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## Self-Discovery of Women in Margret Lawrence's Novels

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### Abstract

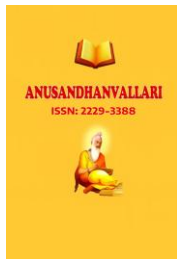
Canadian literature is characterized by the pursuit of national identity. The identity crisis in Canada is a subject that is quickly gaining prominence and vigor. The causes and circumstances that have thwarted attempts to resolve the identification question have been carefully considered. The quest for Margaret Laurence's heroines' individualization offers a framework for thinking on the sense of discontinuity and displacement brought about by Canada's colonial past. It creates a feeling of insufficiency and inadequacy that hinders the development of a complete and appropriate identity. Margaret Lawrence explored her heroines' rebellion against a confining small-town heritage in her "Manawaka novels": *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Diviners*, *This Side Jordan*. These novels examine how the old colonials and indigenous Africans suffered in Ghana and gained independence. Laurence's novels are set in Canada and focus on women struggles.

**Keywords:** Convention of realism, Repression, Identity, Survival, Freedom.

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Jean Margaret Laurence was a notable writer in Canadian literature. She was also founded as the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization dedicated to encouraging Canada's writing community. Her work *This Side Jordan* explores the lives of aging colonials and local Africans who suffered when Ghana gained independence. Laurence's novel *A Jest of God*, set in a tiny Manitoba town during the Great Depression, it follows the narrative of thirty four year old spinster, a school teacher Rachel Cameron, whose midlife experiences have tremendous implications on her circumstances, heart, and future. Trapped by the restrictions of small town life and her overbearing responsibilities to her mother, Rachel embarks on an affair that opens the door to liberty, a newfound independence that she must learn to accept on her own terms. *The Stone Angel* portrays the narrative of Hagar Shipley, a ninety year old lady seeking to come in terms with a life of stubbornness and loss, via a sequence of vignettes. The novel's themes include pride and discrimination based on socioeconomic status. *The Fire-Dwellers* is a remarkable tale about a lady with four children, a hardworking but uncommunicative husband, a spinster sister, and an unwavering belief that life has more to offer her than the mundane pattern of her days. Stacey rediscovers for us all the richness of the commonplace, the anguish and pleasure of being alive, and the secret song that dances in everyone's soul when she tells us about her life. Laurence's final work, *The Diviners*, and Canadian literary classics. It tells the narrative of Morag Gunn, a fictitious Canadian author whose life is based on Laurence's personal experiences. More than her earlier works, it openly relates the author's feelings, experiences, and professional progress to the protagonist.

*This Side Jordan* recreates that colorful milieu, where men and women grapple with self-betrayal, self-discovery, and the birth of political pride. *This Side Jordan*, a magnificent work of lasting significance, leaves echoes in the reader's imagination as resonant as Ghanaian drums. This lyrical, evocative story explores all of the time's tensions: the thrill, eagerness, and horror felt by both Africans and English as they faced a new rule. The hero of the tale, a schoolteacher divided between tribal obligation and hopes for his country's future in the contemporary world, he names his son "Joshua" as a statement of hope that he will claim and enjoy his motherland. Jordan foresees many of the political and ethnic crises that would beset Ghana over the next fifty

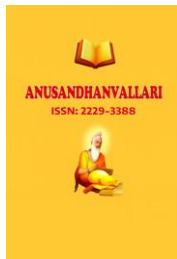


years. It is an evocative and moving examination of the repercussions of colonialism, cultural conflict, and the tenacity of hope in a new political identity

Laurence creates a female protagonist who is learning to overcome the obstacles that are holding her back. Laurence could only reproduce Rachel Cameron's scared reactions to everything around her and her self-mocking evaluations of her responses from the first-person point of view; she is afraid even of herself. When she thinks about how she thinks, about her paranoia and her imagination, she cautions herself that she would become strange, an outsider as a result of her own distortions of reality. She keeps telling herself that she needs to stop thinking like that. Her anxiety about her own reactions to everyday life puts her on the verge of a frenzy. She could be disregarded as a clichéd old-maid schoolteacher, the butt of the town's jokes, if it weren't for the unmistakable quality of her perceptions and the color and depth of her imagination. She shares the upper story of her deceased father's former funeral parlor with her widowed mother. The Old Testament account serves as the mythic framework for Rachel's psychological study since she is "mourning for her children" in the novel, the children she never had. When she is brave enough to fall in love with Nick Kazlik, whom she needs more as a father figure for her children than as a lover, he tells her that he is not God and cannot cure her issues. Neither he nor the possibility of the kid he might give her can overcome her sense of loneliness, of which the lack of children is but a metaphor; her experience of isolation appears to be founded on a lack of spiritual fulfillment, an isolation from God. In the church, she and her mother attend, God's word is avoided, and she is frightened by fundamentalist irrationality. Rachel eventually identifies her own self-pity as a horrifying form of pride, and she begins to learn to feel compassion for those who are similarly alienated as she is. Rachel's circumstance has the makings of a tragedy, but Laurence's heroines never become tragic. They persevere through their crises, gaining strength in the process. Rachel gets strength from Nick's death, which she never understands, and from the death of what she hoped and feared would be Nick's child. Rachel realizes that what she thought was a baby was a meaningless tumor, not even malignant *A Jest of God*, after she has opted not to commit suicide when she believes she is pregnant. Rachel can leave Manawaka despite, or maybe because of, this horrific anticlimax; she applies for and is accepted for a teaching position in Vancouver. Finally, she is traveling with her mother, her "elderly child," to a new life in Vancouver.

The novel *The Fire-Dwellers* was written between 1966 and 1968 in England; the heroine, Stacey Mac Aindra, is Rachel Cameron's sister. She is a regular lady, a middle-class contemporary housewife in Manawaka, worried about all the probable and impossible dangers that await her and her family. Her recognized, appealing, and spontaneous narrative voice helps her transcend stereotypes. Laurence's storytelling method in *The Fire Dwellers* is more complicated than in any of her previous works. A variety of disruptions interrupt the narration. Inner voices of Stacey, snippets of Stacey's memories left to the side of the page, italicized dreams and fantasies, fragmentary discussions with Mac, her husband, and radio and television news. At times, she is so focused on her inner voice that she feels a physical jolt when exterior reality interrupts her inner visions.

As Stacey's lover Luke hints, the title relates to Stacey: she is the nursery rhyme's ladybird who must fly from home because her house is on fire and her children will burn. Although Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) remains unopened beside Stacey's bed at the end of the novel, as it did at the start, Stacey appears to understand the explanation of fire's primeval sexuality intuitively. Stacey is burned by sexual frustration and dreads the detonation of an atomic bomb, a threat that is always on the news. Stacey's memory replays newspaper images from Vietnam of a frightened mother attempting to remove scorching napalm from her baby's face. The water metaphor, which foreshadows its more important role in *The Diviners*, serves as a counterpoint to the fire image. Stacey, unlike the other Manawaka characters, is not monstrous; she believes herself very average, and most people would agree, despite her apocalyptic concerns. The environment surrounding her, on the other hand, is hideous. The terrifying events in Stacey's neighbors' and friends' lives are

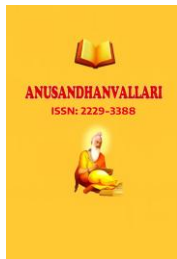


offset by daily news from the Vietnam War. Jen, Stacey's two-year-old, cannot or would not speak, almost as a representation of her incapacity to articulate her anxieties. It's no surprise that Stacey hides her drinks in the Mix-Master. Her interior dialogue clearly presents a compassionate mother with a stabilizing sense of humor, making the conclusion's limited affirmation realistic; Mac and his equally uncommunicative son Duncan are pulled together by Duncan's near-death.

Morag's reminiscences from her past. The photos span her parents' lives from before Morag was born to her early childhood and their deaths. Morag glances at a snapshot, remembers her make-believe story about the snapshots as a child, and then comments, "I don't recall when I invented that one." Early in the narrative, this remark establishes the mythologizing of one's past as an important motif. Morag's future as a writer is hinted at by her recounting of Christie Logan's stories as a child, altering them to her own requirements. Morag the novelist is concerned about diction in the prologue: "How could that color be captured in words?" A rosy peach color, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate. Morag, like Laurence, uses her hometown as a location and character; the concept of belonging is as important to Morag as a writer as it is to Laurence. Because Laurence describes human problems in terms of sex roles, the gender of the characters in the Manawaka novels is particularly essential. All of these novels' female protagonists plainly reflect Laurence's ongoing exploration of women's roles in society. Laurence's women's sex lives are fully integrated elements of their identities without becoming obsessed or neurotic. All of her protagonists enjoy their sexuality while feeling guilty about it. Laurence denied any involvement with the women's freedom movement. Morag Gunn, on the other hand, a single mother with an illegitimate dependent kid, could not have been as easily accepted and adored by readers before the feminist revolution as she was later.

Similarly, while Laurence uses Christian ideas and themes throughout her writing, she does not identify with institutional Christianity. Laurence, like psychologist Carl Jung, appears to find God in the human soul, identifying religion as a Jungian "numinous experience" that can result in psychological development. Salvation is reinterpreted as self-discovery, and grace is granted to establish a new sense of life's purpose. Laurence depicts life as a succession of internal crises by portraying her characters as beings stuck between the inevitability of history and their free will, as persons split between body and spirit, fact and illusion. Laurence celebrates even the crises as she celebrates her heroes' progress through the development of her protagonists. The search for oneself entails both release from and acceptance of one's history. Survival with dignity and the ability to love, she observes in *Heart of a Stranger*, are themes that are virtually unavoidable for a writer of her stern Scotch-Irish heritage. Her works tackle challenges with global appeal because these themes are of enormous contemporary importance, which helps to explain her enormous popularity.

Laurence and her children relocated to London in 1964, and *The Stone Angel* was released two years later. The major theme of this novel, according to Laurence in *A Place to Stand On* from *Heart of a Stranger*, is survival, 'not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and, in the end, some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others.' The monument Hagar Shipley's father commissioned for her mother's tomb in the Manawaka cemetery is a stone angel gouged out by stonemasons used to meet the wants of "fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land." Laurence's horror at the magnificence of the pharaohs' monuments at Luxor, as reported in *Good Morning to the Grandson of Rameses the Second* in *The Heart of a Stranger*, is similar to her reaction to the stern Scotch-Irish prairie pioneers' monetary desires. The story of Hagar Shipley is presented in the first person and spans three weeks before her death; nevertheless, extensive flashbacks illustrate episodes from Hagar's life in chronological sequence over these weeks. Laurence adds sacramental implications to Hagar's final days: She confesses to an unlikely priest over a jug of wine in a deserted cannery; in the hospital where she dies, she overcomes her pride and enjoys and empathizes with her fellow patients; after accepting a previously despised minister sent by her son, she has an epiphany "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that



led me there was fear”; and just before her death, she wrests her last drink from her daughter-in-law. Such sacramental connotations are not uncommon in Laurence’s writings, although they grow more subtle and complicated in her later works than they are here.

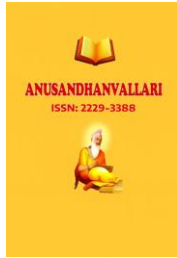
Hagar Shipley is an elderly woman, extremely overweight and physically frail, hideous and malformed in both body and spirit. She is mean-spirited as well as mean about her money and things; she is practically a cliché, an odd heroine, and certainly not one who appears to elicit sympathy from the reader. Hagar, on the other hand, draws the reader in; the authenticity of her portrayal makes her believable because of her complete honesty and the reader empathizes with her dilemma, which she eventually acknowledges as self-made. Despite and because of her pettiness, the reader feels compassion for her. Even in her old age, her voice remains powerful, forceful, and energetic, and the evolution of her self-awareness and self-knowledge is captivating. *The Stone Angel* is the first piece in which Laurence’s fictionalized birthplace of Neepawa, Manitoba, serves as the protagonist’s boyhood setting. She creates a microcosmic universe in Manawaka, the childhood home of all her subsequent heroes, whose memories and friends continue over from work to work. Vanessa in *A Bird in the House*, Rachel in *A Jest of God*, Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and Morag in *The Diviners* all share Hagar’s legendary heritage of Scotch-Irish pioneers and Meti Indians in Manitoba, albeit Hagar is old enough to be the grandmother of the other four. Each of these ladies leaves Manawaka in pursuit of individuality and spiritual independence, but none is able to completely escape her ancestors and childhood milieu. Laurence became increasingly preoccupied with the notion of identity, prompting him to investigate the effects of environment and heredity.

The Manawaka setting allowed Laurence to create characters whose parents or grandparents fought hard to expand the frontier, established what they imagined would be dynasties, and lived to see them crumble due to the Great Depression. These obstinate and arrogant people had children who had to forge their own identities in the absence of the conspicuous mansions their parents had erected to announce their own. Pride in personal accomplishment gave way to pride in family and origin in the next generation, and Hagar’s inheritance from her father demonstrated that the pioneer generation’s strength could destroy as well as build. Recognizing the double-edged character of this strength allows Hagar, a stone angel in her former blindness, to experience some human love for those around her at the end.

Lawrence’s portrayal of female characters examines the social significance of women. In her quest for self-identity, she has created a hopelessly jumbled web of self-fabricated personal myths that she must reconcile with her Canadian heritage. Laurence’s works all deal with the position of women, the injustices of sex-role stereotyping, and the disparity of opportunity. Morag, who is jealous of her daughter’s sexual independence, is troubled by the shifting roles of women in the late twentieth century. Despite the fact that the heroines of Laurence’s later works are women who have not always been treated well by men in their lives, males are never regarded cruelly in her writing, even if the point of view is limited to the female protagonist’s consciousness.

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