

Themes of Alienation and Survival in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*

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Abstract

This paper centres on protagonist of Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* who survive their various personal dilemmas by employing certain survival strategies. By implication and extension, there are striking parallels between their survival strategies visa-vis Canada as a colonial country, in that they both engage from a marginalized position with a dominant culture. In many cases, the identity of an individual and that of his/her nation are inextricably entwined, and therefore, the individual quest becomes a microcosm of the quest for national identity. Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* reflects mainly three kinds of alienation - cultural, social, and self-alienation. In her novel, the characters owe their growth and development as also their rise and fall to an established social order, which they want to rebel against. The individuals grow through their encounters with society and their development is shaped and determined by

social pressures and conventions. Her writing is noted for its unmistakable sense of place, which deepens her perceptions and defines on the one hand, a circumscribed particular geographic and psychic space and on the other, a feminine psyche, and a national cause.

Keywords: Woman, Alienation, Survival, Feminine, Culture

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Margaret Laurence belongs to the group of the most gifted writers of the emergent nations, countries which, like Canada, must find and recognize their own cultures and their own voices. She wrote at a time, when the climate was charged and just right for Canadian literature to blossom and flower. She had a strong conviction that a writer, especially a novelist, is, by definition, a socio-political being, and a serious writer, therefore must reflect the society by which he is formed, but at the same time help to form the society. The novelists in the post sixties one of them being Margaret Laurence has been at the forefront of the Canadian literary scene. She has won unparalleled attention as a writer attempting to focus on the emergence of a new breed of women in fiction

In Margaret Laurence's fictional quests of self-discovery, self-actualization of her woman protagonists dilemmas of identity are resolved through the process of their coming to terms with their past. Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* epitomizes the dehumanizing, hellish state of urban existence. Margaret Laurence in this novel depicts the plight of Stacey MacAindra, the protagonist, a middle-aged woman, who became a victim of the bedlam in which she lives. Her consciousness of the chaotic wide world batters her sensibilities from all sides. The milieu is grotesque due to the encroachment of meaningless violence. It looks as though the universe is on the brink of a conflagration. Stacey is forced to rely on her own internal resources for help,

something to act as a bridge between the internal and external world of her experience. Stacey's problem is that of the marginalized woman. The novelist utilizes thoughts, memories, and inner monologues to constantly keep us aware of the action unfolding within the mind of the protagonist. Aptly asserting the narrative technique employed by Laurence to dispel the pathos of Stacey, Coral Ann Howells, in *Wearing Fabrications, Women's Narratives in Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers*, observes: "Throughout her narrative, realism is interspread with a vivid subtext of fantasy, which provides the breathing spaces for Stacey and is indeed the means by which she survives coming to terms with herself and the world she inhabits" (102)

Stacey MacAindra, thirty nine years old, is the wife of MacAindra, a salesman and the mother of four, Jen, Duncan, Ian and Katie, aged between two and fourteen. She has a deep anxiety about the family, about the hell fires of city existence, about the tension of modern-day living. Stacey apparently presents the picture of a confused, anxious, self-doubting, contemporary housewife. It is the confusion that bothers her. Everything happens all at once. Stacey is a prey to myriads of threatening horrors; both read and imagined which make unremitting impressions on her consciousness from all sides. Laurence's pioneering effort in establishing the Canadian sensibility in the stream of English-Canadian writings has long been acknowledged. In *Canadian Literature in English*, W.J. Keith sees: The beginnings of an essentially Canadian: tradition passed on by the beneficiary to numerous younger writers who have benefited from her example. Manawaka ...has passed into the national consciousness. Most impressive of all is the extent to which she offers abroad a panorama of twentieth-century Canadian experience" (161).

Possibly the single most powerful basis of the fame of Margaret Laurence as a novelist is the "Manawaka" novels: a sequence of events recreated from her experience of growing up in

the small town of Manitoba. *The Fire-Dwellers* is one of the Manawaka novels dealing, at one level with the problems encountered by women in provincial Canada. This involves the sketching of a physical landscape, geographical locales, social structure, familial relationships which form the backdrop of the novel's action in addition to the mapping of interior landscape of the narrator protagonist, Stacey MacAindra. The simultaneous movement of this dual landscape sometimes convergent, at other times imparts to the story a uniqueness and novelty of technique rarely encountered in fictional portrayals of a fairly common theme, the theme of survival. The novelist's own opinion on this aspect of the novel is rather interesting - she admits to have tried various innovations in order to arrive at the present form, which would convey the sense of everything happening all at once, simultaneously she continues: Narration, dreams, memories, inner running commentaries all had to be brief, even fragmented, to convey the jangled quality of Stacey's life the inner and outer aspects of Stacey's life were so much at variance that it was essential to have her inner commentary in order to point out the frequent contrast between what she was thinking and what she was saying.

In *The Fire-Dwellers* Stacey often feels stifled having to cope with the monotonous routine of catering to the needs of her busy husband and children. She finds only vast stretches of emptiness within and around her. On the verge of entering her middle age, she realizes with a pang that after sixteen years of married life with her "inarticulate" salesman husband, she only nurses the feeling of despair and frustration and looks upon life as an inescapable trap. With no one around to share her feelings, she experiences a divided self, an outer self and an inner self which Mitzi Hamovitch, *The Subversive Voice in The Fire-Dwellers, New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence*, prefers to call the "double voice of Stacey" (73) inwardly, her voice is "muffled, and covert" and outwardly it is "wistful, tentative, conformist, occasionally mildly

rebellious, easily rebuffed and sometimes fragmented” (73-74). She desperately struggles against her “duplicitous existence” and her marginalization in the essentially male dominated Canadian society of the 1950 s and would like to register her protest by seeking even extramarital sex, among other things.

Stacey’s family has nothing very remarkable about it. Katie, her eldest daughter, is good looking but rebellious by nature. Ian, aged eleven, is reserved like his father and is given to ever shifting moods. Duncan is her favourite child just eight, he already shows every sign of being creative and intelligent, the last, Jen, is a lisping baby. Her husband Macindra, forty-three started his career as a salesman of encyclopaedias, but now he promotes the sale of Richalife, an all purpose vitamin. They live in a big but somewhat shabby house on Bluejay crescent in Vancouver.

Since Stacey’s relationship with the people closest to her especially her husband and children is characterized by a yawning gap of communication, she is invariably made to rely on her own internal resources for help, sometimes acting as a bridge between the internal and external worlds of her experience. Agencies Sharon knack decibel deciphers, “A chart of the various levels of Stacey,” consciousness and unconscious, her memories, fantasizes, and dreams or a graphic representation of their frequency over the ten chapter of the novel would reveal the complexity of the cycle structure of *The Fire Dwellers*” (161). Retreat in Stacey’s case can be seen to be of two types of dreams, fantasies, and memories on one hand and action on the other. Her sexual adventures possibly fall in the second category. They could be considered as one more pathetic attempt on her part to satisfy the craving for self-expression. But the attempt is thwarted because she is haunted throughout by a monumental sense of guilt for violating the norms laid down by society.

The Fire-Dwellers is important for its analysis of issues relating to gender and to national and regional identities. Stacey is defined by the roles of wife and mother. Further, she is a Canadian of Scots descent born in Manitoba and living in Vancouver, and her identity is significantly shaped by aspects of her European heritage, by her location in Western Canada, and by her consciousness of herself as a woman from the prairies now living in the city. Her perception of her present trouble, her recollections of an earlier happier state and the negotiation by which she reaches a better understanding of her problems are represented through a complex of spatial and topographic metaphors. A post colonial concern with ethnicity and an awareness of the problematic nature of Canadian identity are signalled through manipulation of ideas about place and territory.

The text demonstrates through Stacey's experience and reflections, as she faces the question of what she has to show for her life, the painful paradoxical truth that the activity of a mother is largely a matter of working towards making herself, in the end, unnecessary. She has done her best to bring up her children, but she is aware that they are not her possessions: They belong to themselves. Mothering is an achievement, but it leads to a particularly feminine loss, since she has sacrificed freedom to carry out her obligations at home with her family and she will find that what she must do for them finally is to let them go. But in the present case, the processes of the mind are so closely and inseparably linked that the whole projects a more or less unified effect. It is no wonder then that Colin Nicholson, *Critical Approaches to the fiction of Margaret Laurence*, is moved to comment: "Throughout her narrative, realism is interspersed with vivid subtext of fantasy, which provides the breathing spaces for Stacey and is indeed the means by which she inhabits" (102). It is true that the individual is at the centre of the scheme reorganization. Nevertheless, the role of society in providing proper challenges to impel an

individual to survive and lead a meaningful life must be given due prominence. In other words, a just society allows individuals to exercise their autonomy and to fulfil themselves.

The management of the interaction between voices draws attention to the limited amount of true communication available to Stacey. Her husband's work as a travelling salesman means that he spends much of each week separated from her, and when he is there he avoids speaking to her. This lack of communication between marriage partners is displayed in acute form in their inability to discuss, until they reach a partial resolution at the end of the novel, their anxieties about a major problem for both of them. Stacey MacAindra's life, as a thirty nine year old mother of four with marital difficulties and a drink problem is the focus of an acute analysis of problems connected to femininity and dependency. Stacey suffers greatly from the psychological, if not physical, isolation which is one of the conditions of motherhood in the second half of the Twentieth century: She is conscious that she lives 'alone in a house full of people'. This has seriously damaging consequences for the sense of herself.

The Fire-Dwellers is an extraordinary novel. This dearth of literary criticism may reflect the critics' judgment that the novel is not worthy of serious attention because of its supposedly trivial subject matter: the middle-aged identity crisis of a middle-class housewife and mother of four. Stacey's search for identity, however, transcends the trivial: her rediscovery of psychic wholeness structures the complex cycles of the novel and follows a heroic quest pattern. The themes of alienation and survival are not confined to literature written only in the twentieth century.

The novel unfolds laterally and cyclically, progressing forwards and backwards simultaneously through many levels of time and the psyche. Thought, dialogue, and action spring from Stacey's consciousness. Stacey's fantasies are also often consciously initiated, but at times

they bridge conscious and unconscious levels. Stacey's memories and dreams, on the other hand, always tap the deeper unconscious levels of her psyche. Her memories well up spontaneously from forgotten depths of her personal unconscious, a term Jung, "Form on the Nature of the Psyche," uses to define all the acquisitions of personal existence - hence the forgotten; the repressed; the subliminally perceived, thought and felt. Stacey's dreams derive from yet a deeper level, paralleling Jung in "collective unconscious." The contents of this deeper level, Jung believes, are "mythological associations - those motives and images which can spring a new in every age and clime without historical tradition or migration" (284). The unconscious depths of Stacey's psyche predominate in the novel, revealing her chaotic and divided self: her repressed individuality and autonomy, her sexual longings, and her deepest fears of death for herself, her family, and the world around her. Moreover, the interplay between the conscious and unconscious levels of Stacey's psyche constitutes the novel's main action and determines its narrative structure.

The orchestration of the voices and pictures that compose these levels of Stacey's psyche is a subtle, complex inter-weaving of impersonal external and personal inner stimuli. Stacey's conflicting internal urges are juxtaposed with her contradictory outward actions and words. A violent, chaotic, external world both causes and parallels her personal inner chaos. Stacey's need to cope with that world and to find security within her family unit reflects her need to regain balance in the chaotic world of the self. Thus, Stacey embarks on a monomythic inward adventure to greater self-knowledge. Her journey significantly is one of rediscovery.

The circular nature of Stacey's journey is reflected in the circular structure of the novel: the frame, provided by the description of Stacey and Mac's bedroom with its puddles of clothing, unread books, and photographs of their children and their younger, seemingly more confident

selves, which begins and ends the novel: the round of daily routine highlighted in chapter four with parallel morning scenes, the one a lengthy scene of family clamour against the doom and crass commercialism provided by the radio, and the other a brief re-enactment of the same scene played against the more personal backdrop of Stacey's mental anguish and thundering hangover, or the ritualized, almost mechanical interaction between Stacey and Mac in their routine preparations for social events.

Stacey's science fiction fantasies tap a deeper level of her psyche, these science fiction fantasies are largely expressions of her fear of a seemingly realistic, mechanical automated world devoid of meaning. They help orchestrate the effect of external world on her sense and situation and are appropriately concentrated in the culminating crisis chapters, three to five, as are her fantasies of threatening force destroying her family and the world around her. It is, however, the manifestations of Stacey's deepest unconscious levels, her dreams that most clearly emphasize the cyclic nature of the novel, and the ultimately healing nature of Stacey's psychic journey. Her dreams tap deeply buried archetypal patterns and images. In the first four chapters, each of Stacey's four dreams is dominated by one of the basic elements, earth, air, fire, and water representing overall the fractured nature of her self, and therefore, her need for rejuvenation.

Indeed, Laurence, and her heroine Stacey MacAindra are expressing the "generic, no-name frustration" of women of her time. "Voice" is a significant theme in all of Laurence's works, and in this novel she brilliantly captures the distinctive voice of her heroine, while also speaking for the women whom Stacey typifies. Stacey finally comes to terms with her life and recognizes herself as a survivor. She realizes that she should accept herself as she is and stop wanting to be like others for, as Luke rightly says: "Everything looks better and worse from the outside" (198). Having decided to remain with Mac and her children rather than go North with her young lover,

Stacey decides to take life as it comes and quit fearing the unknown. This realization is not the result of divine inspiration in the form of revelation but is arrived at after being considerably battered by the ups and downs of fortune. The novel ends on a note of reconciliation and acceptance of those things which cannot be changed.

The fact that Stacey's fragmented psyche has healed even at the deepest unconscious level is indicated by her dream in the eighth chapter of the novel. Each of her four earlier dreams is dominated by one of the four elements: Fire, Water, and Earth appear in her dreams as destructive forces, while Air appears as an escape device. With the improvement in her relationship with Mac and the others, her last dream combines the four elements and indicates the possibility of finding peace and limited freedom despite the violence around her. Released from their parental duties, Mac and she are reunited in this dream. Their flat-roofed hut in her dream made of poplar poles chinked with mud provides them with shelter but is not a fortress protecting them from external threats. The "trap," Stacey realizes, is not the four walls of her home but the world. As popularly stated, "The fire born is at home in fire." Stacey who is born to this element, learns to survive in it with dignity and the ability to give and receive love. She also realizes that the others around her are fire-dwellers too. Brave and determined to "survive," Stacey continues to "dance hope" and "dance hurt" in the small gauche ballet called life, according to Margaret Laurence.

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