

Resonation Of Conflict And Trauma In Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel

Ms. X. Amala Steffi^{1*}, Dr. A. Josephine Alangara Betsy²

^{1*}Assistant Professor of English, Research Scholar, Reg. No. 18222214012003, P.G. & Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapati, Tirunelveli-627012. Mail id: steffi.pearlcity@gmail.com

²Supervisor & Assistant Professor of English, P.G. & Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi, Affiliated to Monomania Sundaranar University, Abhishekapati, Tirunelveli-627012. Mail id: alangarabetsy@gmail.com

Abstract

Margaret Laurence's literary work, *The Stone Angel*, transcends the boundaries of a conventional novel, delving into a profound examination of the intricacies of human emotions. This literary masterpiece navigates the universal themes of conflict and trauma, resonating with readers profoundly. The narrative is situated in the fictitious locality of Manawaka and it chronicles the turbulent existence of Hagar Shipley, an aged woman who confronts the complexities of her personal history and the inescapable nature of mortality. Laurence's portrayal of Hagar's internal struggles is characterized by its poignant nature, offering a multifaceted depiction of experiences that effectively underscore the complex interplay between personal trauma and societal expectations. Central to the narrative of *The Stone Angel* is the character of Hagar, an individual in her nineties whose unwavering determination contrasts with her physical vulnerability. The introspective exploration undertaken by the individual allows us to observe the intricate web of traumatic experiences that have profoundly influenced her being. Hagar's life encompasses a range of conflicts that are emblematic of the complexities inherent in the human experience, beginning with her constrained upbringing in a patriarchal society. These challenges persist throughout her life, manifesting in her tumultuous relationship with her husband, Bram, and the strained connections she shares with her sons.

Keywords: Conflict, trauma, distance, relationship, identity.

Full paper

In *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence adeptly captures the essence of Hagar Shipley's life, resulting in a poignant and enduring examination of the human condition. This literary masterpiece navigates the universal themes of conflict and trauma, resonating with readers profoundly. The novel intricately weaves together Hagar's memories and present experiences, revealing the enduring resonance of emotional wounds and the complex interplay between personal history and the present moment. The introspective exploration undertaken by the individual allows us to observe the intricate web of traumatic experiences that have profoundly influenced her being.

Hagar's character is shaped by her upbringing in a society characterized by strong patriarchal norms and it is apparent from the beginning of the novel. Hagar's upbringing instilled in her the expectation of maintaining a passive presence and adhering to societal norms, discouraging her from expressing her opinions. However, her inherently defiant nature consistently clashes with her environment's prevailing values and expectations. The presence of internal dissonance in her life is a result of societal expectations and her inherent inclination towards defiance. This dissonance serves as the underlying cause for the various conflicts that arise throughout her life.

Hagar's choice to wed Bram Shipley, a man of lower social status, can be interpreted as a form of defiance against her father's authority and the established societal conventions governing appropriate unions. Nevertheless, this choice, driven by a sense of rebellion and allure commonly associated with youth, quickly entangles Hagar in a fresh array of societal norms and gender related obligations. In her role as Bram's spouse, she confronts the challenges posed by societal scrutiny, familial disapproval, and the unexpected difficulties that arise in a life that deviates from her initial expectations. The recurring theme in her reflections pertains to the trauma resulting from her decisions made during her youth, which is analyzed through the perspective of gender norms.

Motherhood becomes an additional source of distress for Hagar, exacerbating her existing trauma which is a deep transformative experience for numerous individuals. Hagar finds herself confined within a societal construct that expects a mother to possess qualities such as self-sacrifice, boundless patience, and nurturing abilities despite her lack of readiness for such a role. The woman's tense relationship with her sons, specifically John, serves as a prime example of the internal struggle experienced by a woman who is unable to conform to the societal expectations associated with motherhood fully. The untimely and unfortunate death of John serves to intensify Hagar's feelings of guilt, prompting her to reflect upon her abilities and decisions in her role as a mother.

One of the central challenges faced by Hagar in the novel pertains to her persistent difficulty articulating her vulnerability. Hagar frequently adopts a stoic demeanour due to societal conditioning that associates emotional

expression, particularly in women, with vulnerability. Suppressing one's emotions, a consequence of societal expectations regarding gender, intensifies Hagar's internal psychological wounds, impeding her ability to find comfort or resolution. As Hagar struggles with the inevitable aging process, the societal constructs surrounding older women's gendered perceptions contribute an additional dimension to her emotional distress. In contemporary society, a prevalent tendency exists to associate a woman's value with her youthful appearance and physical attractiveness. Consequently, the natural process of aging can lead to a gradual diminishment of visibility for women. Hagar's actions to establish her identity, assert her presence, and demand recognition during her later stages of life highlight the profound psychological distress resulting from being marginalized and underappreciated.

Hagar engages in introspection in the twilight of her existence, evoking a profound sense of catharsis. The act of recollection, wherein Hagar directly confronts her traumatic experiences, affords her a semblance of emancipation. Although it is not within her power to alter her past, her process of introspection provides valuable insights into the widespread influence of gender norms and their enduring consequences.

In Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel*, the central focus of the narrative revolves around familial relationships. The novel explores the multifaceted nature of familial connections by focusing on the character of Hagar Shipley. It illuminates the intricate dynamics of love, resentment, expectations, and disappointments that shape these relationships. Upon introspection, Hagar's life reveals a prevailing theme of estrangement, wherein familial conflicts propel the narrative and provide readers with a poignant examination of the human condition.

Hagar's familial dynamics have been characterized by persistent conflict since her formative years. The protagonist's father, Jason Currie, is portrayed as a highly accomplished individual who has succeeded through his efforts. He imparts to his daughter a strong feeling of self-worth and a strict adherence to social conventions. The relationship between Hagar and Bram Shipley symbolizes the significant differences in values and perspectives across generations, ultimately leading to Hagar's choice to marry Bram, a man whom her father considers unsuitable. The act of rebellion further establishes her alienation from her father, a source of emotional pain that persists vividly in her recollections even as she advances in years.

The marital union between Hagar and Bram is a compelling illustration of human relationships' inherent complexities and contradictions. Initially, the action can be characterized as defiance and allure; however, it swiftly evolves into a persistent source of contention. The stark contrast between Bram's uncouth demeanour, struggle with alcoholism, and absence of ambition is evident when compared to Hagar's sense of pride and ambitious nature. The presence of discord and the influence of societal judgment exacerbate the division between the individuals, transforming their marital relationship into a contentious arena characterized by resentment and unexpressed grievances.

Hagar's interpersonal dynamics with her two sons, Marvin and John, contribute an additional dimension of intricacy to her experiences of familial alienation. Marvin, the responsible and obedient son, frequently experiences a sense of being overshadowed by John, his younger sibling, who possesses a more energetic and rebellious nature, thereby captivating Hagar's affection. However, it is through her relationship with John that Hagar encounters the most profound sense of alienation. The relationship between Hagar and John is characterized by Hagar's inability to fully embrace John's affection for Arlene, leading to a series of unfortunate events. As a result, Hagar experiences long-lasting anguish and remorse.

Hagar's estrangements are primarily rooted in her challenge with the articulation of her emotions. Hagar frequently experiences a sense of confinement due to her upbringing in an environment that prioritizes stoicism and propriety, discouraging emotional openness. The individual's incapacity to effectively communicate affection, offer apologies, or actively pursue resolution intensifies the familial discord, leading to strained relationships with her relatives. In addition to the external conflicts, Hagar experiences an internal sense of estrangement from her identity. The individual's sense of pride, influenced by societal norms and expectations, frequently hinders her ability to engage in self-reflection and recognize her own imperfections. The internal conflict becomes evident in her interpersonal connections, exacerbating the existing divisions between her and her familial ties.

As Hagar grapples with her impending mortality, the theme of estrangement assumes a heightened significance. The dynamics of her relationship with Marvin, who currently serves as her caregiver, exhibit a pattern of alternating between instances of affection and episodes of animosity. However, during these conflicts, there are instances where reconciliation can be observed. Hagar's recognition of Marvin's unspoken acts of selflessness and her contemplation of her personal history provide a glimmer of optimism for the possibility of reconciliation, even in the later stages of her life.

Hagar experiences neurotic challenges due to her excessive sense of spiritual superiority. Hagar's excessive pride ultimately led to the deterioration of her relationship with her son, John. When John introduced Arlene to his residence for an extended period, Hagar's excessive pride prevented her from allowing the individual to remain, leading her to decline the request. Subsequently, they met their demise in a vehicular collision, prompting Hagar to recognize the potential outcome had she chosen to make concessions, thereby potentially preserving their lives. The individual in question belatedly recognized that her personal sense of pride hindered her ability to prioritize her son's well-being. Following her son's demise, she found herself incapable of displaying any emotional responses.

The significance of the title *The Stone Angel* becomes evident in this context. Similar to the immovable and emotionless nature of the stone angel, Hagar exhibited an inability to produce even a solitary tear. She remained motionless, resembling a solid block of ice. This evokes a connection to the literary work “No Tears” by Alexander Pushkin. The poem possesses an aesthetically pleasing and expressive quality. The persona depicted in the poem assumes the role of a passionate individual who becomes cognizant of the demise of their cherished companion. He discusses the demise of his romantic partner without displaying any signs of emotional distress. Upon receiving the news of his beloved’s demise, he found himself devoid of any emotional response. The messenger delivered the news of her demise, and he received it with a profound emotional impact. The individual reflects upon their previous experiences shared with her. He cannot shed tears for her. Hagar, too, receives the news of death with a stoic demeanour.

Furthermore, she does not express sorrow over the loss of her son. In this analysis, we draw a parallel between the characters of the lover and Hagar, establishing a connection to the stone angel. Despite being afflicted with a severe illness and advised to remain confined to her bed, Hagar continues to exhibit the same unwavering sense of pride that has characterized her throughout her life. When a nurse encounters a patient attempting to navigate to the bathroom independently, she endeavours to assist. Hagar in *The Stone Angel* consistently engages in introspection regarding her personal experiences and sense of self-worth, culminating in her succinctly expressing her thoughts as follows:

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains With me and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, My two, my dead. Dead by your hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years. (292)

This is a critical statement in understanding Hagar’s character at the end since this fully reveals how Hagar sees her life. Hagar discovers that she has never been able to be joyful due to her pride. Her father’s pride is evident right from the Stone Angel that adorns his wife’s grave to the inheritance he leaves for his daughter. Hagar inherits this pride from an early age. Hagar grew up rebellious, stubborn, and crotchety. She recollects exhibiting her pride from an early age. Indeed, pride is a prison for Hagar, but through her inner quest, she overcomes her pride and finally discovers her real identity. When Hagar’s elder son was born, her father did not go to see him. Ironically, Hagar also felt that Marvin was not really her son, her reasoning was not dissimilar to his. Her upbringing made her believe that her family and relatives were superior to others. After her marriage, she encounters some economic difficulties. She remembers in *The Stone Angel*:

Marvin, the day he started school, wearing a sailor suit and a face blank as water. He hated that navy – blue suit for most of the other boys wore overalls, I soon gave up trying to dress him decently and let him wear overalls too Bram’s daughter used to give me the overall their boy had grown out of - How it galled me” (69).

Hagar’s perceptions of her son and her husband were influenced strongly by her pride. She ignores Marvin, her elder son’s good qualities, because she dislikes his resemblance to Bram’s family. She thinks she is brilliant and cleverer than her husband. Hagar almost felt like Marvin was not her son, even though young Marvin attempts to please her, because he is not a quick thinker like her. However, John is Hagar’s favourite son because she thinks he takes after her father. He is quick to learn and is better spoken than Bram and Marvin. He exhibits signs of the same family pride. He is quick-tempered and drunk. She ignores this fact. When John is getting ready to leave Manawaka, Hagar’s pride once again prevents her from expressing herself properly.

Silence is another prison for Hagar and a product of her pride. When Marvin leaves her to go to war Hagar does not know what to say to him. Hagar is unable to accept John’s death. She felt petrified and never wept at all. Just as she had done at the death of both her brothers and her father, Hagar remained stone-faced at the death of Bram. Simone Vauthier asserts:

While Hagar’s hardness is, in the overall context, largely induced by her milieu and upbringing, the Scottish Presbyterian ethic 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. (57) The initial and concluding sections of the novel hold considerable significance. The narrative commences with the introduction of the Stone Angel symbol, which is a significant representation of the pride exhibited by the Curie family. Hagar’s sense of pride becomes evident from the outset of the novel. The initial mention of this phenomenon is evident in the novel’s second sentence. Hagar characterizes the eponymous angel as a symbol of her mother’s legacy, acquired by her father with a sense of arrogance to commemorate her remains and assert his familial lineage. However, Hagar asserts that the stone angel serves as a representation of immobility. She had no desire to embody such an unyielding nature. The individual consistently harboured a desire for autonomy and takes great pride in her self-sufficient disposition.

However, in the final analysis, Hagar expresses a deep yearning for mere existence. Hagar comes to acknowledge that pride is an essential component of her character. The individual in question acknowledges this realization and characterizes herself as being as unyielding as marble. Furthermore, she astutely observes that the sole means of attaining solace in our existence lies in the instinctual drive for survival. Hagar’s conception of freedom entails the capacity to resist external influences and maintain a state of complete self-sufficiency. However, Hagar’s sense of pride hinders her ability to fully embrace her true freedom. Additionally, her self-reliance, crucial for her survival, becomes inflexible in nature.

The Canadian landscape, characterized by expansive prairies and formidable cliffs, serves as a poignant reflection of the tumultuous nature of Hagar's life. Like the topography characterized by its roughness and severity, Hagar's expedition is replete with obstacles. The landscape assumes a distinct role as a character, serving as a silent observer of Hagar's traumas and conflicts. Thus, *The Stone Angel* is a profound exploration of the intricacies of the human psyche, delving into the profound traumas and conflicts that shape our very being. Although the narrative is grounded in a particular temporal and spatial context, its themes are universal. Individuals universally encounter both internal and external conflicts throughout their lives, and it is frequently observed that past traumas significantly influence their current circumstances and future trajectories.

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