

# SEARCH FOR SELF-HOOD; A STUDY OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE STONE ANGEL AND THE DIVINERS

**ABIDA BEGUM M.Phil Research scholar (Andhra University)  
INDIRA COLONY, NEAR JAMA MASJID, GAJUWAKA, VISAKHAPATNAM, ANDHRA  
PRADESH.**

## ABSTRACT

Canadian Literature (Widely Abbreviated as Can Lit) is Literature originating from Canada. Canadian writers have produced a wide Variety of Genres. The First Writers of English in Canada were visitors- explores Travellers and British Officers –Who Recorded their Impressions of British North America in Charts, Diaries, Journals and Letters. These Foundational Documents of Journey and Settlements Presage The Documentary Tradition in Canadian Literature in Which Geography, History and Arduous Voyages of Exploration and Discovery Represent The Quest for Myth of Origins and for a Personal and National Identity

Since Before European Contact and The Confederation of Canada, Indigenous People in North America have Occupied the Land and Maintained a Rich and Diverse History of Culture, Identity, Language, Art and Literature. Indigenous Literature is a Problematic Term as Every Cultural Group has its Own Distinct Oral Tradition, Language and Cultural Practices. After the Colonization of Canada the Dominant European Cultures were Originally English, French and Gaelic. By the Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism With in Bilingual Frame Work in 1971, Canadian Critics and Academics Gradually began to Recognize that there Existed a more Diverse Population of Readers and Writers. The Country's Literature has been strongly Influenced by International Immigration, Particularly in Recent Decades Since 1980's Canada Ethnic and Cultural Diversity has been Openly Reflected in its Literature, With Many of its Most Prominent Writers Focusing on Ethnic Minority, Identity, Duality and Culture Differences Margaret Laurence was one of the Outstanding Writers of Canadian Literature. The Stone Angel and The Diviners were the Manawaka Novels of Margaret Laurence. Her Novels became Memorable not only with the unique Canadian Voice, But also with the Depiction of her female Protagonists. In the Novel The Stone Angel, It Presents The Life Story of Hagar Shipley, A Ninety Four Old Women Awaiting for Death, Reviewing Her Past Life And Relationships, A Concrete Expressions of Her Quest for Self-Hood And Consequent Discovery of Truth About Herself. "The Diviners" is A Typical Work of Margaret Laurence, In Which the Issue of Human Identity, The Female Identity Becomes Synonymous With The Figure of A Woman as The Survivor. The Central Character is Morag Gunn, Who is A Novelist who is Trying to Find her Own Voice as A Writer in A Patriarchal Set-Up.

**KeyWords:-** Canadian Identity, Self –Identity, self-hood, realization, repentance, survival.

## **BACKGROUND GENRE OF MARGARET LAURENCE**

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss on 18 July 1926 in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa. Of Scottish ancestry, her father, Robert Wemyss, also born in Neepawa, was a lawyer. Of Irish ancestry, her mother, Verna Simpson Wemys, a native Neepawan, the daughter of a furniture dealer and an undertaker, was a talented pianist and music teacher. In 1930, at the age of thirty – four, Verna Wemyss died of kidney infection. Her unmarried older sister Margaret returned from Calgary, where she had been teaching, to look after young Margaret. A year later Margaret Simpson married Robert Wemyss, and they had one son who was born in 1933. Two years later Robert Wemyss died of pneumonia.

In 1938 Margaret Simpson Wemyss moved the family into her eighty – two - year – old father's house, where she cared for him as well as for the two children. Young Margaret resented her grandfather's rigid authoritarianism. His strength was her "constant challenge to battle," as Clara Thomas observes in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*: She was challenged, but certainly not crippled, by this old, still fierce and autocratic man; her step – mother's supportive love and encouragement and her own strong spirit, well – matched to her grandfather's strength, were constant, counterbalancing dynamic growth and achievement" (25).

In 1944 Margaret Wemyss left Neepawa to take a scholarship at Winnipeg's United College, a United Church Arts and Theology College affiliated with the University of Manitoba. During her college years as an 10 honors English student, she had

several poems and stories published in *Vox*, the Undergraduate paper. At this time, as Laurence noted in the essay “Ivory Towers or Grassroots?” (1978), she also became involved with the old left, a group of supporters of social reform. The need to alleviate crippling social conditions that prevent man’s full realization of his dignity and humanity is a constant theme of her fiction.

Upon graduation in 1947 she took a job as a reporter for the *Winnipeg Citizen*, where she wrote book reviews, a daily radio column, and reports on labor events. On the 13<sup>th</sup> September of the same year she married Jack Laurence, a civil – engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba.

In 1949 the Laurence left Canada for England, and the following year they went from England to Africa where they lived for seven years. In 1950 Jack Laurence was appointed Director of a dam – building project in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, now Somalia. After the initial stages of the project were completed in 1952, he felt reluctant to stay on when a Somali engineer could do the remaining work. From 1952 until 1957 he continued his engineering work in the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Their daughter Jocelyn was born during a vacation in England in 1955. Shortly before the day the Gold Coast received its independence as the state of Ghana in 1957, the Laurence returned to Canada.

The African years were a stimulating challenge and a formative influence on Margaret Laurence’s literary career. The opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture was a welcome contrast to the prairie world that pervaded her mental landscape.

From 1950 until 1957 Laurence lived in Africa, the first two years in Somalia, the next five in Ghana, where her husband, a civil engineer, was working. She translated Somali poetry and prose during this time, and began her career as a fiction writer with stories set in Africa.

When Laurence returned to Canada in 1957, she settled in Vancouver, where she devoted herself to fiction with a Ghanaian setting: in her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, and in her first collection of short fiction, *The Tomorrow Tamer*. Her Two years in Somalia were the subject of her memoir, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*

Separating from her husband in 1962, Laurence moved to England, which became her home for a decade, the time she devoted to the creation of five books about the fictional town of Manawaka, patterned after her birthplace, and its people: *The stone Angel*, *A jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House*, and *the Diviners*.

Laurence settled in Lakefield, Ontario, in 1974. She complemented her fiction with essays, book reviews, and four children’s books. Her many honors include two Governor General’s Awards for Fiction and more than a dozen honorary degrees. Margaret Laurence died in Lakefield, Ontario, in 1987.

Laurence’s efforts and her talent were widely recognized over the course of her career. In addition to her two Governor General’s Awards, she received the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award (1961), three President’s Media Awards from the University of Western Ontario (1961, 1962, 1964), a Molson Prize (1975), a Periodical Distributor’s Award (1977), and a city of Toronto Award of Merit (1978). Laurence was named Companion of the Order of Canada (1971), Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1977); and she was the recipient of honorary degrees from United College (1966), McMaster University (1970), Trent University (1971), Dalhousie University (1971), University of Toronto (1971), Carleton University (1974), Brandon University (1975), Queen’s University (1975), Allison University (1976), Simon Fraser University (1977), York University (1980), and Victoria University (1982). In 1981 she accepted a three – year appointment as Chancellor of Trent University.

From her careful study of the colonial cultures of Africa, Laurence brought to her Canadian fiction a wide sympathy for the plight of the individual in a young nation, an understanding of the need for myths that give shape to human lives, and an intense dedication to the depiction of contemporary Canadians in the pages of fiction.

## The Stone Angel

Margaret Laurence was one of the most outstanding writers of Canadian Literature. *The Stone Angel*, Laurence most popular work, is set in a fictional small town, Manawaka. The story is narrated by Hagar Shipley, a ninety – four – year old woman living in her son’s home. This novel shows us the distinct aspect of a woman’s life in a patriarchal society. It is about personal development from a position of weakness and alienation to a position of self – understanding.

There is an underlying autobiographical element in Laurence’s novels which are a concrete expression of her quest for self – identify and consequent discovery of truth about herself. Her spiritual experience of self – contemplation led her to an isolation in which searching for a true self became her objective.

Hagar is a unique protagonist and has a special place among Laurence’s heroines. Hagar is incomparable because she is not a likeable person. When the story begins, she is the crotchety, sharp – tongued , old lady: she has lived a life totally devoid of joy and warmth. Patricia Morley remarks : “ Hagar Shipley is the first in a series of memorable women. Laurence presents universal concerns in terms of the Canadian experience over four generations. She allows us to see into the hearts of her individual characters, their society and ourselves” (Morley 8). She is identified with a stone angel which is the central image of the novel. The stone angel is in fact a statue erected on her mother’s grave. Jason Currie, Hagar’s father, did not love his deceased wife. But he erects the statue on her grave only to display of his wealth. She admires male virtues and neglects feminine virtues. She is too proud to cry in the scene where Jason beats her. She refuses silliness associated with girls. Hagar’s confrontational style shows she strength and independence that come from her cultural background and her family. For Hagar, any emphatic assertion of a woman’s independence brings regret.

Hagar is the daughter of a successful merchant. She lost her mother when she was a child. Hagar chooses to marry the ones but her father disinherits her, because he does not like his daughter marrying a lower – class man. The couple encounters great economic hardship. Hagar is unhappy in her relationship with Bram Shipley, her husband. Her life is devoid of joy and love because of her excessive pride and her father’s trait. She is a cold – hearted person like her father. From her childhood as the daughter of a rich man to her rebellious marriage, Hagar as a woman fights a battle for independence. Another trait that Hagar inherited from her father is poor communication skills, she is unable to express her feeling because being a motherless child, she was raised by her father. Mothers play an important role in socializing and raising their daughters, but Hagar was deprived of her mother’s influence in her life as a child. She has learned and imitates her father’s behaviors. Hagar’s femininity is suppressed because of Jason’s overpowering influence on his wife earlier and daughter later.

Her father’s pride is evident right from the Stone Angel that adorns his wife’s grave to the inheritance he leaves for his daughter. Hagar inherits this pride from an early age. Hagar grew up rebellious, stubborn and crotchety. She recollects exhibiting her pride from an early age. Indeed pride is a prison for Hagar, but through her inner quest, she overcomes her pride and finally discovers her real identity.

When Hagar’s elder son was born, her father did not go to see him. Ironically Hagar also felt that Marvin was not really her son, her reasoning was not dissimilar to his. Her upbringing made her behave that, her family and relatives were superior to other people. After her marriage, she encounters some economic difficulties. She remembers “Marvin, the day he started school, wearing a sailor suit and a face blank as water. He hated that navy – blue suit .... for most of the other boys wore overalls, I soon gave up trying to dress him decently and let him wear overalls too ..... Bram’s daughter used to give me the overall their boy had grown out of – How it galled me .....” (The Stone Angel 69).

Hagar’s pride isolated her and inhibited her relationship with her brothers, her sons, her husband and others, which might brought comfort to her. Taylor says: “Hagar loses the fullness of her potential self where she cuts herself off from others” (The Stone Angel 162). Her negation of all female things is the root of this problem. When Dan is dying of pneumonia, Mat urges Hagar to put on their mother’s shawl to comfort Dan, but she cannot move past her abhorrence of perceived weakness to pretend that she is the mother. She does not respect her relationship with her brothers.

Hagar’s perceptions of her son and her husband her influenced strongly by her pride. She ignores Marvin, her elder son’s good qualities, because she dislikes his resemblance to Bram’s family. She thinks she is very intelligent and cleverer than her husband. Hagar almost felt as though Marvin was not her own son, even though young Marvin attempts to please her, because he is

not a quick thinker like her. But John is Hagar's favorite son because she thinks that he takes after her father. He is quick to learn and is better spoken than Bram and Marvin. He exhibits signs of the same family pride. He is quick tempered and drunk. She ignores this fact. When John is getting ready to leave Manawaka, Hagar's pride once again prevents her from expressing herself properly. She tells: "I walked to the wrought iron gate Mr. Dately's house with him ..... wanting only to touch his brown impatient face but not daring to .....". (The Stone Angel 167).

She was unable to shed tears over the death of her family members. After John's death, Hagar once again does not cry or express her grief in any form. She feels she has to bear the pain alone and cannot allow herself to be comforted by others. An old lady puts her arm around her and exhorts "cry, Let yourself. It is the most things. I have never had to do in my entire life" (The Stone Angel 242).

Another relationship that falls short of its potential because of Hagar's pride in her own values is her union with Bram. Hagar rebels against her father's authority and marries according to her own will. Hagar is too ashamed to be seen in town or in church with her husband because of his bad – tempered and cruel behavior. When she leaves him, he does not rage at her but instead shows concern for her but Hagar's pride holds her back from expressing her own feeling and prohibits her from experiencing the others. This pride and rejection of femininity prevent Hagar from responding to Bram's attempts at intimacy. Her failed and unhappy marriage is the direct consequence of her pride.

Silence is another prison for Hagar and a product of her pride. When Marvin leaves her to go to war Hagar did not know what to say to him. Hagar is unable to accept John's death. "I wouldn't cry in front of stranger whatever it might cost me" (The Stone Angel 242). She felt petrified and never wept at all. Just as she had done at the death of both her brothers and her father, Hagar remained stone – faced at the death of Bram.

Simone Vauthier says that "while Hagar's hardness is, in the overall context, largely induced by her milieu and upbringing, the Scottish Presbyterian ethic and the pioneer experience, putting a high premium on courage, Independence 'character', the development of the 'rigidity' isotropy underlines the personal, psychic element in Hagar's obduracy" (Vauthier 57).

Spending of her time reflecting upon her life, Hagar sums up how her pride has influenced her life: "... pride was my wilderness and demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, For I carried my chains within me and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (The Stone Angel 292). While lying in bed, very close to death, Hagar reveals her feeling to Marvin with honesty: "I'm frightened. Marvin. I'm so frightened .... I think it's the first time in my life I've ever said such a thing" (The Stone Angel 303). Hagar's battle for independence is a misadventure. In the course of trying to understand the shape her taken, asking forgiveness from neither God nor those around her, she must overcome to her own nature. Hagar also is too proud to ask for God's help. She begins to pray, thinking "our Father no. I want no part of that. I can think is bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg" (The Stone Angel 307).

Hagar is afraid of needing too much, afraid of giving too much and her pride causes her a lot of pain. She spends most of her time reflecting on her life. In a later scene, when a nurse in the hospital assists her from the bathroom, a proud woman says "oh, I hate being helped: my voice is pettish and doesn't resemble at all, the fury inside me. I've always done things for myself. Have not you ever a given hand to anyone in your time?" As a proud woman Hagar doesn't want to succumb to the realities, adjustment and inconveniences of aging and dying. She faces the combined trauma of diminished health. She has to understand who she really is. Her life was fully influenced by her pride.

*The Stone Angel* is a realistic journey of a woman who has to come the reality that going to the end of life.

Hedrick Sandra examines the formation of Canadian female identity in Margaret Laurence's novels. She claims that Hagar, in the *Stone Angel*, describes her psychological divining for her true self, her quest for her own identity, in a language that transcends the boundaries of gender. Barbara Helen Pells states: "Laurence primarily views 'real' 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" (38). Hagar's life can be told as mundane. From feminist perspective women need to protect and survive in a male- dominated society.

Hagar accepted her female weakness in the hospital, but she understands that male power is the core of her pride. She finds that she can connect the male and female part of her psyche and reaches wholeness and finds her true self. At the end of her life she shows her personal growth as she kindly gives forgiveness for others. Hagar accepts that life is full of happiness. Her time is short

but she tries to open herself to those around her. Hagar's acceptance of her female parts allows for the rejection of her father's values. Now she knows that women's qualities are valuable. This novel reveals the other side of women power.

**The Diviners** - Margaret Laurence explores her sense of human tribalism. Besides expressing a peculiarly Canadian sensibility, she generally presents women's attitudes. The basic problem of every individual, man or woman, in the modern world is one of survival. This is the major concern of Laurence in the Manawaka series of fiction. What she is vitally interested in projecting is the feminine point of view of life in the mid – twentieth century. In the process, she displays the broad spectrum of the Canadian experience of that time. This essay is an attempt at analyzing the struggle and achievement of a representative Laurence heroine, Morag Gunn of *The Diviners*.

*The Diviners* is the fifth and last of the Manawaka series. It is a sensitively written account of a helpless, orphan girl, from infancy through childhood, adolescence and youth – to independent womanhood. While narrating the story of the development of Morag Gunn, Margaret Laurence also records the process of her rise from a hesitant and shy short story writer to a successful and famous novelist. Every reader of *The Diviners* is bound to ask himself (or herself), Which story is the more significant, whether of the woman seeking independence, or of the writer desiring self – expression. The two careers, like the two ambitions, run parallel to each other. Laurence employs the double – narrative technique of two time – spans in developing her theme. The novel is divided into five sections – 'River of Now and Then,' 'The Nuisance Grounds,' 'Halls of Sion,' 'Rites of Passage,' and 'The Diviners.' There are nine chapters in all, each beginning with a short account of the present, where Morag is already an established novelist, going through the trials, of raising a teen – aged daughter, Pique, and writing her books at the same time. But the main, powerful and fascinating story of the struggles of an independent woman and her urgent need for love is told through extended flashbacks, which Laurence calls Memorybank Movie. Other devices of shorter pieces, Snapshot and Innerfilm, are also used to supplement the flashbacks, wherever necessary.

After losing both her parents, victims of infantile paralysis, Morag Gunn is brought up by a childless couple of Manawaka – Christie Logan and his wife Prin Christie is the town scavenger, who collects and carries rubbish to the dumping ground, known as the Nuisance Grounds. This creates problems for Morag, when she goes to school, where the other children taunt her with the profession of her foster – father. Inwardly, she suffers much, but bravely does not let on. Early in life she learns the wisdom of not arguing with adults. This is the way for her to survive. When a kindly neighbor explains to the five year old orphan that she has to go and live with the Logans, "Morag says nothing, she has learned you can't argue when you are a kid. You can only wait not to be a kid any more.

Another lesson that she learns early is 'never let them know you are scared.' (34) Growing up at Manawaka is for Morag a toughening process. She feels alienated from the town society, as the only way to survive is by putting distance between herself and a world that does not seem to want her. During these years of crisis, what sustains Morag is her individual fighting spirit and the father's love she gets from Christie. He fires her young impressionable imagination with tales of her Scottish ancestor, Piper Gunn, who came piping all the way from Sutherland, over the Atlantic, across the prairies, putting heart into his people, till he brought them to the farmlands on the banks of the Red River. However, to seek social and economic freedom, Morag resolves to leave Manawaka. The idea of putting a great distance between herself and the shabby town attracts her like a beacon shining from afar. "Now she knows one thing for sure. Nothing – nothing – is going to endanger her chances of getting out of Manawaka. And on her own terms, not the town's." (153) But when the time, finally, comes for Morag to depart from Manawaka to seek higher education at Winnipeg, her feeling of jubilation is mixed with that of guilt at being so eager to run away from the place of her birth.

As already pointed out, it is a moot point whether the leading concern of Margaret Laurence in *The Diviners* is to write the success story of a novelist coming, like herself, from the backwoods of Canada, or to demonstrate the strength and fortitude of a woman, who learns to live and love exactly the way she wants, and who is prepared to take on the whole world for the sake of her independence. Apparently, the growth of the woman overshadows the other development, which is subservient to the main issue. Laurence depicts phases in the growth of the woman- child, girl, young woman, wife, and middle – aged mother. The child Morag grows into a young girl, whose need for love is both physical as well as emotional. Jules Tonnerre, a Metis (French – Indian half – breed) school fellow of Morag, adds to her experience by initiating her in the mystery of sex.

Many years later, Jules turns up again in Morag's life when she is trying hard to make a success of her marriage with Brooke Skelton, a University professor at Toronto. The husband refuses to let her become a mother. While the woman in Morag clamours for

fulfillment by having a child of her own, the self centred Brooke Keeps postponing the event for one reason or another. On an impulse, Morag leaves home to find temporary shelter with Jules. She conceives after reunion with her former lover, who is of too individualistic a spirit to be tied down to marriage and family, but he does not mind if the woman wants a child from him. It is highly ironic that the two men with whom Morga gets passionately involved follow their own dreams, without really caring for her feelings. This, in fact, move her feminine sensibility to work for independence and attainment, away from the world of men. Laurence suggests that woman's dependence on man is not so much an emotional, as a biological necessity, which becomes a cause of unnecessary mental torture for the heroine of *The Diviners*. Brooke does not bring credit to himself by refusing to comply with the wishes of his wife, who is just a plaything to him, without an independent entity. He is too much involved in furthering his own professional status to care for Morga's intense craving for motherhood. Her femininity feels outraged. She breaks up the marriage in order to exercise her freedom to have a child, Conceiving out of wedlock does not bother her in the least. Morag is bold and defiant in her disregard of social taboos. What matters, in the end, is that she gets what she wants. Divorced from Brooke, she gives birth to a daughter, who she names after Piquette, the dead sister of Jules Tonnerre.

Christie and his tales of Piper Gunn give Morag an abiding interest in her ancestral past. Struggling to establish herself as a writer, she journeys to London, where she finds work as a book – seller's assistant. She meets a Scottish painter named Mc Raith, and they become friends. He offers to take Morag and Pique to Sutherland, the region in Scotland to which the Gunns originally belonged. For Morag, it is a kind of pilgrimage to discover her ancestral roots. They first go to Mc Raith's home at Crombruch, a small finishing village. But when he wants to drive her to Sutherland, Morag unexpectedly turns down his offer.

Soon after this episode, Morag rushes back to Canada to visit Christie on his death – bed at Manawaka. Later she buys a farm – house at Macconnell's Landing, on the banks of a river. For the first time in her life, she writes her novels in tranquility of mind and natural surroundings. At the end of her struggle and wanderings, she feels at home with her neighbors, the river and changing seasons. The passage of time is marked by the movements of the migratory birds, the swallows and Canadian geese. Like them, Pique too has a life of her own. She keeps going off on her jaunts in different directions. Morag worries about her daughter, but dares not interfere directly in her life. The mother has lives an independent life, and naturally hesitates to try shaping the destiny of the daughter.

The final image of *The Diviners* is of Morag living her solitary life at Macconnell's Landing, devoting herself whole – heartedly to writing, the dominant passion of her life. The reference to a nineteenth century work, *The Canadian Settler's Guide* (1855), indicates her interest in history as well as feeling for women writers. She reflects appreciatively on the achievement of her predecessor: "Catherine Parr Traill, mid- 1800s, botanist, drawing and naming wildflowers, writing a guide for settlers with one hand, whilst reading a brace of young and working like a galley slave with the other." (95) Morag feels so much involved with C.P. Traill that she is frequently in the habit of carrying on imaginary conversations with that worldly wise woman. This serves her instead of the feminine companionship, which she misses in her lonely existence, especially when Pique is away from home.

Royland, a neighbor who makes his living by divining wells for the farmers in the surrounding country, suddenly loses his miraculous gift. Morag retains her own skill of creative writing. But she is not quite sure how effective her novels are, how useful to the readers. Margaret Laurence comments: "At the least Royland knew he had been a true diviner. There were the wells, proof positive ..... Morag's ,magic tricks were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent." (452)

Still, Morag Gunn has a sense of achievement at having sur- mounted all odds and become one of the literary diviners of the world, Eventually, she has established her identity as a woman by succeeding in her chosen field against stiff opposition.

### Conclusion

Laurence's treatment of women observed that Laurence explores women, observes that Laurence explores the constricting definition of women and dramatizes the ways that a women's voice become a means to her self realization, to discover their voice and learn to let their voice speak rather than suffocate themselves in the prison of the Manawakan codes. Thus, along with the search for an authentic voice, an attempt at shaping themselves at their own standards apart from the societal images handed out to them forms a major proposition in the development of each of the protagonists in the Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence.

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