

Stacey's Uneasy Dwelling in Marital Fire: Anxiety, Ambivalence, and Identity in *The Fire-Dwellers*

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

¹Part-time Research Scholar Madurai Kamaraj University

Madurai India.

²Research Supervisor, Associate Professor and Head in English,

Research Centre in English

VHNSN College, (A), Virudhunagar India.

Abstract

In *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), Margaret Laurence provides a psychologically complex view of domesticity through Stacey MacAindra, whose experience of marriage and motherhood is fraught with significant anxiety, ambiguity and a fragmentation of identity. This paper explores Stacey's subjectivity via feminist and psychoanalytic lenses by engaging with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of domesticity, Jacques Lacan's theory of the divided subject and Julia Kristeva's idea of maternal ambivalence. It suggests that Stacey's dilemma stems from the conflict between socially assigned responsibilities and her own yearning for independence, resulting in a broken sense of self. Although her experiences are indicative of larger structural limits, there are moments of self-recognition that indicate a partial reconciliation with her condition. In the end, the novel repositions domestic life as a site of negotiation rather than fulfilment.

Key Words: Motherhood; Maternal Ambivalence; Female Subjectivity; Marital Alienation; Identity Crisis

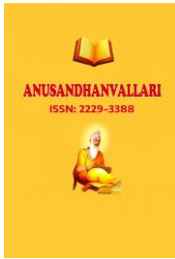
Introduction:

Feminist criticism has led to a major adjustment in the way marriage and motherhood are represented in modern fiction. They are institutions that are less and less stable, and that guarantee fulfilment, and more and more ideological systems that manage female identity. Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" highlights the fact that gender is a social construct. Within this framework, the institution of marriage is typically where women are consigned to immanence, repetitive, uncreative labour and denied transcendence or self-fulfilment.

Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* subscribes to this discourse by portraying Stacey MacAindra as a woman stuck between expectation and desire. Her identity is defined by domestic duties, yet emotionally, she opposes being confined to them. Her wail that "I can't go anywhere as myself" (Laurence 97) captures the core conflict of her life.

This situation, Friedan describes as "the problem that has no name," a discontent felt by women assigned to household roles. Similarly, Adrienne Rich contrasts the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, stating that the latter is the one that establishes impossible standards for women.

This is further complicated by Julia Kristeva, who argues that motherhood is ambivalent by nature and involves connection and rejection. Stacey's statement, "They nourish me, and yet they devour me" (Laurence 16),



eloquently encapsulates the dichotomy. Meanwhile, Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity accounts for her fragmented identity as she fights with the contradiction between her aspirations and roles shaped by language and society.

Fragmented Selfhood in Domestic Space

Stacey's identity is not just intrinsically unstable, but also formed by competing expectations and internal conflicts. She lives in a household atmosphere which requires constant emotional and physical work and sees herself as split into many tasks. It is this instability that defines Clara Thomas's existence as she notes that her environment is filled with "aberration, cruelty, desperation, doubts and death" (116).

Her articulation of selfhood, "I stand in relation to my life both as child and as parent" (Laurence 48), exposes a shattered identity that cannot be united. This is in line with Lacan's idea of the divided subject, where the self is formed via lack and division rather than coherence. Nancy Chodorow contends that women's identities are constructed in relational systems that produce a "self-in-relation" rather than an independent subject. Stacey's identity is bound up with being a wife and mother and is a perfect example of this syndrome. But this relational identity is harmful when it destroys individual identity. Todkar's point that Stacey is "trapped in the role of a mother" (157) shows how strict these roles are. She often criticises herself: "I'm not fit to be in charge of kids" (Laurence 138), and shows how completely she is trapped in her own mind.

Narrative Technique and Psychological Realism

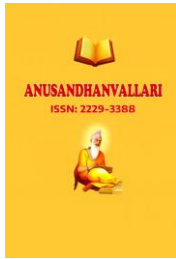
Laurence's narrative framework is vital to the representation of Stacey's shattered psyche. The usage of stream of consciousness, interior monologue and changing narrative perspectives reflects the instability of her mental state. George Woodcock calls this the "jungled quality of Stacey's life" (86) and highlights the lack of order and coherence.

The narrative also represents the incursion of external discourses into Stacey's mind. Keith points out that she "lives in a world of newspaper headlines... and television commercials" (160), which shows how mass media influences her perspective of reality. This linguistic segmentation accounts for her failure to properly express her emotional experience. Again and again she said, "What's wrong with us? We can't talk?" (Laurence 171), illustrates the inability of language to overcome the emotional divide. This is in line with Lacan's notion that the subject is made and constrained by language, and that there is a divide between experience and expression.

Marital Dissonance and Emotional Isolation

Stacey's marriage to Clifford MacAindra is structurally and emotionally uneven, and it serves as a key site of her psychological pain. What seems to be everyday dissatisfaction slowly peels away to show a deeper crisis of failed communication, uneven emotional labour, and the destruction of connection. Stacey's plea, "Can't... talk to me. Mac's emotional detachment creates a persistent void. "Mac?" (Laurence 142), a reflection of her need for acknowledgement and mutuality.

This mismatch is, in Simone de Beauvoir's view, a sign of the patriarchal placement of woman as "the Other," whose identity is determined relationally and restricted to immanence (Beauvoir 26–27, 451). Stacey's place in the marriage is defined by unacknowledged emotional labour, her individuality repressed. This situation is only compounded by the lack of communication. Stacey asks repeatedly, "What is the matter with us that we can't



talk?” (Laurence 171), demonstrating her awareness of emotional estrangement. Language cannot cross this gap and thus shows the limits of the symbolic order. As Jacques Lacan proposes, the want of the symbolic order is organised by lack, “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (Lacan 235), and is therefore never totally satisfied.

Stacey, in response, tries to find validation through affairs, especially with Luke Venturi. These meetings, although momentarily confirming her identity, also reveal the continuation of her discontent. She further intensifies her disillusionment through her “unsuccessful attempts to attract her husband” (Singh 59), and therefore strengthens the inaccessibility of fulfilment. This tension between compliance and resistance echoes what Elaine Showalter calls female ‘double consciousness’ when women internalise patriarchal norms and fight them at the same time (Showalter 198). This dual state is expressed through Stacey’s acts of acquiescence, disobedience, and emotional turbulence. And Stacey, slowly, begins to see not just the absence of connection, but the fundamental limits of marriage itself. This diffuse unhappiness is the product of emotional neglect and systemic limits and is captured in Betty Friedan’s concept of “the problem that has no name” (Friedan 15).

Marital discord is not a matter of personal pathology but of social structure in the end. Her emotional isolation is indicative of the failure of traditional marriage to accommodate the female subject. Marriage, rather than a space of fulfilment, becomes a site of fragmentation, in which communication breaks down, desire is unsatisfied, and identity is constricted.

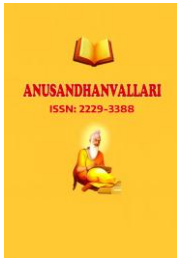
Maternal Ambivalence and Emotional Conflict

Stacey’s experience of motherhood is pervaded by a continuous ambivalence which precludes idealised images of maternal identity. She loves her kids, feels guilty about not being responsible toward them, yet feels overwhelmed by the obligations of caregiving. This contradiction is expressed in her confession: “They nourish me, and yet they devour me” (Laurence 16), which reveals motherhood as both nourishing and devouring.

Her moods reveal her ambivalence. Her outburst, “Shut up... you goddamn little nuisance” (Laurence 295), reveals the stress of caregiving. Just as her confession, “I am not a good mother. ‘I’m not a good wife” (Laurence 136) exemplifies the internalisation of ideals of parental perfection and the shame that ensues when one inevitably fails to meet them.

According to Julia Kristeva’s notion of maternal ambivalence (Kristeva 30–31), maternity, with its dual demands of attachment and separation from the child, can help explain this tension. Nancy Chodorow argues similarly that motherhood produces a “relational self” that is developed via caregiving, frequently at the sacrifice of autonomy (Chodorow 66–67). Stacey’s sense of self is increasingly constrained by her children.

This dilemma is compounded by her incapacity to maintain what Medow refers to as “maternal reverie” (121), as her children frequently feel overwhelmed. Her concern - “What if I slap Jen... without knowing?” illustrates the weak boundary between care and aggressiveness (Laurence 217). This contradiction is clarified by Adrienne Rich’s difference between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. Caregiving can be a meaningful experience, yet institutional expectations breed shame and self-alienation (Rich 13). Stacey’s struggle is a reflection of this duality. In the end, her ambivalence is not a personal flaw but a structural state created by cultural expectations. Laurence thus redefines motherhood as a place of negotiation, where love and dissatisfaction exist side by side, not in harmony.



Communication Breakdown and Generational Conflict

The breakdown in communication among her family members is one of the most pervasive and destabilising aspects of Stacey's experience. Language, which should be a bridge to connect and understand, always fails to bridge the emotional barriers inside families. Stacey's reiteration of the query, "What is the matter with us that we can't talk?" (Laurence 171) functions as a motif, highlighting her dissatisfaction and alienation. This failure to communicate effectively is not incidental but symptomatic of deeper emotional and structural disconnections within the family unit.

Stacey's marriage and her relationships with her children are marked by miscommunication, silence and emotional distance, and it is hard to have a real conversation. She often stumbles when she tries to put her thoughts into words, confessing: "I can explain everything... How can I explain everything?" (Laurence 48-49). This uncertainty speaks to the limitations of words to capture the nuanced emotional landscapes of relationships that are characterised by anticipation and misunderstanding.

This communication failure can be analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective with the theory of language and subjectivity of Jacques Lacan. Lacan contends that language in the symbolic order constructs human experience, but also creates a gap between intention and expression (Lacan 244). This failure to communicate properly is symptomatic of this gap, and her words are unable to describe her inner experience, resulting in frustration and alienation.

This disintegration is compounded by the age divide between Stacey and her daughter Katie. The friction between Stacey and Katie reflects Stacey's rebellion against her own mother, as Katie grows in independence and assertiveness, challenging Stacey's authority. This recurring pattern indicates that generational conflict is not simply a question of individual difference but a structural repeat in family connections.

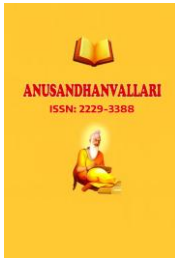
Katie's defiance makes evident Stacey's ambivalence about her job as a mother. Stacey wants to guide and protect her daughter, but she also knows she has to let her be independent. This tension shows up in her changing replies, moving from control to concession. Helen Buss notes that her own internal conflict might be viewed as a reflection of the move from hierarchical to relational models of mother-daughter interactions, in which both parties want "a relationship based on understanding rather than authority" (Buss 48).

But this journey towards mutual acknowledgement is neither smooth nor total. Stacey and Katie have not yet bridged the emotional gap between them, and misunderstandings still emerge. But there are times of tentative connection that hold the promise of change. Stacey's increasing recognition of her daughter's uniqueness represents a break with inflexible maternal power and indicates a readiness to rethink their relationship.

Again, Elaine Showalter's concept of female "double consciousness" is applicable here, as Stacey occupies the position of both authority figure and compassionate observer (Showalter 199). She understands her daughter's demand for independence and battles her own urge to dominate, representing the larger conflict between tradition and change in mother-child interactions. Ultimately, Stacey's family fails to communicate, showing the limitations of traditional family arrangements to create emotional understanding. Laurence's characterisation indicates that real communication isn't just about words; it involves empathy, acknowledgement, and the courage to face hard facts. Stacey's work to bridge these gaps is not yet complete, but it is a vital step in re-configuring relationships on mutual respect, not authority.

Anxiety, Fear, and the Threat of Violence

Stacey's psychology is marked by a pervasive anxiety ranging from private discomfort to thoughts of instability, loss and violence. This anxiety is not intermittent but constant, and it shapes how she views family life and the



larger world. The nursery rhyme, repeated again and again: “Ladybird, Ladybird, your house is on fire” – is a strong metaphor for this condition, symbolising the impending catastrophe on personal and communal levels (Laurence 1).

Stacey’s fears are then “private fears” that symbolise “public horrors” as Patricia Morley suggests (Morley 102). Her fears are therefore linked to a broader cultural instability. Her maternal preoccupations aggravate this situation; as illustrated by her repeated fear: “What would happen to the kids?” which demonstrates both responsibility and vulnerability (Laurence 134). Such anxieties are generalised and persistent, pointing to an underlying existential uneasiness.

Stacey’s knowledge of her own potential for aggressiveness is equally important. Her disturbing notion. ‘What if I hit Jen... blind?’ (Laurence 217), destabilizes the idealised picture of maternal care, revealing the presence of repressed violence in the domestic realm. This is in line with Jacques Lacan’s idea of repression, when unwanted urges resurface during times of stress (Lacan 256).

This anxiety is further contextualised by Betty Friedan’s concept of the “battered-child syndrome,” which proposes that maternal anger can be a result of emotional exhaustion and systemic strain (Friedan 128). Likewise, Julia Kristeva’s idea of abjection helps us to understand Stacey’s unease with her own violent tendencies when she faces portions of herself that threaten her identity (Kristeva 4). Stacey’s uneasiness ultimately exposes the fragility of domestic stability, undermining the idea that the home is a secure and loving space. Laurence, in contrast, shows it as a place of psychological pressure where dread, responsibility and repressed aggression are all present.

Identity Crisis and the Search for Self

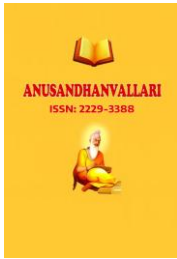
Stacey’s experience is one of a deep identity crisis, as her selfhood is reduced to relational categories. The extent to which her identity has been swallowed is evidenced by her constant insistence that she is “Mac’s wife and the kids’ mother” (Laurence 97). This erasure is articulated in her statement, “I can’t go anywhere as myself” (Laurence 97), which reflects the extent of this erasure, suggesting both limitation and invisibility.

Simone de Beauvoir would see this as a manifestation of the placing of women as “the Other,” whose identity is formed via others, rather than as an autonomous person (Beauvoir 26). Beauvoir’s description of immanence, which Stacey’s vocation as a housewife places her inside, restricts her ability to actualise herself (451).

Her attempts to regain identity - via looks, relationships, and introspection - are stunted by the internal insecurities and exterior limitations. As Stovel notes, her identity is “bruised and battered in the marital wars” (210), implying both injury and resilience.

Her dependency on external validation is further explained by Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. The way Stacey sees herself as “Housewife... mother of four” (Laurence 10) is constructed by a projected external gaze that solidifies her sense of constriction (Lacan 75). Similarly, Nancy Chodorow’s theory of relational identity stresses how women define their selfhood in terms of relationships, frequently to the detriment of autonomy (Chodorow 66).

But the increasing self-awareness of Stacey indicates that change is possible in spite of these limits. Her identity is still fragmented, but her awareness of this fragmentation is an important step towards redefining selfhood outside of prescribed roles. In Laurence’s presentation, identity is flexible, contested, and constantly developing.



Toward Self-Acceptance: Moments of Transformation

However, amid the ongoing conflicts that shape Stacey's life, the story offers moments of understanding that point towards a tentative form of self-acceptance. They are not dramatic or transformative in any conventional sense. They come softly in the rhythms of regular life, suggesting that change is gradual and incomplete. Jen talks for the first time, and a moment like this happens, "Hi, Mum, want tea?" (Laurence 307). This brief utterance is important as it represents not just the child's development but also a moment of connection that temporarily alleviates Stacey's estrangement. Likewise, as Stacey interacts with her other children, she begins to see emotional depths that she had missed previously. Events like Duncan's vulnerability and Katie's increasing independence make Stacey rethink her ideas about her family. These experiences go counter to her previous predisposition to perceive her marital life as a burden and enable her to discern periods of affection, resilience and mutual dependency.

Crucially, Stacey's transition is not one of resolution, but of recognition. Her awareness that "there must be some way of talking to kids" (Laurence 152) marks a move from exasperation to reflection. She doesn't suddenly get the ability to communicate effectively, but she realises the need for a change. That shift to self-awareness echoes Julia Kristeva's view that subjectivity is constantly emergent, constructed through an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed identity. This moment can also be understood from a feminist viewpoint through the idea of transcendence in restriction, as presented by Simone de Beauvoir. Stacey does not escape her home roles, but she starts to re-interpret them, creating a limited room for agency within the present circumstances. Her acceptance is not passive resignation but a subtle re-orientation of vision.

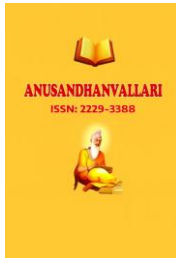
Conclusion

In Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*, the domestic world is not a world of stability, nor a world of fulfilment, but a world of tension, contradiction and psychological complexity. Through Stacey MacAindra, the story reveals how the competing demands of marriage, parenthood and social expectation construct (and frequently destroy) identity. Drawing on the theoretical ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, the study has revealed that Stacey's experience parallels broader issues about female subjectivity. Her state represents the idea of woman as "Other" in Beauvoir, the split subject in Lacan and maternal ambivalence in Kristeva. These frameworks collectively offer explanations for the structural and psychological causes that inform her divided identity.

The novel, at the same time, refuses to be viewed in exclusively gloomy terms. Stacey's short moments of self-awareness indicate the possibility of recreating identity within constraint. Her journey ends not in emancipation or resolution, but in a more complicated awareness of her position. This consciousness becomes a type of agency in itself, allowing her to negotiate her responsibilities instead of merely enduring them. Ultimately, *The Fire-Dwellers* refigures family life not as a place of harmony but as a dynamic space of negotiation, in which identity is fluid, contested, and always in flux. Laurence's representation subverts romanticised myths of marriage and parenthood, providing instead an intensely human story of struggle, endurance, and incomplete self-knowledge.

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. University of Victoria Repository, hdl.handle.net/1828/.
- [3] Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978. Google Books, books.google.com.
- [4] 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. Taylor & Francis Online, doi.org/10.1080/02722017809481118.
- [5] Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin, 1983. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/femininemystique00frie.
- [6] Hutcheon, Linda. "Pride and the Puritan Passion." *Études Canadiennes*, no. 11, 1981, pp. 55–61.
- [7] Keith, W. J. *Canadian Literature in English*. Longman, 1985.
- [8] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/powersofhorroran00kris.
- [9] Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Norton, 1977. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/ecritsselection00laca.
- [10] Laurence, Margaret. *The Fire-Dwellers*. Apollo, 2018.
- [11] Medow, F. X. Merlin. "Maternal Ambivalence in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*." *Litcrit*, vol. 35, nos. 1–2, 2009, pp. 119–23.
- [12] Morley, Patricia. *Margaret Laurence*. Twayne, 1981. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/margaretlaurence00morl.
- [13] Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1976. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/ofwomanbornmothe00rich.
- [14] Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977. Google Books, books.google.com.
- [15] Singh, Kaptan. *Women in Exile and Alienation*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. Google Books, books.google.com.
- [16] Stovel, Nora Foster. "Sister under Their Skins." *Divining Margaret Laurence*, McGill-Queen's UP, 2008, pp. 203–24.
- [17] Thomas, Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/manawakaworldofm00thom.
- [18] Todkar, Shrishailya T. *Margaret Laurence's Fictional World*. Dream Book Publishing, 2025.
- [19] Woodcock, George. "Introduction." *A Place to Stand On*, edited by George Woodcock, NeWest Press, 1983, pp. 1–10.