



## ROLE OF LOCALE IN RESTRUCTURING THE INDIVIDUALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE STONE ANGEL*

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### ABSTRACT



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Margaret Laurence, a Canadian novelist, short-story writer and essayist, is one of the major figures in Canadian literature. She is best known for her Manawaka novels; *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1972); which are considered as the classics of Canadian literature. Margaret Laurence has placed great emphasis on the depiction of locale in her Canadian novels. Manawaka, the small archetypal Canadian prairie town acts as a setting for her novels and it is closely modelled on Neepawa, Manitoba where she was born. It is actually much more than merely a physical setting, it acts as a formative influence on the lives of all the four central female protagonists in these novels. Initially, they feel Manawaka as a confinement and Manawakan values as emotional repression, but during the course of their life they acknowledge the Manawaka within themselves. M. Laurence uses Manawaka as a fundamental concept to show the positive and negative influences of a place that shape the individuality of her characters for several generations. The present paper analyses *The Stone Angel* and the life of its central character Hagar Shipley, who at the age of ninety sees that her life is moulded by Manawaka. In fact, it is her identity that is being influenced by the Manawakan values. At the last phase of her life she acknowledges the role of locale in restructuring her present and her individuality.

**Keywords:** *Individuality, Locale, Manawaka, Moulded, Prairie, Repression, Restructuring.*

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Margaret Laurence has shown immense concern and has been very particular for the choice and depiction of locale in her fictional works in the context of Canadian Literature. She quotes Mordecai Richler's saying of Montreal, "This was my time and place and I have set myself to get it exactly right" (Interview OISE); and it is apparently observed in her works that her place is the small archetypal Canadian prairie town of her time, Manawaka, that has been created on the model of Neepawa, Manitoba where she was born and brought up. Manawaka is a fictional town that is used as a setting for her Canadian based fiction, which is sometimes restrictive, but at the same time acts as a dynamic force. Neepawa was settled in the late 19th century by the people of Scots - Presbyterian background from Ontario. Wemyss, Laurence's paternal grandfather incorporated the town on November 3, 1883; her maternal grandfather, Simpson was among the earliest settlers. Manawaka shares many features of landscape with Neepawa as it has a Regal Café, Flamingo Dance Hall, a river, poplar and spruce trees and gravestones with the names of early settlers carved on these like Shipley, Currie, Conner and M. Laurence uses the same skillfully in her Canadian fictions. The concept of Manawaka places M. Laurence's novels in the mainstream of Canadian fiction and it further acclaims universal literary significance. The Manawakan values are based on Puritan background and the Canadian literary experience is also influenced by Puritanism. Manawaka is actually much more than merely a physical or biographical setting in Margaret Laurence's novels- *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers* and *The Diviners*. The common Manawakan heritage acts as a connecting link between the novels as well as the characters. Though Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Morag are different in various aspects of life, yet being the product of same locale they exhibit many similar characteristics. It has been observed as a formative influence on the lives of all the characters. Initially, they find Manawaka as a confinement and Manawakan values as emotional repression, but during the course of life they realize the Manawaka within themselves and learn that the resolution to their problems lies in dealing with it

instead of moving away from it. Later, they acknowledge it as a positive and strength giving force that enables them to gain insight to understand various aspects of life and to live it while dealing with the problems. In other words, it becomes a way of responding to life. Margaret Laurence portrays her characters through different phases of life ranging from youth to old age under different circumstances while taking into account the effect of locale in shaping their lives. She emphasizes the individuality of her characters and they are called archetypes and she insists on her interview with Robert Kroetsch in 1970: "this is the important thing about archetypes – they have to come across, in the writing as individual people;" (55). She intends to create living characters in her novels and her intentions are revealed in an interview with Don Cameron : "I realised quite quickly that what really grabbed me the most, what I really would like to do the most in a novel, was to, as far as possible, present the living individual on the printed page, in all his paradoxes and all his craziness" (3, 11). Manawaka locale highlights the ordinariness in her works – the ordinary people and ordinary place. Margaret Laurence is a "small town prairie person" ("Sources" 84) and she insists that "only a Canadian born in a small prairie town could write about that very deeply from the inside and that . . . is my business" (Interview OISE). Laurence seeks the reader to feel the dilemma of her character, the character who is the product of her own background and that is a "kind of juxtaposition . . . on one hand repressed community, on the other hand a community in which the values of the individual were extraordinarily recognized, if only sometimes by implication" (Interview with Cameron 3). In all her Manawaka novels, she not only portrays sufferings and ambiguities of an ordinary person, but also shows courage and resilience he displays to struggle with the complexities of life By defining Manawaka as "an amalgam of many prairie towns" ("Sources" 82), M. Laurence seems to negate the belief of the critics who see it as an isolated town. Edward McCourt supports that "any native westerner who reads Margaret Laurence's novels will be able to identify Manawaka as the town he grew up in" and to him it's "exists primarily as an influence on the human spirit .



.. a shaping force which either emancipates or stifles, gives peace to or makes mad its creatures" (108). George Bowering in "That Fool of a Fear" terms it as "almost a character" in M. Laurence's fictional works (41). Manawaka is seen as a repository of ancestral values. The female characters in her works seem to be repressed by the Manawakan values but M. Laurence intends the reader to look beneath the external mask of her characters, their individuality and acknowledge the purpose of ancestral values. She unravels the "discrepancy between private and personal selves" in F.W. Watt's words in a review of *The Fire Dwellers* and it is most obviously her central theme in all the Manawaka novels (87). Manawaka expects its inhabitants to conform to ancestral communal values imposed by their family as well as community, that are seen initially as a confinement, but these have long lasting benefits as these endow the people for generations with staunch spirit that causes to develop a highly verbalized sensibility which further ensures individual survival in difficult circumstances offered by life. M. Laurence uses it as a symbol of garrison against Canadian prairie wilderness. She apparently uses Manawaka as a fundamental concept in all her Canadian works to show the positive and negative influences of a locale that shape the experiences of people for several generations. She intends the reader to acknowledge the role of past in reaffirming the present as she states in her interview with Graeme Gibson: "I can't believe that all of life is contained today, and the past goes back a long way" (204). Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is the oldest and most complicated of all the M. Laurence's Canadian female protagonists. Hagar, at the age of ninety, the last phase of her life retrospects and sees her past moulded by the Manawaka values. In fact, her individuality is being moulded by her Manawakan values. Although Hagar lived away from the town of Manawaka with her husband Bram and later in the city with Mr. Oatley, then with Marvin and Doris yet she reiterates that the city has been only a "kind of home" since she left Manawaka; it implies that Manawaka has always been her real, her spiritual home (SA 36).

Hagar is preoccupied with the falsity of artificial and fabricated life; the influence of Manawakan

background has been seen in her behaviour since her childhood days. Being the daughter of Jason Currie, a proud patriarch of Manawaka she values the importance of externals and facades. Above all she has been too much concerned about her own appearance, her behaviour, social accomplishment and manner and order in everything. She herself admits it, "How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed" (5). She inherits Manawakan snobbery and seems to maintain and continue her father's social status. Manawakan values not only trains Hagar in her physical appearance, it restrains her emotional expression also. She learns to hide her emotions or whatever seems weakness to her. She seldom communicates with any of her family members even with her father as she was taught to avoid clear communication with others. She was trained in sexual repression; her father restricted her to talk to men because he believed that they had "terrible thoughts" (44). He shows her an alternative to physical pleasure and offers Calvinistic values; he teaches her to achieve sublimation through – determination, hard work and "elbow grease" (13). Hagar lives with Manawakan values throughout her life and passes them on to the next generation, but it does not negate her rebelliousness against Manawaka. It is apparently observed that Hagar has always been ambivalent for manawakan values. On one hand, as a child she passionately follows her father's Manawakan principles; on the other hand, she is rebellious against his standards. In other words, she adopts as well as opposes the Manawakan values. Hagar despises Regina Weese's respectability and propriety and mocks her while reading the inscriptions written on a tombstone: "She was flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard, caring with martyred devotion for an ungrateful fox-voiced mother year in and year out. When Regina died, from some obscure and maidenly disorder, the old disreputable lady rose from sick-smelling sheets and lived, to the despair of her married sons, another full ten years" (4). With hatred in her mind, she often remembers Manawaka with its uglier aspects like the dump: "Here were craters and cartons, tea chests with torn tin



strippings, the unrecognizable effluvia of our lives, burned and blackened by the fire that seasonally cauterized the festering place" (26). She identifies herself with wild and passionate nature as well as refutes the town proprieties. Hagar's duality and ambivalence towards Manawakan values is revealed as she simultaneously seems to flout as well as continue those. It gives way to the development of her complexity as a character that remains with Hagar throughout her life and affects her relationship with others. She finds herself unable to express herself to either of her brothers. She wanted to talk to Dan when he was on the death bed, but she could not and now she repents, "If I had spoken and tried to tell him – but how could I?" (26). The artificial ideal of not to reveal herself in front of others has influenced her relationship with her husband as well as her sons. To marry Bram, she rebels against her father's authority, feels very pleased with her husband's good physical appearance, but it is very difficult for her to forget the values she adopted from Manawaka. The way she defines Bram's family as, "They were all Mabels, Gladyses, Vernons and Marvin, squat brown names, common as bottled beer" shows her irresistible adherence to Manawakan values (32). The reason for her rebellious attitude towards them in a way reflects a penchant for respectability which Manawaka has created in her. Above all is Bram's ridiculous public behaviour that outrages her most of the time. Bram is the person who is Hagar's own choice but after marriage, it is very difficult for her to retain their relationship. She herself admits, "We'd married for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them" (50, 79-80). Her attempts to uphold the values which she herself repudiated to marry Bram ultimately results in crumbling their marriage. It indicates that the conflict is not actually between Hagar and Bram, but it is the outcome of Hagar's duality of character, the conflict is actually between Hagar's inclination towards propriety and rebelliousness. The real conflict is between Hagar's Manawakan values and Bram's lack of them. Hagar finds herself unable to escape her Manawakan training even after her sons are born. It is apparently

seen that she continues to live and raise her sons largely by Manawaka values and expects them to extend these forward. She trains them by inculcating these values in them, by correcting their language and socially unacceptable behavior fearing it may ruin her position and status in society. Even as an old woman, widowed by Bram, Hagar retains her Manawakan values. She is still concerned about physical appearance and shows inclination towards the things that proclaim her status, like the house and things kept in it. "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purpose, then I do not know where I am to be found at all" (36). Hagar exhibits a strong sense of social propriety while dealing with others. She mocks Doris' grammar; she does not even spare Murray Lee for forgetting his manners and in hospital too, she vents out her anger over women in a hospital ward for disturbing her sleep and mental peace. Hagar continues to control her emotions, even when she is dying. Due to long illness and old age, she is losing control over her body; she finds herself unable to undress herself; her control over her speech and tears is also lost. Bedridden and trussed Hagar is helpless and cannot even administer her bodily needs. She feels profoundly humiliated due to loss of physical and emotional control. Her incontinence aggravates her condition and leaves her in total dismay. It would be unfair to nullify the strength that she bequeaths from her strong Highlander ancestors. Her ancestral pride takes her beyond the ordinary and gives her personal growth and individuality. She seems to equate her pride with strength of character when she says: "I prided myself on keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead" (81). She realizes her duality and the fact that only the exterior self is not real. When she sees herself in public mirror, she is scared and says, "Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant" (133). Hagar learns to reconcile the two opposing warring forces lying in her and demonstrates personal growth. She acknowledges that she has put on the mask of Manawakan facade and it certainly has cost her something very important in her life and it is



explicitly shown by Laurence through Hagar's flashback chronologically. Hagar does not allow others to invade her privacy, she conceals her real pride, but the recognition of artificiality helps her to integrate the antagonistic forces residing in her mind since childhood and it certainly proves extremely helpful to her to reaffirm herself. Nobody can alter oneself completely and suddenly, in the same way Hagar also retains some of her mask till death. She is guilt ridden for having sinned against her sons by forcing them to fit in the mould she has made. She understands her mistakes and wants to amend her faults and die peacefully. She wants to release her tension and achieve salvation. Her old age, the physical and mental weakness makes her endeavour more complicated and challenging as compared to Laurence's other female protagonists. In her own case Hagar always substitutes physical pleasure with hard work, but she envies and admires the sexual pleasure of others. When she sees John and Arlene making love firstly, she grudges against it and then she admires the openness they share with one another: "Nothing to bless themselves with, they had, not a penny in the bank, a grey shell of a house around them, and outside a grit - filled wind that blew nobody any good, and yet they'd closed themselves to it all and opened only to each other. It seemed incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world" (208). Such type of liberal feeling towards a couple indicates the signs of Hagar's movement towards the physical release that seemed impossible for her earlier. Hagar's journey to appease her guilt, to release her mental tension that has arisen due to the realisation of her faults, her fractured self is complicated by her physical weakness and limited imagination. It seems that her "escape route" lies neither in physical release nor in fantasy because her Manawaka mask is social one and it is expressed through her snobbery, manipulation of others and above all through her pride. Hagar's pride had always been with dual functioning, it is double faced. It gives her strength in time of hardship, courage to rebel against those values she does not want to emulate and to get the independence she longs for; on the other side, it is her weakness too, for it has destroyed

her relationship with others. Now at the last phase of life she realises that it was her pride due to which she lost her both sons; it was the demon that clutched her and made her weak and vulnerable. She repents: "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. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine?" (292). It seems that to liberate herself from the burden and to die peacefully Hagar must go with spiritual gestures that can be achieved through the reconciliation and humility towards others. Murray F. Lees betrays her location to her son, but she "bless[es]" him by forgiving and it works wonderfully and she feels "lightened and eased" (253). When she brings Sandra Wong a bedpan even at great discomfort to herself, she experiences that her "paining laughter" is released and she has a peaceful sleep afterward (302). In a fever of sickness and hallucination, she talks with her sons and makes peace with them. She gets such a relief that she could have begged pardon of God that night. She expresses her feeling for John and shows her real gesture for Marvin too, "You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John" (307,304). With the growing awareness and realization that she has cost the pleasure of rejoicing due to pride and external facade, she has humbled herself to others and opened her heart that enables her to enjoy the rest of life in tranquility: This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly and with such bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that - - simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? . . . Every good joy I might have held . . . all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances - - oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? (292) It is apparent that Manawaka has put binding over Hagar and imposed many restrictions too but it gives her a sense of ancestral strength and security. Driven by the fear of Silver Threads, her rebelliousness and independent action help her to break through and pave the way for her journey to Shadow Point. Besides being a physical action the journey has high symbolic significance associated



with it as it shows her the way to rejuvenate and reaffirm her lost self. Hagar's voyage to wilderness, hostile and punitive cannery and the sea – the alien and frozen planet has remarkably played a significant role in her transformation towards reaffirming herself. The sea is linked to the apocalyptic vision of hell and Frank Pesando has termed it as "sinister". The place was full of overgrown wild plants, the chill sea was full of "sly-eyed serpents", monster whales and the "phosphorescent creatures dead to the day time" but Hagar took it in purgatorial terms (224-25). She seeks her identification with the creatures there – fish scaled and writhing and clams with fluted shells pried open and it manifests the way to her redemption through suffering. In D.G. Jones' view Hagar visits these for her reclamation. Enduring extreme cold and sickness with a bout of hallucination, she feels being forgiven by John. She does redeem herself and forgives Mr. Lee and shows kindness and humility for all after this instance of purgation. Hagar must attempt to integrate her fragmented self into her whole individuality and acknowledge the role of her background in structuring it. Hagar's spiritual renaissance has achieved as she has made several changes in her life by releasing her artificial and proud stoic mask. She has stepped forward to reach her sons, Murray Lees, Sandra Wong including others. Like other Manawakan protagonists Hagar cannot achieve complete freedom from Manawakan inheritance – the rebellion against submissiveness, the independence that she exhibits in seizing the glass from the nurse. Even in her last stage, she displays the influence of Canadian locale, the Manawakan trait and Hagar is: "unchangeable", "unregenerate" (SA 293).

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