

From Silence to Selfhood: Tracing Feminist Consciousness in Margaret Laurence's Fiction

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Abstract: Margaret Laurence, for anyone studying Canadian literature, is essentially a giant. Mostly because she spent so much time examining how women actually managed to survive when the rules were incredibly strict and old-school. One can see this everywhere in her books: the daily grind and struggle of female characters. Handling the crushing weight of society's demands, while desperately craving personal freedom, absolutely exhausts these women. This paper maps out the slow burn of feminist thought across five of her biggest titles: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), along with *The Diviners* (1974). Using basic feminist theory, this paper looks at the nuts and bolts of how Laurence puts together female identity. The core argument here is that her protagonists show us the different phases of waking up to feminism. Most of them begin completely silenced, but slowly work their way toward accepting themselves and taking action. Comparing the novels right next to each other makes one thing obvious: Laurence was totally rethinking gender roles, adding something incredibly valuable to the literary conversation.

Keywords: Feminism, Pushback, Female Experience, Autonomy, Selfhood, Women Speaking

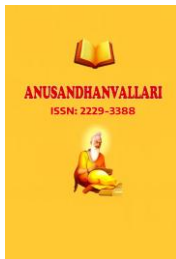
Introduction

Feminist literary theory took the traditional, rigid academic reading practices of the twentieth century and totally demolished them. It put a big spotlight on the historical power imbalances that always controlled gender relations. Critics finally started questioning those older, male-focused ways of interpreting books that usually ignored women's voices. Right as this academic shift was happening, Margaret Laurence became a huge deal in Canadian literature. Her books give readers a really close look at the everyday things women go through. Instead of crafting picture-perfect heroines, she gave us women who are resilient yet entirely chaotic. In this suffocating environment, they essentially spend their entire lives just trying to figure themselves out.

The books we are looking at in this paper give a really full picture of what women experience at all different ages. If you look at her main characters - Hagar Shipley, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and Morag - they all act as different stepping stones in discovering feminism. Just reading them in order gives you a pretty obvious timeline of how that thought process grows. The women in her earlier novels are super limited by old traditions they actually believe themselves. But the protagonists in her later books show way more self-awareness and actually fight back against being trapped. The shift from just staying quiet to becoming an independent person is undeniable.

The main point of this essay is to look closely at how women are shown in Margaret Laurence's biggest books. I want to track how feminist themes get stronger over her career. The focus here is on the clash between what the outside world demands and the inside need to just be yourself. Plus, this paper tries to spot the specific ways these women push back against social boxes and to judge how much Laurence actually helped feminist literary theory overall.

By creating female characters who reject old social rules and put in the work to build complicated identities, Margaret Laurence shows a really clear progression of feminist thought. In the end, her novels changed the way



women were written about in Canadian stories. They added something really important to understanding who she is. She doesn't try to find a perfect, easy fix for her life problems. Instead, she accepts that real freedom is often confusing and contradictory. Morag stands as the final, fully developed example of female strength in Laurence's novels.

We can break this essay down into a few different parts. First, it goes over some older feminist criticism and what other academics have already said about Laurence. Then it moves into the early kinds of pushing back we see in *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*. After that, the paper talks about family life and figuring out who you are in *The Fire-Dwellers* and *A Bird in the House*. Finally, it looks at the total independence we get in *The Diviners*. To finish things off, the essay just pulls everything together, showing the exact evolution of feminist awareness from the very first book to the very last one.

In the middle of the twentieth century, feminist theory blew up in popularity. And honestly, it was needed. The literary world at the time was almost entirely obsessed with male voices. The movement shined a light on the deeply rooted beliefs that always pushed women's stories to the side. Simone de Beauvoir's paradigm of woman as the 'Other' remains exceptionally relevant when dissecting literature where female characters struggle for agency within a culture that establishes the male experience as the universal baseline.

Elaine Showalter built on this by introducing gynocriticism, a concept pushing scholars to look at women as creators of their own unique literary traditions. Adding to the political side of things, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* argued that male dominance is basically a cultural system, and literature either holds it up or breaks it down. On top of that, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* broke down the intense mental toll of the post-war housewife ideal. This toll looks exactly like the quiet misery we see in so many female characters from that time. Combined, these concepts offer a strong way to understand Laurence's detailed characters.

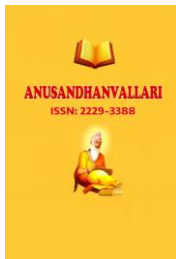
Feminism in Margaret Laurence's Fiction

Within the Canadian literary scene, Margaret Laurence holds a massive amount of respect. Even though she avoided labeling herself a political feminist early on, her deep dive into the female mind made her work absolutely crucial for feminist scholars. People who study books love her because she refused to write flat, perfectly good female characters. Instead, the women she writes are difficult, they contradict themselves, and they feel very real.

When academics write about *The Stone Angel*, they usually zero in on Hagar Shipley's extreme pride and how isolated she gets because she buys into the old idea that you shouldn't show emotion. Over in *A Jest of God*, folks focus on Rachel Cameron. She represents the quiet, hidden struggle of breaking away from a mother who won't let go and a town that demands you act proper.

When looking at *The Fire-Dwellers*, research usually highlights Stacey MacAindra's desperate attempt to mean something outside of her marriage and her kids. Meanwhile, readers often view *A Bird in the House* as a story focused on growing up and remembering. It tracks how young Vanessa MacLeod figures out society's gender rules and immediately starts challenging them. Finally, *The Diviners* gets widely celebrated as Laurence's masterpiece. Academics point to Morag Gunn as the ultimate blueprint for a woman being independent in both her art and her actual life.

Looking at Hagar through a feminist lens shows how sad and ironic her choices really are. She fights so hard against being a quiet, submissive woman. But to do that, she ends up copying the absolute worst traits of the men around her. So she basically turns herself into a brick wall. You know that stone angel statue from the title? That basically sums her up perfectly. Stuck in place, totally ignoring the real world, and shutting everybody out. The awful irony is how she literally destroys herself in the name of freedom. She totally misses the fact that she's acting exactly like the awful men she hates. Her big breakthrough doesn't even happen until she's literally dying. She finally realizes the damage of her emotional walls, confessing, "I carried my chains within me, and they



spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 292). This just goes to show how disastrous it can be to refuse any sort of vulnerability. The book traces her really hard journey from being someone who just stays quiet and does what she's told, to someone who finally figures out what she needs. Deciding to finally pack her bags and haul her mother out of town - strictly on her own terms - is a monumental step in claiming her own life. Emboldened by her escape, she declares,

"Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen... I will be light and straight as any feather. The wind will bear me, and I will drift and settle" (Laurence, *A Jest of God* 201).

It clearly demonstrates that she refuses to remain a passive victim anymore. In Laurence's writing, this marks a huge turning point for women finally finding a voice. By 1969, *The Fire-Dwellers* switches things up to look at Rachel's sister, Stacey MacAindra. Stacey lives out in the suburbs, dealing with what everyone calls the perfect middle-class life. On paper, she won the lottery. She checked off the whole list: the husband, the kids, the pretty house. But having all those things doesn't stop her from feeling totally alone, constantly stressed, and just deeply unhappy.

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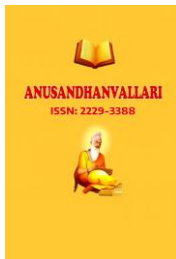
"what goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside" (Laurence, *The Fire-Dwellers* 45).

Everyone expects Stacey to be the perfectly patient mom and the super helpful wife, leaving zero time or energy for her to just be herself. Her racing, and sometimes really funny, internal thoughts show that she's actually incredibly smart and critical. She is always questioning why these unfair gender roles are forced on her. The book keeps bringing up the idea of fire, basically as a symbol for how chaotic the modern world is and the massive emotional stress Stacey is feeling every single day. She brutally summarizes her total loss of identity, stating,

"I am thirty-nine. I am four children. I am a waistline that is spreading. I am a mind that is going. I am a person who doesn't know who she is" (Laurence, *The Fire-Dwellers* 8).

The really important thing here is that Laurence isn't saying being a mom is bad; Stacey loves her kids fiercely. Instead, the novel targets the societal demand that motherhood must be a woman's one and only defining feature. When the book wraps up, Stacey doesn't just run away from her husband and kids to make some grand point. Instead, she finds her actual power just by accepting herself for who she is. She figures out how to deal with her messy life by seeing her own worth, proving that you can be a strong feminist woman even if you are living a pretty traditional family life. The really important thing here is that Laurence isn't saying being a mom is bad; Stacey loves her kids fiercely. Instead, the novel targets the societal demand that motherhood must be a woman's one and only defining feature. When the book wraps up, Stacey doesn't just run away from her husband and kids to make some grand point. Instead, she finds her actual power just by accepting herself for who she is. She figures out how to deal with her messy life by seeing her own worth, proving that you can be a strong feminist woman even if you are living a pretty traditional family life.

A Bird in the House from 1970 dives into how feminist ideas actually start forming in the first place, told through the eyes of a young girl named Vanessa MacLeod. It's written as a bunch of short stories that link together, kind of sketching out the early days of a girl who will grow up to be a writer. Vanessa is super observant. She spends a ton of time just watching the adults around her, especially her really demanding grandfather and the women who are forced to put up with his bossy behavior.



Looking at everything through Vanessa's perspective offers a brutally honest view of how outdated, patriarchal family rules are enforced and passed down. She spends countless hours simply observing the quiet, degrading compromises forced upon the women around her. *A Bird in the House* from 1970 dives into how feminist ideas actually start forming in the first place, told through the eyes of a young girl named Vanessa MacLeod. It's written as a bunch of short stories that link together, kind of sketching out the early days of a girl who will grow up to be a writer. Vanessa is super observant. She spends a ton of time just watching the adults around her, especially her really demanding grandfather and the women who are forced to put up with his bossy behavior. Looking at everything through Vanessa's perspective offers a brutally honest view of how outdated, patriarchal family rules are enforced and passed down. She spends countless hours simply observing the quiet, degrading compromises forced upon the women around her:

"On these occasions, my mother always said, 'Do you think we are teaching the child deception?' And Aunt Edna always replied, 'No, just self-preservation'" (Laurence, *A Bird in the House* 65).

That slowly cements her decision to completely reject that kind of life. The whole image of a bird trapped inside a house works perfectly as a metaphor for Vanessa realizing she is stuck. It really highlights how desperate she is getting for some sort of creative freedom. This specific book matters a lot because it shows the very beginning stages of a woman realizing she's being held down. By looking back and picking apart her childhood memories, Vanessa takes the reins of her own life story. She learns how to question the rules society tried to teach her. That builds the mental groundwork for the total independence we see Laurence's final main character achieve. This specific book matters a lot because it shows the very beginning stages of a woman realizing she's being held down. By looking back and picking apart her childhood memories, Vanessa takes the reins of her own life story. She learns how to question the rules society tried to teach her. That builds the mental groundwork for the total independence we see Laurence's final main character achieve.

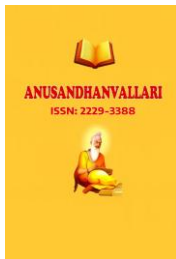
All of Laurence's themes pretty much hit their peak in *The Diviners*, which came out in 1974. Morag Gunn is the totally independent woman that all the previous books were slowly building up to. Juggling life as a single mother and a professional author, Morag intentionally obliterates almost every conventional rule society throws her way. She stops letting terrible men, her boring hometown, and old-fashioned rules tell her who to be. All of Laurence's themes pretty much hit their peak in *The Diviners*, which came out in 1974. Morag Gunn is the totally independent woman that all the previous books were slowly building up to. Juggling life as a single mother and a professional author, Morag intentionally obliterates almost every conventional rule society throws her way. She stops letting terrible men, her boring hometown, and old-fashioned rules tell her who to be. Reflecting on her suffocating first marriage, she notes,

"She was Brooke's wife. That was her occupation. It was not enough. It was like being locked in a room where the air was perfectly sweet but there wasn't quite enough of it" (Laurence, *The Diviners* 140).

Acting like a 'diviner', Morag digs straight down into her memories, pulling apart her family's past and her own brain to figure out who she actually is. She stops playing defense and starts building her own life from scratch. Storytelling becomes the main weapon here. Putting words on paper gives Morag her power back. By writing her own story, she steals back the control that a sexist world usually hides from women. Also, Morag accepts her complicated background, dealing with problems related to being poor and her relationship with Jules Tonnerre, a Métis man. Embracing her status as an independent mother, she proudly asserts,

"I don't need a husband to make me a proper woman, and I don't need a man's name to give my child a life" (Laurence, *The Diviners* 280).

This demonstrates a very advanced and thoughtful approach to understanding who she is. She doesn't try to find a perfect, easy fix for her life problems. Instead, she accepts that real freedom is often confusing and contradictory. Morag stands as the final, fully developed example of female strength in Laurence's novels. Also, Morag accepts



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Evolution of Feminist Consciousness

Looking at all five of these novels together shows a clear path in how Laurence views women becoming independent. Hagar runs entirely on anger, but she doesn't actually understand herself well enough to escape the male-dominated rules. Rachel, on the other hand, actually starts making some real mental progress, figuring out she doesn't just have to sit there and take it. Stacey MacAindra integrates this newfound awareness into the domestic sphere, critically analyzing and surviving the immense pressures of motherhood. Vanessa MacLeod demonstrates that this critical consciousness takes root in childhood through observation and memory. And then there's Morag Gunn. She is the final win: someone who gets total independence, runs her own career, and just accepts that she's a messy, complicated person. Honestly, watching these characters grow up looks a lot like how the actual feminist movement evolved back then. It starts with women just being quietly angry, then they start yelling about how unfair things are, and finally, they just figure out how to stand on their own two feet.

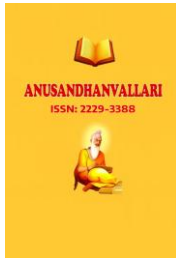
Conclusion

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka books are a massive deal in literature specifically because they don't try to pretend the female experience is simple. By writing characters like Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and Morag, Laurence builds a messy, realistic world where women actually have to fight tooth and nail just to be treated like whole people.

These stories prove that Laurence's main characters aren't just empty symbols. They are active women dealing with real history, culture, and their own mental baggage. Laurence makes it super clear that getting freedom for women is almost never just one huge, explosive moment of rebellion. Most of the time, it's a really slow, hard, and deeply personal journey of throwing out what society taught them and figuring out how to speak up for themselves. Her writing is still a really important look at what it actually takes for a woman to become her true self in a world that often tries to keep women small.

You can clearly trace a path of development in Laurence's writing when it comes to feminist thought. Her characters change from having blind, self-destructive anger to hitting a really smart and vocal self-awareness. The books show that unfair treatment isn't always about obvious violence. It usually sneaks into normal daily routines, family relationships, and what small towns expect from people. Identity is portrayed as something that shifts, built up through memories and personal stories. Being able to speak out - whether through Vanessa's childhood notes or Morag's published books - is shown as the absolute best way to gain independence. Laurence widens the idea of what it means to take feminist action by including personal emotional shifts and just quietly refusing to follow social rules. By making sure her characters were deeply flawed and incredibly real, she completely avoided writing simple, cheesy stories. Instead, she managed to deliver something that feels psychologically true and lasting. Ultimately, looking at her work this way proves why we have to see feminist awareness as something that is constantly moving and changing. By tracking this kind of growth across all of Laurence's books, anyone reading gets a much sharper picture of exactly how female characters in literature grew up and got more complicated over the years.

Later research could really benefit from throwing some newer feminist ideas into the mix, like looking closer at race or nature in her stories. That would probably uncover a lot more about how life really worked in her fictional town. Wrapping things up, Laurence's dedication to just writing women exactly as they are guarantees people will be reading her stuff for a very long time.



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