

# Role of Women in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*

K. Madhumitha,  
M.Phil Research Scholar,  
Bharathiyar Arts and Science College (W),Deviyakurichi.

## Abstract:

*The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* were the Manawaka Novels of Margaret Laurence. In all her works the major role was played by her heroines. Hagar is the protagonist of the novel *The Stone Angel*. She is so pride and she feels ashamed to show emotion. Because of this reason, she commits mistake and at last she realises all her mistakes which she committed in her life. In the same way, Rachel in *A Jest of God* ruins her own life by having affair with Nick. Only at some stage of her life, she realises her mistake and begins to live a new life.

**Key words:** Pride, survival, freedom, realisation, marriage

Margaret Laurence is one of the famous and most respected writers in Canada. Naturally she is the most popular writer in Canada. She is most famous for her Manawaka series which includes *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), and *The Diviners* (1974). She is a genius whose ability extends across the limits of nature, culture and genre. *The Stone Angel* is one of the novel which tells about freedom and survival. It is the first novel of her Manawaka series. Lina L. Richards comments about *The Stone Angel* in his *Strength Without Beauty*. He calls it as a disturbing book. The novel is about Hagar Shipley who is a protagonist. Whole novel is a flashback which explains the memories of Hagar whose age was 90 at the time of presenting the novel. She brings back the memories of her childhood, her marriage and her struggle in life. Thus the novel explains the characteristics of the main character Hagar. Hagar is a woman who was so proud in nature. She lost her mother during her childhood days and so she was brought up by her father, who was so pride. It is evident that from her father she inherited the pride nature. Being a woman her character cannot be compared with another woman instead of that her character was compared with a male character Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Hagar is a type of woman who refuses to show any sort of feelings on others. Even she hates others who have the character of showing love towards others. She never develops any kind of intimacy towards her family and friends. An article, "Biblical archetypes of *The Stone Angel*" observes,

The Currie virtue keeps Hagar from expressing any outward form of emotion which ultimately limits or ruins the majority of her relationships including her marriage with Brampton Shipley. Hagar's freedom is limited by the conflicting influences internal versus external in her own life. (Kanitha 108)

*A Jest of God* is the second novel in the series of her Manawaka novels. Margaret Laurence in her novels focuses on New Woman. She portrays her woman as an independent, intelligent, confident and assertive person. The themes of the novel are survival and freedom. They give formation to the structure of the novel. Rachel in *A Jest of God* is a middle aging school teacher in Manawaka. She returns to Manawaka after the death of her father, Niall Cameron. She feels that God did not have any concern for her. She is leading a very dull life even though she lives in a comfortable and pleasant flat with her mother, May Cameron. May Cameron is a best example for the fact that an elderly woman control others by knowing the secret that the young people always need elder women's help. He even did not enjoy any sort of happiness in teaching for school children. Though she is a school teacher, she did not have any close friends or relatives. This is evident for the fact that she is leading a dull life.

Margaret Laurence is notable for her heroines in her novels. Her heroines are different from others. They cannot be compared with other heroines. For example her heroine Hagar in *The Stone Angel* cannot be compared with other heroines instead she can be compared with Okonkwo, the male character in *Things Fall Apart*. Both the women named Hagar and Rachel lead their life according to their wishes. At some point of time, they realised their mistake and they started a new life. Hagar is a woman who feels ashamed to show feelings. She even hates her mother for showing emotions towards her husband and her children. When she was a young child, she lost her mother and she was brought up by her father. It is from her father she learned the habit of being pride. Due to her pride her hatred towards showing emotions gets increased and she is portrayed throughout the novel as a proud woman. It is quite evident by some instances in the novel. She even refuses to cry for the death of her beloved son. She has been transformed into stone. Even for the death of her husband, she never cries but instead of that she tells that the man who was dead was none other than her brother. It can be compared with a character named Abram in *Genesis 12: 18,19* in which he says that Sarah was his sister. But there is a difference between these two characters which is a lie Abram says due to fear, but Hagar tells the lie due to her pride and because of her inability in showing tenderness. According to her, showing tenderness towards others is an act of cowardice. Hagar has to understand that she is a woman and she has to play her roles as sister, wife, and mother in relation to the male characters. She has to realise her mistake before her death. At present condition of the novel, she recollects her past memories in which she says that, she was the sole reason for the death of her husband and son. She blames herself that the reason for their death is her refusal to show love on them. It is evident that only when Hagar realises all her mistakes, she is free to die.

Rachel in *A Jest of God* always use to have a feeling that she got failure in her life. She herself imagined that she is not leading a decent life because she did not find any dignity in her life. Rachel is unmarried. Only during her age of thirty four, she decided not to be the spinster for her whole life. She feels isolated because she imagines that she is not so beautiful, she is not attractive. Sometimes she refers herself as a thin giant. Rachel feels some hatred towards her sister Stacey. She always compares herself with her sister. Stacey got married and she is having four children. This is the main reason for Rachel's hatred towards her sister. Rachel lost her father when she was young. So in the age of twenty she had a responsibility for looking after her mother and so she decided to move to a place called Manawaka, where she joined as a school teacher and started teaching. Rachel has a desire like every woman has. She wants to have children. Because of that desire she always used to have a soft corner for James Doherty, who is one of her class students. She is very affectionate towards James. She behaves like a surrogate mother for James. But she wants to hide her feelings because she belongs to a conservative family of Manawaka town. This is the only reason that she tries to escape from the society. Escaping from the society alone will be her dream. But she worries

about her mother's reaction towards her attitude. Rachel's mother brought up her daughter in a strict way which leads Rachel to hide all her secrets from her mother.

In the course of time, Rachel had a short time affair with Nick which brought up a huge change in her life. Nick is her former schoolmate. He is a teacher working in Winnipeg. He has come to his father's farm which is nearby Manawaka. There he happened to meet Rachel which leads to their affair. Rachel was longing for love because of the restricted life she is leading. She starts her relationship with Nick which leads her opportunity to set free life without having control from her mother. As soon as she started her relationship with Nick, her attitude towards her mother gets changed. But her mother did not like her relationship with Nick because she feels that Nick was inferior to them as he was a milkman's son. But Rachel was stubborn in her decision and also she started telling lies to her mother. She did not allow her mother to interfere in their matter. The relationship between Nick and Rachel becomes stronger and they had urge to have children. This idea mainly gets up in Rachel's mind. She says, "If I had a child I would like it to be yours" (142). But later Nick started to move away from Rachel. When she expresses her desire to have children, he shows her a photo which is his own childhood photo but Rachel misunderstood it as Nick's son photo. Rachel worries about her pregnancy when he moves away from her. She feels she was left alone. When Rachel comes to know about her pregnancy, she first worries about her mother's reaction towards her. She feels sad about her mother by thinking how she was ashamed because of her daughter's pregnancy before marriage. Later Rachel realized her mistake and she decide to spend her life as per the rules of the society. But she has a doubt whether to accept the child or to reject the child. She decided to abort her child but she did not find anyone to help her to abort the child. She feels alone without anyone's help. She also thinks that she cannot bring up the child which is eighteen years responsibility without society's help. At last she decided that she cannot continue with her pregnancy. "I can't bear it, that's all. It is not to be born. I can't face it. I can't face them"(142). So she herself decided to take sleeping tablets by mixing it with whiskey. But after taking one tablet she cannot continue it. So she throws it away and decided to continue the pregnancy against the society.

Rachel gradually feels some changes in her body as well as in her character. She started gaining confidence and tried to stand in her own leg without depending on her mother. She even comes out of her mother's control and leads her life. But even though she gets some changes in her confidence she denies telling the truth about the child. She says that she is not pregnant but the one which is inside her uterus is tumour and it can be removed by operation. At last in Winnipeg hospital, the tumour is removed which breaks the connection between Rachel and Nick. Rachel decides to move from Winnipeg to Vancouver where she got a teaching job. But her mother proclaims to her decision but she moves according to her wish without considering the control of her mother. At last her mother accompanies her to the new place. Rachel's decision to move to another place shows that she become individual and also she tries to create her own identity. Laurence explains her woman character as an independent girl is evident through the portrayal of Rachel. At last she became independent and move away from the control of her mother.

Through these two novels we can able to understand the character of Margaret Laurence heroines. She always presents her heroines as self assertive woman with braveness. In all her novels, women were so adamant in their characters. She also presents her heroines in such a way that they realise their mistakes at some circumstances and they begin their new life by realising the mistakes committed by them. Laurence clearly presents her novels with the glimpses of women.

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