bram and John later in the novel. It is her negation of all things female that is at the root of this problem. She refers to Matt and Dan as "graceful and unspirited boys" who "took after [their] mother" (Laurence, TSA, 7) and, because of this perceived weakness, her relationship with them is never close.

Even as Hagar privately seeks to establish herself as an autonomous agent, she challenges some of the traditional ideas of woman in the evening of her life. The issue of interior monologues provides the kind of access the novelist gives to readers. Also, the inner conflict generated by these monologues prelude the assertion and annihilation of Hagar's self. A tragic protagonist she is, Hagar

offers a different perspective of character in that, she administers a cut across the so called patterns of sympathy expressed by Mr. Troy and the Marvin.

At the time when she meets Bram at a dance, she has consistently snubbed each of the young men her father has brought to the house for her to meet, whether through pure perversity because her father has chosen them or because she found them genuinely boring we are not sure. Jason has always expected Hagar to obey him. He has taken decision at every stage for her. She has not opposed him though she does not like some decisions taken for her against her wish. Many times she has suppressed her desires not even mentioned to him. This time she rebels against her father because he never liked the people below his dignity. It is the first time she takes her own decision and continues dominating the other people. Bram could not have been more different. Both Lottie Drieser and Hagar's father endorse the view that Bram is "common as dirt" (Laurence, TSA, 47). It is sad that Hagar, in order to escape her father's authoritarianism falls a prey to another form of oppression.

Bram is not refined man in his language and manners but, Hagar thinks she may bring the changes in his behavior. She cannot change him little on the contrary her pride disturbs their relations. The pride and inability to open up which mars Hagar's relationship with Bram, continues in her relationship with her sons. She holds the pride of Currie throughout her life. She expects her children should take after Currie not Shipley. Giving birth to two children she starts distinguishing them. By an irrational belief, she holds that Marvin, her eldest son is a Shipley whereas John, her favourite son is a Currie. It turns out to be just the reverse. As John once puts it succinctly, "You always bet on the wrong horse" ... "Marv was your boy, but you never saw that ..." (Laurence, TSA, 237).

Her liking for John and control over him takes her to interfere his life. Her aim is to make him more like Currie not Shipley. But on the other hand naturally, he is Shipley in his behaviour and nature. He develops liking for Arlene, daughter of Lottie Dreiser whom Hagar has always despised. Hagar is not satisfied when she comes to know their relations, she tries to break up the relation but cannot succeed in her plan. In one sense, Hagar resents the mutual understanding that exists between John and Arlene and the perfect marriage between Marvin and Doris. For instance, she once tries to advise Arlene against marrying John by saying that Arlene cannot change him a bit. The perfect understanding that exists between John and Arlene is evident in their clear thinking and frank discussions about their marriage and their future. When direct confrontations with John and Arlene prove futile, Hagar tries to break the relationship by joining hands with Lottie. This results in their plan to send away Arlene to the East. When Hagar and the Simmonses interfere in John and Arlene's relationship, he sacrifices their young lives rather than part with Arlene. This, in turn, results in the ghastly deaths of John and Arlene. Hagar's pride isolates her from her most important relationships.

Hagar's motive to leave her protected existence with Doris and Marvin is, superficially, her refusal to be put into a nursing home. On a deeper level, Hagar has a sense of her impending death and needs to get rid of her weaknesses before she can find the freedom to die. We know that Hagar's mind is on death as she feels Marvin and Doris are treating her like "a calf, to be fatted" (Laurence, TSA, 35) "and as though [she] weren't [t]here" (Laurence, TSA, 32) anymore. She also feels as dry "as an old bone" and in this same passage she uses the phrase "dust . . . to dust . . ." (Laurence, TSA, 54). The pain she now lives with is a dramatic reminder that her end is imminent.

Hagar meets Lees there who has come to the cannery in an attempt to escape facing the fact of his child's death. Hagar drinks wine with him who is a perfect stranger and also sinks into sleep close to him. This is the first instance; reader can see there is change in her behavior. First time she has shown the closeness to somebody sharing her feelings. This is the beginning of the transformation which leads her to get rid from her deep rooted pride and feel affinity for others. She has broken false cage in which she was caught now she can enjoy her real happiness showing empathy and helping to others.

Through her relationship with the other patients in the large public ward where she finds herself to begin with, she becomes more aware for the first time of the sufferings of others - the poor German woman who prays all night in her own language for release in death, and the little bird of a woman, Elva Jardine, who will probably never leave the hospital alive but keeps up a pretence for the sake of her husband. Hagar's initial irritation and impatience grow into sympathy. She at last learns to accept people for what they are, not for what they appear to be, and to accept help when offered. Appearances do not matter when you are face to face with death. She is quite upset when she is moved into a semi-private ward, but here too she is able to take a small step towards new understanding in

comforting the young Chinese girl who comes to occupy the other bed. It is for this attractive though rather spoiled child that she performs her first truly unselfish act.

Hagar's reconciliation in the female community allows for a denunciation of her father's values. Through her relationships with Mrs. Jardine and Sandra she faces and denies the hold her father's pride has had on her. Initially, she does not respect Elva because she represents women as "flimsy as moth wings" (Laurence, TSA, 269), exactly what Hagar has loathed throughout her life. Her opinion changes, when Hagar sees that Elva shows strength and kindness for others in the face of death. Sandra is strong and weak at the same time; not denying either side of her personality. She admits to being afraid of an operation, yet, she has the courage to stay with Hagar though she is initially afraid to be with someone who is dying. Through the example of these women, Hagar is able to reconcile being "hard and "soft" at the same time. In accepting these representatives of her mother, she can deny the hold that her father's values have had on her.

Hagar has somewhat of an epiphany when she hears Mr. Troy sing. Until now she has seen the minister as not strong enough to be worthy of her respect. When she hears him singing she realises that having joy is more important than having power. Joy allows one to cherish life and loved ones. This "know[ledge] comes upon [her] so forcefully, so shatteringly and with such a bitterness as [she has] never felt before" (Laurence, TSA, 292). She acknowledges that her pride in appearing strong has been one of her burdens and then she does the same with language. She questions, "When did I ever speak the heart's truth?" (Laurence, TSA, 292). Pearson and Pope see this type of connection for the hero as a liberating moment when she identifies those things in society that have "restricted" her or "taught her that she must repress . . . herself" (Laurence, TSA, 103). These admissions by Hagar show that she has successfully completed her quest. Her treasure is her transformed self and she is supposed to live in happiness with her new family. Hagar's time is short but she tries to open herself to those around her.

Hagar is a heart touching character that remains something else being influenced by her father than her true self. Inherited pride from her father never allows her to appreciate others and feel affinity for others. Pride stricken Hagar dominates the others retains individuality, but her this nature cuts off her relation from people around her. She remains isolated from her son and daughter-in-law too. She never shows closeness to both of them; she never shares her feelings with them. There is no harmony and tuning in relation between them though she has been living with them in a house for many years. When there is little time for Hagar she finds that her life has become miserable because of her isolation from people. It is the only one way for her to enjoy the life if she sheds off her pride and appreciate the people. This transformation is necessary for her to find her true self and enjoy the life from which she is deprived of. Her sharing feelings with the stranger, Lees at cannery and relationship with the other patients in the large public ward where she becomes more aware for the first time of the sufferings of others allows her to enjoy the happiness of real self.

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