

Pride, Self-Deception, and Marital Dissonance in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*

¹R. Kokila Madhu Priya, ²Dr. J. Samuel Kirubahar

¹Part-time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021 India.

²Research Supervisor, Former Associate Professor and Head in English, Research Centre in English, VHNSN College, (A) Virudhunagar – 626 001. India.

Abstract

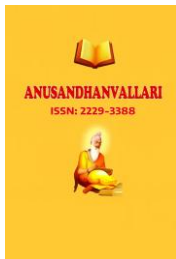
Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964) is a psychologically intricate depiction of Hagar Shipley, a woman whose existence is defined by pride, emotional repression, and damaged relationships. This paper looks at the dissonance in her marriage and emotional estrangement created by the inflexibility of Hagar's selfhood and the delusional nature of her false self-esteem. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic theories, the study contends that Hagar's struggle to reconcile vulnerability with autonomy results in her separation from her husband, children, and eventually herself. Her late-life self-awareness emphasises the damaging repercussions of pride and the need for emotional vulnerability to have meaningful human interactions.

Keywords: Pride, life, marriage, rejoice, self, consciousness, self-esteem.

In recent years, women novelists in English fiction, wherever it is published, present marriage as a trap for women and problematise the concept of marriage itself. They portray marriage as a trap and a slavery for women, where her own identity as a living human being is destroyed, effaced and annulled. Marriage is a social institution that is typically idealised as sacred and fulfilling, but in modern feminist discourse, it has been critically probed as a place of emotional negotiation and structural injustice. Marriage, more often than not lauded as the epitome of individual and social fulfilment in traditional terms, takes place in patriarchal contexts that curtail women's agency and selfhood, and women's emotional expression is trapped and enslaving. Feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir claim that marriage lowers women, often "annihilat[ing]" their sense of self (496). At the same time, Germaine Greer argues that "self-sacrifice is the leitmotif of most of the marital games played by women" (80).

Marriage, thus, seems a strange arena, bringing fulfilment and creating constriction at once. Radical feminists view Marriage as a conspiracy against women, rendering them non-entities and objects to be consumed or, in Atwood's words, an edible woman, and limiting them to a private domestic domain in the name of marriage. The marital contract is a work contract for the social feminists; the man becomes the coloniser and the woman the colonised. The paradox is articulated in three broad patterns of literary representation: for some women, marriage is the site of emotional and social fulfilment; for others, it is a site of claustrophobia and existential stagnation; and for a few, it is a site of resistance where patriarchal constraints are challenged. Margaret Laurence's novels are squarely on this continuum, depicting women negotiating these conflicts as they struggle with identity, autonomy, and emotional survival.

Critics have thoroughly examined Hagar Shipley's pride, isolation and existential struggle. Kertzer emphasises the tension of duty, freedom and guilt in her existence (502), whereas Vevaina reads her pride as a



cultural inheritance and psychological resistance (207–08). Her incapacity to combine sensuality with emotional expression is one of the main reasons for her relational failures (58), according to Hutcheon. But the crucial lacuna still exists in comprehending how Hagar's self-deception actively generates marital difficulty, and not only its accompaniment. This paper fills that vacuum by analysing pride as a negative psychological mechanism informing Hagar's marriage, motherhood, and identity.

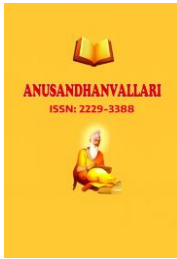
Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* is organised in a narrative framework that reflects Hagar's broken brain and has a complicated interaction between the past and present. The narrative alternates between two planes of time: the present, when Hagar is an old woman, dependent on her son Marvin and his wife Doris, and the past, which she reconstructs in her memory.

One sequence follows the besieged consciousness of Hagar in the present at the very old age of ninety, who now lives in Vancouver during the near end of her life with recollections of the past and the home struggles of the present moment. In the narrative present, she is seen living with her son Marvin and his wife Doris. She expresses her life and her static lifestyle in it. The second sequence is largely set in Manawaka. It overtakes the present with her memory's shards. It is from a time when she was a six-year-old youngster. In this narrative past, her childhood is recounted up to her coming to Manawaka after the loss of her son John. The narrative past connects people like her father, Jason Currie, her husband, Bram Shipley, her sons Marvin and John, and Mr Oatley, under whose employ she is a maid in Vancouver, British Columbia. This double structure not only shows the path of her life, but also stresses her incapacity for reconciliation with her past. Hagar's life is divided into four stages: childhood, youth, marriage and old age, each period a gradual increase in emotional rigidity. The changing point of view enables the reader to see how early experiences, especially her childhood under her authoritarian father, Jason Currie, affect her relationships later in life.

The stone angel, the novel's key emblem, mirrors Hagar's character. The angel looking at the town with "sightless eyes" (Laurence 1) represents rigidity, emotional sterility and blindness. Like the statue, Hagar grows hard and is unable to give life or establish meaningful connections. Her life is, as critics comment, "rampant with memory" but lacking true reconciliation (Laurence 3). The symbol also reflects her paradoxical situation: she craves life and involvement but stays emotionally inactive. Thus, the narrative structure and symbolism combine to represent Hagar's life as a path to tardy self-recognition.

Hagar's pride is steeped in her past and her bond with her father. Hagar's selfhood is moulded by Jason Currie's severe moral code, class consciousness, and patriarchal power. She is constantly told that she is somehow inferior as a girl, and she internalises this sense of inadequacy, which she makes up for by becoming over-proud and self-assertive. This pride is a defence mechanism, a psychological cover for her dread of being vulnerable and rejected. As Vevaina hints, her pride is not just a personal attribute but a manufactured facade to hide her insecurity. Her dread of seeming silly and being vulnerable causes her to pull away from human contact, and therefore, she is like the stone angel of the title. Ninety-year-old Hagar dives into the shipwreck of her broken personality and comes up with the freeing but painful revelation that she has never been able to 'rejoice' not because of a capricious God as she has always thought but because of her animus-bound pride. "[H]er inability to rejoice stems from the fact that, in her self-exiled state, she has not realised that joy can be derived from open interaction with others, from giving and receiving love and from being able to love, play with and exult in the power within oneself" (208).

Consequently, Hagar thinks that showing emotion is a sign of weakness and creates an identity built on strength, independence, and control. Yet this built self produces great contradictions. She craves independence, yet her inability to admit emotional needs estranges her from others. Her connection to male authority further distances her from traditional feminine duties, generating a continuous tension between independence and



tenderness. Ultimately, her pride is poisonous, stopping her from developing real relationships and sending her into what Pathania calls a “emotional wilderness” (49).

Hagar’s marriage to Bram Shipley is the major place in which her vanity and self-deception appear most destructively. Her decision to marry Bram is at first a rebellion against her father's rule, a hint of her wish to be independent. But this is a choice based on romantic fantasy rather than actual compatibility, and so the groundwork is laid for marital strife. Hagar and Bram are incompatible on many levels, culturally, emotionally and psychologically. Hagar stands for refinement, order, and artistic sensibility, while Bram stands for roughness, spontaneity, and disrespect to societal conventions. Their domestic disputes about managing the household, cleanliness and lifestyle are a symptom of deeper ideological divides, which neither of them is ready to overcome.

This struggle is further intensified by the sexual aspect of their connection. Hagar glorifies love as something fragile and poetic. Bram sees love only in carnal terms. “Love... must be words and actions fine as lavender sachets” (Laurence 76). Her incapacity to express desire or claim pleasure adds to emotional distance, confirming Hutcheon’s comment that she does not combine sensuality and sexuality (58). She makes their connection one of confusion and frustration by refusing to share emotionally.

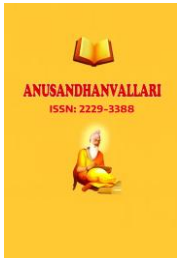
Breakdown of communication is another important issue in their marital discord. Because of Hagar’s pride, she cannot express her wants or vulnerabilities, and thus is silent and estranged for a long time. This failure to communicate effectively, as Todkar notes, is a distinguishing flaw (77). Their marriage gradually degenerates into constant bickering. Hagar realises that they had spent their years together “wrangle and bicker” (Laurence 110). Ultimately, Hagar’s leaving Bram does not symbolise freedom, but rather the continuance of her avoidance behaviour. She never confronts the emotional truths; the underlying causes are not dealt with, which reinforces her isolation even more.

Hagar’s pride is not only that of a wife, but of a mother, and it affects her vision of her boys, Marvin and John. She imposes her own values on them and favours John as a representative of her Currie background and rejects Marvin as a representative of the lower Shipley qualities. This misrecognition exposes her failure to recognise her children as persons, but to see them through her own prejudices. Her relationship with John is especially important since she projects her unfulfilled hopes onto him. But her hostility to his relationship with Arlene shows her controlling personality and her reluctance to accept his individuality. In the end, this disruption results in his terrible death, forcing Hagar to carry the burden of remorse and sorrow. Hutcheon’s comment that Hagar’s parental desires are “unconscious projections” (59) highlights how much her pride dictates her relationships. She is not only breaking her relationship with the children but also her own emotional isolation by not seeing her children as individuals.

Hagar’s existence is a tale of alienation, born of her failure to reconcile the inner self with the outside self. Her pride separates her from her father, spouse and children and community; a deep loneliness envelops her. Her consciousness forces her to relive her own past. Her unconscious mind tells her to think about her lost men, like her father, Jason Currie and her husband, Bram Shipley, but her conscious self-abhors such a thought in her. In all, she made four flights, escapes/retreats to freedom. They are:

First is her attempt to escape from Jason Currie, as he is a self-made man who has recognised her intelligence and pride. She then marries a coarse and uncultivated farmer, Bram Shipley. Hagar and her husband have no interests in common; she is engaged in housework, and he is interested in horses. She leaves him later, after having two boys, Marvin and John, taking John with her.

Hagar’s second flight is when she leaves her husband and takes John with her. In her second flight, she gets a job as a housekeeper with Mr. Oatley, where she also raises her son, John. She wants to teach John good habits and a sense of dignity, but her trust in John is challenged when he falls in love with a lady called Arlene



and wants to marry her. When John leaves her and moves in with his father, Bram Shipley, she is devastated. She later visits Bram Shipley on his deathbed and spends money on him. Then, after his death, she returns to Mr Oatley and has to mourn the loss of her son John, who dies in an accident with his lady love, Arlene. In the end, she regrets not having permitted his son John to wed Arlene.

Hagar's third flight is to Silverthreads care home, after fleeing from her son Marvin and his wife Doris's home. Hagar's last flight is from the Silverthreads care home. She escapes the nursing home with the pensioner's cheque and avoids being housed alone in Silverthreads nursing home, and reaches an abandoned cannery at Shadow Point, where she meets a stranger called Murray Ferney Lees, a failed insurance salesman like Willy Lowman in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, Jimmy Vann in *War Memorials* by Clint McCown and Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain. Finally, she is dragged out of the Shadow Point and put in the hospital, dying with dignity.

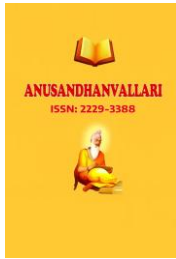
Her fallibilities are as follows:

- She feels she has inherited and treasured the virtues and principles of her father, yet she disobeys her father by choosing Bram Shipley to marry him.
- She has no sympathy with weakness when she is near the end of her life.
- She hates Doris, her daughter-in-law.
- She has no warm feelings for her oldest son, Marvin.
- She had great aspirations for John, and by resisting his love, she causes him to lose his life in an accident, and subsequently laments his death.

Taylor says that by cutting others out, she loses the whole potential self that she may have (162). She tries to get away from emotional confrontation over and over again, by getting married, by separating or by running away. These escapes are not escapes in reality, showing that she is truly imprisoned by her mind and not by her circumstances. This self-delusion culminates in her old age in an existential crisis, when she is compelled to face the consequences of her choices. Her reliance on others, especially Marvin and Doris, contradicts her self-image as an independent and self-sufficient person, thereby heightening her internal conflict.

Hagar's retreat to Shadow Point is a journey into the unconscious, in keeping with the Jungian archetypes of metamorphosis. In this voyage, she begins her confrontation with her true self, moving away from denial to recognition. Meeting Murray Lees is a turning point for her, allowing her to experience a genuine human connection without pride and pretension. She tells the truth for the first time, admitting her shame and her vulnerability. This gathering, Dommergues feels, is a point of human togetherness. The exacting lady is not ashamed of herself. "Perhaps for the first time she has established a real relationship with a man and realised what human solidarity means" (69), which is significant for her psychological transformation. Her tiny gestures of empathy at the hospital, such as providing a bedpan to another patient, show her growing ability to be compassionate. These acts signal a move from self-absorption to relational consciousness and, by extension, suggest that her route to self-realization, however partial, is nonetheless significant.

When Murray Ferney Lees tells Marvin where she is, she forgives him. She touched his wrist in care and consideration for him. Then comes her real and honest explanation of her life to him. It is an "unforgettable" example of the Kerygma, the "vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation" in *The Great Code* (Thomas, "Towards" 86), of Northrop Frye. She tells him her life story. In reality, "responsibility, freedom and guilt are three of the terms by which Hagar must judge her life" (Kertzer 502). The title of the novel, *The Stone Angel*, relates to Hagar's Prufrockian-like lifestyle, the barren life of Hagar, her rocky existence like Mr Stone in V.S. Naipaul's *Mr Stone and the Knight's Companion*.



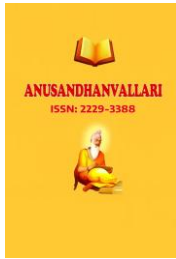
The last realisation for Hagar is that she would never know joy in her life. "Every good joy... was stopped by some brake of proper appearances." (Laurence 285) She saw that her pride, her sense of appropriateness, had prevented her from any real feeling. She confessed that "pride was my wilderness..." Laurence (285–86) captures the basic sorrow of her existence in the line, "I carried my chains within me." This moment of clarity makes clear that her misery is mostly her own doing, the consequence of her resistance to admitting vulnerability. She does develop some self-awareness, but it is too late to change the direction of her life, emphasising the tragic nature of the tale. As Thomas notes, Hagar becomes "a stone angel whose eyes learn to see just before it is too late" (*The Manawaka World* 75).

Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* is a deep exploration of pride as a negative force that alters identity, relationships and emotional experience. Throughout Hagar Shipley's life, the story shows how self-deception and repression of emotion result in marital discord, estrangement from family, and existential remorse. Laurence is more inclined to portray the inner anguish, terror and anxiety of Hagar in Angel. In it, Hagar is unable to identify herself with her husband and children, John and Marvin. Her unfulfilled filialities and an uncomfortable marriage make her a scared, suspicious old woman, who is afraid of rejection" (Pathania 41). She is neither happy nor content with her husband and with others either, like *Mrs Dalloway* in Virginia Woolf's novel. She has a grandiose and romantic image of herself, which her husband, Bram Shipley, can hardly understand and accept, like Gautama, who fails to appreciate the tender notion of romantic love in Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*. She has pride and false self-esteem that keep her from having a meaningful and fulfilling life with others. She imagines herself as a high-born woman like Jane Austen's Emma, but marries a guy who is the opposite of everything she is, against her father's wishes, and ruins her life. She has been fussy throughout her life, preoccupied by the sheer idea of self-importance.

The study about *The Stone Angel* suggests that pride is not only a personality attribute, but a psychological mechanism that blocks true connection. At its core, Hagar's journey is a celebration of the power of vulnerability, empathy and emotional openness to foster meaningful human connections. Her heartbreaking realisation is a poignant reminder that self-awareness, when belated, cannot redeem a life circumscribed by pride.

Works Cited

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 1974. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/secondsex00beau.
- [2] Buss, Helen M. *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*. University of Victoria, 1985.
- [3] Davidson, Cathy N. "Past and Perspective in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*." *American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1978, pp. 61–69. doi.org/10.1080/02722017809481118.
- [4] Dommergues, Andre. "Order and Chaos in *The Stone Angel*." *Études Canadiennes*, no. 11, 1981, pp. 63–71.
- [5] Fabre, Michael. "From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*." *A Place to Stand On: Essays on and About Margaret Laurence*, edited by George Woodcock, Newest Press, 1983, pp. 193–209.
- [6] Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Penguin, 1990. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/greatcodebibleli00frye.
- [7] Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. Methuen, 1971. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/femaleeunuch00gree.
- [8] Harishankar, V. Bharathi. *Women in the Fiction of Patrick White and Margaret Laurence*. Creative Books, 1997.



- [9] Hutcheon, Linda. "Pride and the Puritan Passion." *Études Canadiennes*, no. 11, 1981, pp. 55–61.
- [10] Kertzer, J. M. "The Stone Angel: Time and Responsibility." *Dalhousie Review*, vol. 54, 1974, pp. 499–509.
- [11] Laurence, Margaret. *The Stone Angel*. Apollo, 2016.
- [12] Morley, Patricia. *Margaret Laurence*. Twayne, 1981. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/margaretlaurence00morl.
- [13] Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Princeton UP, 1972. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/greatmotheranaly00neum.
- [14] New, W. H. "Voice and Language in Laurence's *The Stone Angel*." *Canadian Literature*, no. 93, 1982, pp. 79–96.
- [15] Pathania, Usha. "Psycho-dynamics of Interpersonal Interaction." *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*, Prestige Books, 1994, pp. 41–53.
- [16] Salat, M. F. *The Canadian Novel: A Search for Identity*. B.R. Publishing, 1993.
- [17] Taylor, Cynthia. "Coming to Terms with the Image of the Mother." *New Perspectives of Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*, Greenwood, 1996, pp. 161–71.
- [18] Thomas, Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/manawakaworldofm00thom.
- [19] Todkar, Shrishailya T. *Margaret Laurence's Fictional World: Identity Transformation*. Dream Book Publishing, 2025.
- [20] Vauthier, Simone. "Images in Stories, Images in Words: Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*." *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence*, UBC Press, 1990, pp. 46–70.
- [21] Vevaina, Coomi S. *Re/Membering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence*. Creative Books, 1996.