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ALIENATION, SELF DECEPTION AND SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL OF HAGAR SHIPLEY:
STREAM OF TRANSFORMATION IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S "THE STONE ANGEL"

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ABSTRACT

The Stone Angel, published in 1964, is Margaret Laurence's first novel written out of her Canadian background. Margaret Laurence is a leading major contemporary postmodern author who is not easily separable from her fictional protagonists. She creates characters whose experience bears a measure of resemblance to her. Suffering the loss of her parents at a very young age, Laurence's loneliness and isolation in which she dwelt nearly in all her life is apparent through her works. It also produces a prevailing tone of despair in all of her works. She believes that the aspects of the texts she writes are integral elements of its construction of her sense of identity. The protagonist Hagar of the Novel 'The Stone Angel' shows pride and stubbornness out of her past situations and experiences of isolation and alienation.

Keywords: Alienation Canadian, Isolation, Postmodern, Stubbornness

Introduction

Margaret Laurence is a leading major contemporary postmodern author who is not easily separable from her fictional protagonist. She creates character whose experiences, like Canadians, bear a measure of resemblance to her sufferings, loss of her parents at a very young age. Laurence's loneliness and isolation in which she dwelt nearly all her life is apparent throughout her works. It also produces a prevailing tone of despair in all of her works. She believes that the aspects of the text she writes are integral elements of its construction of her sense of identity. Her parent's death when she was young marked both her literary and private life, as she was never able to remove herself from her childhood. Laurence's despair, loneliness and insecurity are abstractly seen in the novel 'The Stone Angel'.

Margaret Laurence presents women protagonists, who are weak and low, both physically and spiritually. They are caught up in the world of self-made crisis and yet, they are not vanquished by the realities that surround them. The women of Laurence are surrounded by fear and isolation, which in turn helps them to put back their fears, overcome their haunting problems and establish themselves as strong and subjective individuals. Laurence portrays this experiential transformation with sympathy and understanding of human life in general and woman's consciousness in particular.

Laurence is aware of the emotions that lay buried beneath the surface of people's lives and often casts a gently ironic eye upon the more fundamental absurdities of the human condition, particularly the discrepancy between the idealized and the actual. Her psychological analysis of characters implies a religious perspective; she believes that the religious experience can be a numinous one, accomplishing a kind of psychological salvation. Laurence is the Biblical allusion when she names, for example her character Hagar of 'The Stone Angel'. 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 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 stereotypical 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 even from her father and then she leaves her husband and shows isolation living with her son and daughter-in-law.

Margaret Laurence's protagonist undergoes a struggle to find their real self. The painful pressure of anxieties makes them loose their real self. They experience a gap between the higher needs of their inner nature and the unchangeable enormous conditions of existence. The protagonist's personal and past problems play a significant role in exaggerating their neurotic troubles and in bringing about their basic anxiety. Those who are able to comprehend and conquer their personal difficulties, gain healthy vision of life. However, sick personages are often entangled in personal problems and cannot feel whole, because they are obsessed by neurotic anxiety. Such characters lose their real self, sacrifice human values and create unalterable conditions for themselves and these problems can be clearly seen in the protagonist of the Novel.

Lack of basic needs on childhood cause basic anxiety, but they are not only the cause of later troubles, the characters social, biological and cultural forces also share in forming their personalities. In her novels, Laurence does not fully expose the childhood of her character but she frequently uses the flashback technique to help the reader understand the characters background and she uses the first person narrative form to help the reader enter into the characters psyche and get glimpses of its life. Her characters have much more compels realities behind their inexplicable behaviour, reactions and rigidities. The reader meets them as grown up individuals, apparently well settles in life, some of them right into their middle age, nonetheless disturbed psychologically by forces beyond their comprehension. With the reflective flashbacks and first person narrative techniques, the characters childhood is revealed enabling the reader to relate the present structure of psyche of their past.

The stubbornness and pride of Hagar might be inherited from her Father or ancestors. Her father lived an isolated life. He did not marry anyone after her mother's death. Hagar admires this and wants to live a life that her father lived. Deprived of her mother at birth and subjected to her father's harshness, she imitates his behaviour from an early age, Hagar's identity is shaped by her father, not her dead mother who exists only as a portrait in a frame. She can only conceive of her mother as the antithesis of herself since her mother passed away after giving birth to her, Hagar has no true knowledge of her mother's personality. Her father Considers himself to be 'a pioneer,' he strongly believes in the gospel of 'individualism' and hands down this belief to his children. He repeatedly tells them "You'll never get anywhere in this world unless you work harder than others... Nobody's going to give you anything on silver platter."(The Stone Angel P: 13)

Laurence tries to detail, illuminate and fix the moments of transition with her brilliant knowledge of what happens in the mind of a woman. Laurence in her first Manawaka novel 'The Stone Angel' explains the physical and psychic turmoil, fear, and anxiety of the protagonist Hagar Shipley, who fails to relate herself to her family members. Laurence herself was uncertain about her life. This is reflected in most of her heroines. Thus, her Manawaka novels deal with problems encountered by women in Provincial Canada. Her women live in a nightmarish world characterized by fear, brutality and deception. The world is not acceptable to them. When the novels begin, her women seem to live in a world of fixed notions. Change is a slow and gradual process that

occurs within them unnoticed. They find wholeness through three stages which is Isolation, Initiation, and Self-Realization.

Laurence begins her novels with a symbol of isolation. In 'The Stone Angel', the stone angel stands in the Manawaka cemetery above the town. She stands lonely viewing the town. The stone angel broods over the entire novel, from the beginning till the end. Hagar reflects, "I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty forever and a day"(The Stone Angel P:3). She consigns her lost men to the angel's guardianship. Finally, she recalls her last visit to the cemetery where the angel was alone with no one to take care of it. Hagar, of course, is the stone angel. Laurence tells us through her narration that she is "stone blind". The person who carved the angel had left the eyeballs blank. Hagar comparing herself with the angel feels angry "at God, perhaps, for giving us eyes but almost never sight" (The Stone Angel P:173). Hagar proves to be in the peak of dejection, and she is not able to accept her own self as the best of God's creation. Hagar Shipley is much attracted towards the angel as she compares it to herself.

The isolated self is clearly and cleverly depicted by Laurence in the beginning of the novel itself as the novel proceeds, their isolated self-gains strength and moves further for an initiation and transformation. Hagar of 'The Stone Angel' is rampant with her own memory. To her: "Some people will tell you that the old live in the past-that's nonsense. Each day, so worthless really, has a rarity for me lately. I could put it in a vase and admire it, like the first dandelions, and we would forget their tweediness and marvel that they were there at all". (The Stone Angel P: 5)Hagar feels that life does not have any meaning. She feels lonely and to make her engaged she develops the habit of smoking. She tells "It's my only enjoyment, that and the cigarettes, a habit I acquired only ten years ago, out of boredom" (The Stone Angel P: 5).

Hagar's room does not have a lock. This makes Hagar feel that her privacy has been robbed off. She creates a shell and wants to go to her inner self. She is not ready to come out of her isolated self. She feels old and is sure that no one will admire her. She compares her dress to others, and feels her dress shabby, old, and worn out. She is not satisfied with what she has. Hagar views her wedding picture that hangs above the bed. In the picture, she looks young, charming, and beautiful. She immediately looks at her present self she has lost much of her physical appearance and her dress too is not more attractive. She thinks of a change through diet which may make her pleasing and attractive to others. She dislikes the dress she wears. They are old fashioned ones. She is not ready to change them on any cause.

Hagar has her own problems, and is unable to accept them as reality when she was a child. Dan, brother of Hagar was affected by pneumonia and his condition was delirious. When Matt, her brother asks Hagar to put their mothers shawl over Dan and hold him she refuses. Hagar is not ready to imitate her mother and when Dan is dying, Hagar who is well aware that he is like her mother and not their father, cannot bring herself to "mother" him: "I can't. Oh, Matt I'm sorry, but I can't I can't. I am not a bit like her" (The Stone Angel P: 25). Children whose parents die sometimes unconsciously assume guilt for something which is obviously out of their control; at some level, Hagar feels guilty because her mother died giving her life, and her understandable aversion to such an uncomfortable feeling might explain her revulsion towards Dan, who is so much like the dead mother. She weeps thinking of Dan. Now as a woman of ninety she thinks of this and feels sorry for having left Dan to die.

Hagar's daughter-in-law Doris comes in with an artificial silk wear. Hagar feels "Everything is artificial these days, it seems to me. Silks and people have gone out of style, or no one can afford them anymore" (The Stone Angel P: 28). Hagar's refusal to accept life to the present is depicted in these lines when Doris asks her to come down for tea. Hagar gets up and slips down. Doris calls Marvin, her husband to come in and help her lift Hagar. She feels strange of being alive and thinks "More strange for him, no doubt, to have a mother at his age" (The Stone Angel P: 32). Hagar tells Doris that the rug lying in her room is the reason for her fall and asks her to remove it. She is not ready to accept the weakness of her legs. Instead, curses the rug and does not want its presence anymore.

Margaret Laurence in her novels, certainly never avoided the reality or harshness of death, nor the grappling to find its meaning. Nor did she avoid the question of guilt and forgiveness and the struggle to unearth

life's ultimate meaning in that direction. A good case can be made for the fact that one of the central themes of all her novels was lack of community. Her novels have a constant refrain of alienation and strangeness that persons feel toward each other. The men of Laurence seem so stubborn and unyielding and they show no change. As a result, their marriage becomes a failure however good their women may be.

The problem of communication and the way Hagar is being isolated can be clearly seen in the Novel. Hagar is not able to communicate with her own dad. The problem continues in her and in later stages she finds it difficult to communicate with her son Marvin and her daughter-in law, Doris. Hagar while having tea comes across a newspaper spread on the kitchen table, bends and reads the advertisement given by Silver threads nursing home. This advertisement makes her hand, mouth, and throat dry. The pain flames up and she becomes breathless "I cannot breathe. I am held, fixed and fluttering, like an earthworm impaled by children on a ferociously unshar hook of a safety pin" (The Stone Angel P: 54). Hagar has a view of all her collections. The cut-glass decanter with silver top was her wedding gift from Bram. Hagar always wanted to have it in the sideboard but Doris always puts it on the walnut-spool table. Hagar hates this, but is not able to utter a word to Doris while they wait in Doctor Corby's waiting room. Doris asks Hagar to sit down instead of gawking at the pictures. When Hagar speaks, Doris looks embarrassed and asks her to keep quiet as people around are watching and listening to them. Hagar at this instance does not wish to blame Doris as she herself has used these words often on her husband Bram: "Hush, Hush. Don't you know everyone can hear?" (The Stone Angel P: 89).

Once in the church when the sermon was long, Bram became restless and blurted his impatience. Hagar felt ashamed at Bram's behaviour and after this incident she never went to church. Hagar compares her present state with Bram of the past. To Hagar, Doris resembles her past. Her company with Hagar sounds similar to Hagar's company with Bram. As Hagar, does not allow Bram to communicate with others, so is Doris, not allowing Hagar to communicate in public. When Doris tells doctor Corby about Hagar's illness she gets furious "will she never stop? My meekness of a moment ago evaporates. She is forfeited my sympathy now, meandering on like this. Why does not she let me tell him? Whose symptoms are they, anyhow?" (The Stone Angel P: 90). Hagar waits in the hospital for the x-ray to be taken. She has waited in her life several times for things to get better or worse. As they promise to send home her x-ray report they thank the doctor and return home. When the report comes, they are secretive and sneaky about it. They look at her with their eyelids lowered. Their vague words seem threatening to her. She understands that her son refuses to communicate well. The problem of communication pushes her to isolation. She is notable to be one with the society and her family members.

Hagar's narrative voice and her memories are the authentic voice and recall a ninety-year old woman's "journey" into the past. They are recognition of various roles she has played as daughter, wife and mother. Even the journey dispels her victimization of personal bias making us aware of her pride and arrogance. 'Roshan Shahan' aptly says about the journey that it promotes self-awareness:

"Nonetheless these journeys do lead the protagonists more often than not to new "horizons" of self-awareness and to a clearer perception of their relations with families than those which they possessed at the 20 beginning of their journeys. Undoubtedly, these journeys are not always taken in a spirit of enterprise and anticipation; in fact, more often than not, they are acts of desperation, attempts to get away from the constraint of family life. Yet here again is seen the circular route back home, to a new acceptance or at least to a new awareness of family one chose to leave behind."

As Hagar's narration progresses, one perceives much more than nostalgic reminiscences of old age. First, we become aware of the element of pride in her which makes her a victim of personal bias. Hagar Shipley is sustained and made monstrous by her pride. Hagar's pride is a factor of her background, both ancestral and historical. Jason Currie, her father, was a relentlessly proud and god-fearing urban, and the battle-cry of the Currie clan, which Hagar took as her own, was Gainsay Who Dare. Pride governed Hagar's actions even as a young woman. It has been the weakness that leads to her fall from grace. Hagar is herself a ruined angel in the destructive energy of her pride. Hagar lived in a battle pitted against everyone who came close to her and tragically she betrayed them all - her father, her brother, her husband, and her sons. With this pride, Hagar repudiates from her very girlhood all that is maternal and tender, the penultimate episode being the moment

when she refuses to wear her dead mother's shawl in order to comfort her dying brother Dan. She refuses even to be a housekeeper like Auntie Doll. But ironically these refusals all reverse themselves.

In time Hagar finds herself playing the wounded mother, playing at being in a rage, keeping house for another, and these, when she is very old and has fled her family, to try to regain her independence. Even for John, the younger son in whom she placed all her hopes, her love was blind and ultimately destructive. Hagar drives John from the house to his death and her greatest loss. Yet in the hospital John bears his mother no ill will. He even seems to comprehend the tragic irony of her fallen state. Secondly before he dies, he calls out for her help in relieving his pain and then laughs knowingly No he said distinctly you can't, can you? Never mind, never mind. He understands that she is unable to alleviate his pain because she is entirely wrapped up in her own. Jason Currie had directed his enormous will towards proclaiming his dynasty and getting ahead in the microcosmic world of Manawaka where he had come as a pioneer. Hagar sees her mother's monument as a symbol of her father's place in the town and his pride: "I think now she must have been carved in that distant sun by stone masons who were the cynical descendants of Bernini, gauging out her like by the score, gauging with admirable accuracy the needs of fledgling pharaohs is an uncouth land." (The Stone Angel P: 3)

Her stubborn will to spite her father and assert her rebellious will lead her to marry Bram Shipley who has nothing in common with her. He is fourteen years older than her and has a poor reputation of being lazy as a pet pig. Even after marriage Bram does not stop hobnobbing with half breed girls and makes no effort to improve his language and manners. Coming from two different backgrounds Hagar and Bram have different concepts of good living. Hagar also entertains a romantic notion of love which Bram can neither understand nor appreciate. Their differing attitudes and expectations provide her with a lot of opportunities and expectations. Hagar attempts to mould Bram into a gentleman in her father's image and fails to do so. A time comes when all this becomes unbearable and she decides to lead an independent existence. Bram's reaction to unexpected decision was quite bewildering for Hagar and she leaves. It had finally led to Bram Shipley's lonely existence and death. Seen in this light, Hagar's leaving of Bram was a selfish act, a means of escape from a situation that the class-conscious and arrogant woman could not cope with. Hagar's neglect is responsible but not solely responsible for Bram's illness and eventual death. Hagar's rebellious pride still refuses to accommodate the fact of her old age or the fact that the processes of time are irreversible and that she must face death probably soon. As she is repellent physically, especially to herself, she is just as ugly in her cruelty towards Doris. Only her body has aged; her spirit is indomitably young, tough and brave. Her unchangingly dark eyes symbolize the stubborn, flaming vitality that still burns in her.

Hagar Shipley is a tragic figure who learns the awareness of the reality of the present. She discovers who she is and discovers that she is alone. Hagar emerges out of her self-inflicted isolation and alienation cleansing the personal bias which made her a victim. She moves towards a meaningful relationship with fellow-humans, as is evidenced by the bed-pan incident in the hospital. She is a fighter against the dying light to the end. Her final words are "And then" – (The Stone Angel P: 308) uttered in the novel at the time of her death. This sentence remains unfinished. Laurence closes the book in ambivalence. Finally, although Hagar learns to recognize the past, she persists in regarding her share of loss and suffering as being excessive: Pride was my wilderness, and the 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 P: 292)

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 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. 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, 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.

Hagar's father endorses the view that Bram is "common as dirt" (The Stone Angel P: 47). It is sad that Hagar, in order to escape her father's authoritarianism she falls a prey to another form of oppression. Bram is not a 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 and the relationship with her sons. She holds the pride of Currie throughout her life. She expects her pride and inability to open up which mars Hagar's relationship with Bram, continues in 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 liking for Currie and control over him takes him in and interfere in his life. Her aim is to make him more like curie not Shipley. But on the other hand, naturally, he is Shipley in his 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 ..." (The Stone Angel P:237). 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. These results in their relationship, he sacrifices their young lives rather than part with Arlene. This, in turn, results in the 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.

The pain she now lives with a dramatic reminder that her end is imminent. Hagar meets Lees there who has come to the cannery in an attempt to escape from her Son and in-law, here is the first instance, where the changes of Hagar's behavior happens, for the first time she has shown the closeness to somebody sharing her feelings and this is the beginning of her 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 others. Through the relationship with other patients in the public ward 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 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. Hagar then acknowledges Marvin as a better son than John. As she says: "you've not been cranky, Marvin, you've been good to me, always. A better son than John" (The Stone Angel P: 304). She never said these words before in spite of Marvin's abundant love and sacrifice for her in contrast to John's selfish indifference. Even Hagar accepts her grand-daughter's gift of the lily of the valley perfume. Hagar has freed herself of the constraints that had bound her. She is almost reconciled to the family against whom she had fought all her life. Hagar discovers her self-awareness in the hospital-bed at the point of death. That is the sad paradox with which her story ends.

Conclusion

Hagar's ritualistic journey enables to come to terms with the past. It brings about a release into an inner freedom. It is a spiritual journey back to her own roots. She acknowledges that her pride in appearing strong has

been one of her burdens in the resolution and gets to know the relationship values and understands that the only one way for her to enjoy the life is to shed off her pride and appreciate people around her. This transformation in her finds her true self in the death bed and allows her to enjoy the happiness spiritually in real self.

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