

SUBVERTING THE GENDER STEREOTYPES: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF HAGAR SHIPLEY IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE STONE ANGEL

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Abstract : Women, to be better stereotyped as the Weaker Sex was subjugated and suppressed since time immemorial. She was restricted within the boundaries of house and was only entrusted with domestic chores. It is only a few decades that women began to step out of their confinements and proved that they are equal to their counterparts' men, the Better Sex in all respects. Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley is a strong willed woman who moved ahead of her times breaking the shackles set up by the society. As the title *The Stone Angel* indicates a paradoxical relationship between the two words, the protagonist Hagar Shipley did not fit herself into the stereotypes assigned for a woman. This paper undertakes a detailed analysis of the character Hagar Shipley who overtly subverted the norm that a woman should be taken care by father, husband and son in every stages of her life in the light of feminist reading.

IndexTerms – Patriarchy, stereotypes ,confinement, subversion, out spoken, strong willed

“One is not born a woman but becomes one” (Simon de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*).

There is a trend to use the words sex and gender used simultaneously without trying to analyse the deeper differences between them. Sex is the term used to differentiate a man and woman physiologically whereas gender is the qualities and attributes predetermined and assigned by the society. Everything was seen in dichotomies like white/black, day/night, reason/passion, heaven/hell, man/woman where one half is considered as better and the other as inferior. Women were considered secondary and subordinate to men in all respects. The Feminist movement was spearheaded to emancipate woman from all the confinements of life. It brought into light the millennium long subjugation of women community by the patriarchal society and developed a platform for them to raise their voices. The Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence has strongly undermined the gender stereotype assigned to women through her depiction of the character Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*.

Margaret Laurence is a novelist and short story writer hailing from Canada. She is one of the pioneers of Canadian literature and held in great respect. She began her literary career by writing short stories while she was a teenager in Neepawa. *The Land of Our Father* is her first published work. She created a fictional Canadian town called Manawaka which figures in most of her works. She became a fully fledged writer after her marriage. She spent a major portion of her life in Africa which had an influence on her early novels. Margaret wrote her masterpiece novel *The Stone Angel* after her return to Canada.

The Stone Angel was published in 1964 and is set in the fictional Manitoba town called Manawaka. The entire novel progresses on the perspective of the protagonist Hagar Shipley through three stages of her life including childhood, adulthood and old age. There is a continuous shift from old age to the past recollections of her life. She is suffering from memory grip which she fails to admit. Hagar is portrayed as an outspoken woman who never compromises her pride before others and shows an antagonistic nature. The entire novels works on stream of consciousness method .She does not fit into the so called gender stereotypes assigned to women who are supposed to be gentle and epitome of love and motherhood. During her younger days she never liked to associate herself to her weak and docile mother and considered herself as strong-boned. She dared to oppose her affluent and powerful father Jason Currie while choosing to marry the half breed Bram Shipley. During her life with Bram Shipley she never regarded herself as someone inferior to her husband and demanded that she should have an equal say with him. The most elaborate part is the depiction of Hagar as a ninety year old grandmother who is considers herself as self sufficient and unwilling to submit to the controlling mechanisms adopted by her son and daughter in law. Throughout her life Hagar continues to subvert the gender stereotypes entrusted upon a woman by the society.

Feminism began as a popular movement in France in the Nineteenth century which advocated for the rights of women. Feminist criticism is branch of literary criticism which seeks to challenge the notions and establish the perspectives and responsibilities of women who were silenced for ages. There is a common misconception regarding feminism. Many people considered that feminism propagated hatred towards men and instigated women to get separated from their families. However in the true sense feminism established the fact that all human beings are equal and have same rights. Feminist literary criticism aims to study the ways in which cultural representations, like literature, undermine and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression and oppression of women in society. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification and patriarchy. Prominent feminist literary critics include Isobel Armstrong, Nancy Armstrong, Laura Brown, Barbara Bowen, Margaret, Eva Figes, Toril Moi, Gayatri Spivak, Marina Warner, Nancy. K. Miller etc.

Feminist theory gathered momentum in the 1960s. It starts with the idea that gender difference is a neglected aspect of traditional literary criticism. Traditional approaches are male dominated and have ignored the perspective of women. Feminist literary critics in the mid-1970s drew attention to neglected female authors in the English tradition and propagated a new literary

history by focusing on an independent female literary tradition. The third phase of feminist criticism began in 1980s. It saw the influence of French feminists like Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. They focused on textual features. They view the female physical anatomy as the chief factor influencing the structure and style of female writings.

The attempt by feminists to account for the position of the male in literary criticism and in feminism resulted in the shift to gender theory. Gender theory analyses not only the female but the interaction of the male and female. It includes women's studies and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex). Gender theory supports the idea that men and women have different strengths, perspectives and rules, while advocating for the equal worth and dignity of both sexes. Feminism is multicultural and diasporic. It is a proven fact that women, in general, are subjected to patriarchal oppression. Also patriarchy operates in different ways in different countries. It is also true that women's problems are shaped by their race, class, nationality, religion and many other factors. It is a complex issue involving implications at various levels. Feminist critics try to go against the grain in exploring/ exposing the patriarchal ideology of literary texts. It is wide in its range, because it accommodates several issues-cultural, social, political and psychological. Its goal is to widen our understanding of women's experience of the world, and their value in the world.

As the title indicates *The Stone Angel* can be considered as paradoxical since angel is associated with love, gentleness and warmth whereas stone is a synonym of lack of feelings and cold heartedness. The protagonist Hagar Shipley is also presented as someone out of the box who does not fit into the qualities ascribed for a woman. The novel introduces Hagar as a nine year old daughter of the proud and rich merchant Jason Currie. She never liked to relate her as he daughter of her dead mother who was mentioned as a weak woman. Simultaneously we come across a ninety year old Hagar who is staying with her son Marwin and daughter in law Doris. Though being a sick and old woman she is unwilling to depend on others. She even takes pleasure in smoking at this age. There is a sudden shifting between the present and past. She narrates a child hood incident when she got beating from her father for misbehaving in front of a customer. But she did not cry. 'I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged' (Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, 9). She behaved more proudly than her proud father. The quality pride was often associated with men. Women are supposed to be humble and modest. Hagar undermined the notion through her stubborn nature.

Jason Currie was more fond of Hagar than his two sons Matt and Dan. According to him both his sons inherited the gentle characteristics of their mother. However Hagar had backbone and she was entrusted with task of assisting him in the shop. Once he said: 'Smart as a whip, she is, that one'(14). In the earlier times girl children were only trained to become good housekeepers. They were denied from possessing higher education and obtaining outside jobs. Mary Wolestonecraft has clearly demarcated the so called duties and tasks assigned for a woman in her epic work *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (1792) which was a pioneer work for the early feminism. According to her both men and women possess same power of reason and hence both should have equal access to education, job, decision making and every opportunities of life. Even in her old age Hagar considers her as an independent woman who does not want to live at the mercy of others. Though she suffers from memory loss her pride won't allow her to admit it. She never lets others to see her tear during the times of extreme pain. People generally believe that at old age one is bound to depend on others and should detach from worldly possessions. Hagar still affirms that the house they live is still in her name and she is the sole owner after the death of her husband. She proclaims that she bought the house with her hard earned money and is unwilling to pass it to her children.

The most striking incident which showcases the stubborn nature of Hagar was during the last moments of her dying brother Dan. He was youngest of them and was inclined towards the mother and used to sleep on her shawl after her death. When Dan became seriously ill, the elder brother Matt asked Hagar to play and role of mother and nurse the dying child. He offered her the shawl so that Dan would suppose that it's his mother and would some get relief. To the shock of Matt she stood cold and drifted away her hands. She even went on saying 'I can't. Oh Matt, I'm sorry, but I can't. I can't. I'm not a bit like her.' (25). Later it was Matt who put the shawl on him and took care of his brother. Motherhood and the qualities associated with it like selfless love, caring and nurturance is expected from every woman. However Hagar subverted each and every stereotypes that is associated to the female gender through her outspoken nature. Feminism points out that there are no qualities assigned only to woman. Both men and women should play every role as and when the situation demands.

People especially old women tend to be more religious towards the final stages of their life. They spent their times by chanting prayers and reading Holy Scriptures. Doris had arranged a session for Hagar with the pastor Mr. Troy hoping that his words would give her solace. However in reality Hagar was very much irritated in meeting the pastor. She thought he was just wasting his time by talking to her. She has the least desire to lead a spiritual life ignoring the worldly comforts. Her mind is still that of the young outspoken Hagar who never succumbs to anyone's orders. She always had the courage to raise her voice before others. She demanded to her father that she preferred teaching rather than assisting him in the store. Teaching was then not considered as a decent job for woman hailing from rich families. He wanted her to play the role of hostess and confined within the four walls of the house. Hagar has dared to go much beyond her father's controlling mechanism by proclaiming that she was going to marry Bram Shipley. Girls at those times weren't given the choice to select their husbands. Those matters were decided strictly by the parents and elders. Bram Shipley came from a low family and hence her father never approved him. Moreover he was a widower survived by two daughters. Herb father warned that 'There is not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent' (49). But Hagar disregarded all his threats and went away to live with the man she preferred. The choice of partner should be in accordance with the preference of women rather than submitting to society's whims and fancies.

Even during Hagar's life with her husband Bram she always demanded an equal say in all important matters. She was unwilling to let herself to be solely controlled by him. She remembers that eventually it became unbearable for her to tolerate the manner and speech of her low breed husband Bram. She was of the opinion that he lacked the initiative to lead a business. In many a times she played the role of the head of the family. In reality she craved for his love only and she did not want to be a mother. She preferred physical intercourse for pleasure and satisfaction and not for giving birth to children. But gradually she also played the role of motherhood which was expected from every women. During the time of labour pain she wished that child

to be entirely his and not her. Nevertheless they continued to live without many problems and raised their two sons. Women were not given authority over their body. They did not have the right to choose or deny motherhood. Feminism upheld that it is women who are masters of their body and are not being slaves of men. Women are not machines entrusted only with the task of child bearing and upbringing. Menstruation and motherhood are never the yardsticks to proclaim that a woman is a weaker sex. It is just a natural process. A woman can be independent and self sufficient at all stages of her life. Through the portrayal of the character Hagar Shipley, Margaret Lawrence has successfully subverted the usual stereotypes that are assigned to the female gender.

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