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Research Papers

Affirmation of Human Life in Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel

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Abstract

The present study examines the theme of affirmation of human life through the character of a ninety years old woman, Hagar Shipley who suffers throughout due to of her personal attributes such as sense of pride, notion of independence and idea of self-respect, but at the same time these attributes keep her affirmative to grapple with her personal demons, and to struggle to provide meaning and purpose to her life through the process of self-examination.

During the life-journey, she remains courageous, independent and self-respecting woman, and fails to achieve a warm, satisfying relationship with anyone within or without family, but the same attributes keep her dynamic and affirmative against the heavy odds of life and upkeep her zeal for human life. At the fag-end of her life she gives more importance to need to rejoice than pride by attaining self-discovery and self-realization. Hagar's life journey moves from spiritual emptiness to salvation, from resistance and revolt to acceptance and adaptation.

Paper

Margaret Laurence, in her novels, presents human life to predict the dilemma of man by planting humanity in all its nakedness bringing the real picture out of the social and environmental context. Laurence places human life in the situation where people respond with vitality. In The Stone Angel, the novelist presents the personal account of the last few years of the ninety years old protagonist, Hagar Shipley. With memory in form of chaotic energy, the old narrator reflexively weaves episodes and events of her past life into the agonizing present one. The novel's structure follows the development process of Hagar's mind and character. In the beginning, Hagar is blind and lifeless like the statue of The Stone Angel in the graveyard of Manawaka. Throughout her life she conceals her emotions to protect her sense of pride and position, and lives in her own world of self-sufficient isolation. She grapples with her personal demons, struggles to provide meaning and purpose to her life through the process of self-examination. At the fag-end of her life, though Hagar's recognition of need to rejoice and her restraining pride are very much personal, yet, at the same time, her situation can be generalized as a description of the situation of a whole generation. According to Patricia Morley, "Hagar Shipley is the first in a series of memorable women….Laurence presents universal concerns in terms of Canadian experience over four generations. She allows us to see into the hearts of her individual characters, their society and ourselves"(Morley, 8). Hagar's life journey moves from spiritual blankness to salvation, from resistance and revolt to acceptance and adaptation.

In the very beginning of the novel, Hagar looks grotesque due to fat and old age, and appears harsh, arrogant, ailing and frightened old woman with a sharp tongue to sting and satire others as well as herself, and her nature is battered by the

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self-willed jolts of her life. Presently, she is nearing her death with almost nothing to look back on with pride. It seems that her life has been governed by her concern of outward appearances and manners, but she is still exceptionally full of zeal for life. Towards the end of the novel, she struggles to maintain her poise, independence and finally her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey towards her self-knowledge. The way Hagar confronts the life situations and problems testifies to the fact that she has formidable strength of both mind and body, and strong sense of independence that flow from both cultural background and personal predilection. "While Hagar's hardness is, in the overall context, largely induced by her milieu and upbringing, the Scottish Presbyterian ethics and the pioneer experience, putting a high premium on courage, independence, 'character', the development of the 'rigidity' isotropy underlines the personal, psychic element in Hagar's obduracy" (Vauthier, 57).

Hagar inherits her personal attributes from the harsh climate of Prairie landscape and stern father, Jason Currie. Throughout her life she remains courageous, independent and self-respecting woman, but at the same time she fails to express feelings and emotions for others, fearing that it will be taken by others as weakness. It is her inflexible pride that contributes to her inability to achieve a warm, satisfying relationship with anyone within or without family, but the same attributes keep her vigorous and affirmative against the heavy odds of life. At times, she wants to reveal her emotions to others, but she finds herself incapable of doing so, as she has been reared to be strong and independent at all times.

Hagar receives sense of pride from her father, Jason Currie who has “pulled himself up by his bootstraps" (Laurence, 7). He takes great pride in the "terribly expensive" statue, which "had been brought from Italy….and was pure white marble” (3). She describes the Stone Angel as "my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty…" (3). Hagar recalls displaying her pride at the age of six when she says: "There was I, strutting the board sidewalk like a pint-sized peacock, resplendent, haughty, hoity-toity, Jason Currie's black-haired daughter" (6). Hagar's obsession with the sense of pride and the idea of independence get revealed when she embarrasses her father by drawing attention to the bugs in the raisin bin and stoically withstands beatings and bruises as punishment from her father for the daring gesture. She refuses to cry before and after the punishment: “I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged” (9). It is her father's stern, strong-willed isolation and failure to communicate his emotions that determine her character and shapes her responses throughout her life. His influence on the young Hagar is manifest at an early age:

I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged He struck and struck and then all at once he threw the ruler down and put his arms around me. He held me so tightly I almost smothered ...I felt caged and panicky and wanted to push him away, but didn't dare. Finally he released me. He looked bewildered, as though he wanted to explain but didn't know the explanation himself. 'You take after me,' he said, as though that made everything clear. 'You've got backbone, I'll give you that'....I did take after him. …God knows he wasn't wrong in that. (9-10)

The word "backbone" makes sense of Hagar's stand for independence years later when she frustrates her father's attempts to make her a dependent angel in his house rather than let her to pursue a career as a teacher out in the world. She remembers the incident: "I jerked my hand away as though I had accidentally set it on a hot stove. He didn't say a word. He turned and went outside…I felt I must pursue him…. But I didn't" (44-45). The father and the daughter steam towards each other like trains on the same track. The father insists on her compliance in a world where women are considered to be non-persona, and their work is subordinated to that of men. But she reduces his harsh father to pleading: "'Hagar,' he said. You'll not go, Hagar.' The only time he ever called me by my name. To this day I couldn't say if it was a question or a command. I didn't argue with him. There never was any use in that. But I went, when I was good and ready, all the same" (49).

Hagar refuses to go by the authority of her father in order to protect her pride and freedom when he asks her not to marry Bram Shipley who is “a common dirt” (48). When Hagar refuses to compromise, her father explains: “there's not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent…it's not done” (49). But Hagar replies: "'It'll be done by me,' I said, drunk with exhilaration at my daring" (49). Even though Hagar marries Bram, her “hoity-toity” (6) attitude prevents her from expressing emotions of love and tenderness towards him. She always keeps distance from him on the emotional plane: “I never let him know. I never spoke aloud---I prided myself on keeping my pride intact” (8). Initially,

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she gets drawn to Bram's casualness and freedom, but soon she realizes that his freedom, more precisely, laziness is what she never needs in her life. Within marriage, Hagar's position is akin to that of a captive. Hagar is feeling like a prisoner in her own habitat, that she is not "free" in spirit; "I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (292). She becomes a slave of her own emotions struggling within. Thus she is a prisoner of her own desires and aspirations, position and pride. Hagar also displays courage to leave Bram for the sake of her children's future life when she finds him averse to familial duties.

Hagar, throughout her life, continues to hide her emotions to protect her sense of pride. When her brother, Dan is on the verge of death, she is asked to play the role of his mother to comfort him, Hagar refuses: "…however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her----it was beyond me" (25). Hagar looks at mother as "the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest"(25). She gives the reason: "I can't. I'm not a bit like her" (25). Hagar is too proud to be her weak mother even for the brother who is very close to death. Another brother registers his protest against her callous attitude by braking all ties and relations with her. Hagar's pride also destroys her relationship with her son, John. One night he brings Arlene home, but she refuses to accommodate her in the house. She realizes later her mistake when both are killed in a car accident. She apologizes: "I didn't mean it, about not bring her here---You could come here in the evenings, I wouldn't say a word" (247). When their dead bodies are placed before her, she is asked by the matron to cry, but she refuses to do so: "Cry. Let yourself. It's the best thing"(242).

Hagar remains emotionless throughout her life. When Bram dies Hagar does not even dare to shed a tear. "But when we'd bury Bram and come home again and lighted lamps for the evening, it was John who cried, not I" (184). In many ways, Hagar's passionless life is identical to that of the Angel; it never sheds a tear, rarely does she. Her inability to express emotion leads to her relentless ignorance of others and their opinions. When her son John dies she does not weep, almost as if she were made of stone. "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (243). Hagar keeps the belief that if she cries, it will damage her pride and make her appear weak. As Brenda Beckman-Long points out, "[h]er opposition is motivated by an attempt to protect the vulnerability of her position in society as a woman. Precisely because she is a woman, part of her self-discovery is that she has had to live 'alone and against' in order to preserve her autonomy in a male-dominated society" (Beckman-Long, 63).

Hagar becomes resentful, moody, childish and angry when her son Marvin and his wife Doris try to help her. She feels that they are trying to take her pride away; the one thing Hagar could not face up to, "I always swore I'd never be a burden" (37). Hagar is averse to be helped: "Let me, alone, leave me be" (31). She replies:" I can manage quite well, thank you go on now for pity's sake" (33). When the couple suggest that they should put her in an old age home, she bluntly declines the suggestion" "I won't to go there….The two of you can move out. Go ahead and move right now" (57). In the hospital, she refuses to take help to drink water from the nurse: "I only defeat myself for not accepting her. I know this----I know very well. But I can't help it---it's my nature….I would drink her daft, and push her hands away, certain I could hold it for her better….I hold it in my hands. There. There. And then"(308).

Despite her negative attributes, Hagar also displays a positive mannerism of commendable courage. She appears rude, blunt and tough, but she is also courageous and strong-willed old woman. It is Hagar's courage and indomitable will that provides momentum to her onwards journey against heavy odds, typical of Prairie landscape, but, on the contrary, it is her pride that is always responsible for creating problems in her life, yet she surmounts the same with a good deal of ferocity. She is so bold that she is afraid of nothing, even she is not afraid of being alone at the time of her son, John's birth, while her husband is away fixing fences: "I was not frightened at all when John was born. I knew I wouldn't die that time. Bram had gone to fix a fence down by the slough. Such mercies aren't often afforded us. I hitched up and drove the buggy into town myself…I wished the drive had been longer, so peaceful and light I was with none to bother me" (122). It is more than conspicuous that Hagar is courageous both physically and mentally. Her struggle to escape death at the age of ninety is the evidence of her courage. Struggle for survival is just another theme symbolic of the Prairie landscape. She painfully endures her journey to Shadow Point just because she would like things to happen her way. Her possession of unbending pride despises weakness

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in every form.

The process of realization in Hagar's life begins as she leaves home with her son, John. She wishes her son to be like Jacob in the Old Testament. But soon she gets disillusioned finding that he is not like that. In Manawaka, she asks her son to fix the fallen statue of the Stone Angel in the cemetery: “I wish he could have looked like Jacob then; wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no”(159). Hagar's second journey into the wilderness begins when she flees to Shadow Point. She realizes that her son, Marvin is her Jacob and she has favoured the wrong person. Though she is determined to survive on her own, she is, in a way, secretly happy to see him. "In my heart I have to admit I'm relived to see him. Yet I despise my gladness. Have I grown so weak I must rejoice at being captured, taken alive?" (252). Hagar journeys into self- realization and eventually accepts the fact that she is no longer a young woman but an old women who needs to be taken care of by others. Hagar also puts her pride aside and comforts her son Marvin: "You've been good to me, always. A better son that John" (304). Although she accepts his help, she does not entirely give up her beliefs. Hagar dies holding on to some pride and feeling defeated by society. Thus, Hagar's journey into self-realization allows her to find her proper place in society. The Stone Angel heralded as triumphant woman's story that relates “the journey through life of a country girl into a wise and heroic adulthood" (MacSween,108).

The novelist employs Biblical imagery and symbolism to present the development of Hagar's character. The Stone Angel chronicles Hagar's life and parallels the Biblical story of Hagar, the Egyptian bondswoman. “In the same fashion that the law binds Hagar to Abram and Sarah, Hagar Shipley is bound by the Currie code of values, the Shipley freedom, and the Manawakana elitist attitude, in addition to her own pride” (Blewett, 36). Hagar and Marvin relationship is similar to the Biblical Hagar's relationship with Sarah's son, Issac. Having never really loved Marvin as her own son, Hagar ignores him and yells at him when he attempts to be helpful. Both Hagars love one son with all their hearts while they ignore the other. Thus, Hagar of The Stone Angel is an archetype of the Biblical Hagar. The way she does the things, speaks words and represents attributes is indicative of the Biblical Hagar. In fact, she is a modernized version of the Biblical Hagar in that people can no longer be bound as slaves in the Western culture, but are governed by either personal or social restraints as Hagar is governed. The virtues of her father contain her from articulating any emotion towards others, which, eventually, spoils all her personal relationships. In the meantime she, like her archetype, performs the wifely duties, but reluctantly engages herself in sexual activity with Bram. As a result she gives birth to a son, Marvin, but never loves him.

The novelist also employs imagery of flower, mirror and water to provide momentum to action in the plot and to develop characters. The development pattern of Hagar's character follows the pattern of imagery. With a view to arrest our attention the novelist fashions these patterns around the images of animals, birds and fishes. Hagar, the nonagenarian woman, is also called old mare. She is shown as crazy for a man who is crazy about horses. Hagar's marriage with Bram stands for a natural urge for autonomy, authority and authenticity that a horse precisely represents. The novelist employs the imagery to represent Hagar's urge of the eternal struggle of human beings against the harsh and hostile forces of nature.

The novelist presents the problem of old age through the character of Hagar, which represents the vital aspect of human life, immaculate till the end of human existence. Through the character of Hagar the novelist also presents the marginalization of elderly people. The diminution of aged people to stereotypes in a way provides a peep into another dominant aspect of human life. The novel highlights the point that the elderly people undergo the rigorous life of indignities and hardships when their bodies betray and memories fail them. Resultantly, they lose their social position and power as human beings. At this critical juncture of life, it is only the indomitable spirit that can provide the elderly people a ray of hope to love others with an essence of righteousness. In this way, the novel traces Hagar's journey from the juvenile imagination of life to an authentic sense of trials and tribulations suffered by elderly people. This also shows the novelist's steadfast faith in the assertion of human life. It is obvious that he prepares human beings to struggle against the anomic forces prevalent in the external environment. They continue to battle against all odds of life until their physical death, but they seldom lose essential love for life and the spirit to go ahead to attain their cherished goal in life. The novelist makes her characters hold on to life as a symbol of humanistic efforts.

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Towards the end of her life, Hagar's body is aged but her spirit is still exceptionally young, tough and unyielding, and struggles for survival and fights against all odds of life on her own: "For when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself…the eyes change least of all" (38). Even at the fag-end of life, she is still acutely conscious of her bodily appearance, she is still concerned about her delight in gratification of her senses and, in fact, she is often greedy for them. She loves colour, the black garden yellow with forsythia, or her lilac silk dress. She praises the food cooked by Doris, though, at times, she compares it against her own culinary skills. She relishes food even at the cost of her digestive system. Hagar says: "I eat well. My appetite is usually very good. I have always believed there could not be much wrong with the person if they eat well" (67).

Eventually, Hagar's admirable qualities prepare her for self-redemption towards the end of the novel. Her salvation begins when the story of her life to Murray Lees and bursts into tears. At that moment, the process rescues her from the constraints that have dominated her life. In the end, she views the tragedies she has visited upon others and herself. Now she comes to realize that life is a blending of opposing forces of holiness and horror, affection and anger, seraph and stone which provides momentum to one's life. Therefore, the realization of Hagar helps us understand her final acceptance of herself as a virtuous person. Thus, Hagar's life journey truly reflects the Prairie sentiment in relation with human life.

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