

An Ever-Ending Propulsion of Psychological Realism in Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Psychological realism is considered by many as physiological fiction that often investigates the emotional, spiritual, and psychological aspects of the leading character under whose influence the entire story or novel is carried on many a time. The role of these three elements is always crucial in analyzing the character, yet the reader connects himself or herself comfortably with the two, whereas the singled-out aspect of 'psychological' is always a tough nut to crack. The main characters in these stories are often men and women who are facing difficulties in making their choices or are suffering from a specific thing they have done. For example, a book about a criminal who spends the novel thinking about why he is murdered, stealing something, etc. Margaret Lawrence's *The stone angel* is best known for its lucid presentation of all the above-mentioned traits. The author's narrative brilliance provides a refreshing experience to every reader across the ages, periods, and places. It talks about contemporary life and how rigidity and stubbornness influence an individual's role in the familial or social bonding that is observed in every society. The novel is still relevant for the study as it carries psychological realism and its significance in comprehending or assessing a person for one's contribution to family or society.

Key Words: Psychological realism, Narrative, characterization, self-righteousness, social spirit.

Introduction:

In fiction, psychological realism centres usually on a single character though not in every fictional work. It is a character-impelled approach that focuses on the motivations which induce the character's actions and is often perceived in literary studies. This study examines the psychological reality of a 90-year-old woman, who as the leading role of the story, tries to

adjust herself with the life offerings after a series of heart-breaking losses. The novel's themes of social class pride and prejudice return, when her eldest son, gets her into a situation where she is reminiscent of her past that is full of ups and downs. This happened so because of beloved younger son's demise. The author seeks to instil a sense of hope and determination in the reader's psyche through the adversities that protagonist undergoes in dealing with her life. This as a focal point, the author Margaret Lawrence hopes to consolidate a sense of well-being in the minds of the readers.

Margaret Laurence's debut novel *The Stone Angel* (1964), presents the story of Hagar Shipley, an old woman in her nineties, who recollects many incidents of her unrivalled life, with much ease. Her life isn't like anyone else' of her age group who can't remember things in the later years of their lives. As a self-righteous aged woman, she behaves in her own way. She is the leading character by many ways in this novel and ever since her childhood she maintains to be an obdurate and adamant woman. Unyielding in her convictions, she talks about her past, where she is so clear about her present and future plans as a young woman of twenty-six years. She is both caring and self-centred while also craving for independence. Along with the characterisation of Shipley, understanding of certain elements of psychological realism benefits every reader to explore further about the novel's narrative in a better way. S.Udhayakumar in his article "A Thematic Analysis in The Novel *The Stone Angel*" rightly comments about Shipley that

She opens her past to the people whoever she meets during the last three weeks. She reveals her life's incident like the Mariner in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" who tells his tragic incident happened during the dangerous voyage to everyone he meets. The similar nature of Mariner and Hagar of being pride has been the reason for their troubles. (Udhayakumar, 2022, pp. 9-13)

It is true that she meets many during those three weeks in her elder son's house and shares the saddest moments of her life. These meetings with others too fail her in providing complete satisfaction. Her condition is quite similar to that of the mariner in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Her pride in revealing about her past actions, become a source for her deliberate handling of her present life. Though her past uncover the troubles and hardships she faced, yet she prefers to take the positive side of them and ready to dictate her own life even in the present situation by recalling the past experiences. It is not just the ability of the protagonist that matters, it is also the uncompromised spirit that keeps her away from all the distracting forces

of her life. Her life is quite identical to that of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, who ignores all the external forces that challenge the way she lives.

But I'm glad you're in good spirits, and are hunting bears, and working, and interested. Shtcherbatsky told me another story—he met you—that you were in such a depressed state, talking of nothing but death.... (Tolstoy, 1998, pp. 396)

As a literary genre, psychological fiction (called by some as psychological realism) focuses on the development and motivation of the character by examining the emotional, spiritual, and mental conditions of its protagonists. The author succeeds in presenting this by exploring and explaining the character's inner feelings and thoughts through his or her narrative form, i.e. stream of consciousness and flashbacks. The narrative style of Lawrence focuses on the character's motivations behind the way she responds to everything in her life also helping move the storyline along and provides the required base for the entire narration. Jie Chen's article on "Research on Henry James and His Psychological Realism Novels" describes the basic factors that determine psychological realism in the fiction in the following way.

On the basis of strictly following the objective reality of the external world, it strengthens the character's psychological portrayal, and through detailed analysis of the character's psychology, it reflects the reality of the evolution of social spirit.....first, although the psychological activities of the characters are used as the framework, and the mental changes and development of the protagonist are used as the main narrative clues and structural methods.....it focuses on revealing the mentality of the characters and at the same time expressing the emotion of the characters, he also pays attention to the story and supports the psychological process of the characters. (Chen, 2022, pp. 73-81)

As a matter of fact, Lawrence has achieved success in the revealing mentality of the character and at the same time disclosing the emotions of the character. Here also Lawrence's character is similar to Winterbourne of Henry James' novel *Daisy Miller*. In James' novel the character expects reassurance from other when she got wounded mentally. She thinks she is a very approachable woman, but in the real sense, she is a proud, rude, and elusive woman, like the protagonist in Lawrence's novel.

Research Questions:

1. Has the aspect of 'mentality' of the main character contributed to the narration?
2. Are the emotions exhibited by the protagonist close to reality or not?

Shipley's Mentality as Driving Force to the Narration:

Hagar is the daughter of a successful businessman. She lost her mother at an early age and lives with a single parent. She chooses to go by her own decisions many a time that include her marriage. But her father dislikes the marriage proposal forwarded, because he does not like his daughter getting married to a lower-class man. "The evening I told Father I was bound on marrying Bram Shipley, he was working late in the store, I recall, and he leaned across the counter and smiled. "I'm busy. No time for your jokes now." "It's not a joke. He's asked me to marry him, and I mean to."(The Stone Angel, p.47)

The absence of support from her father causes great economic hardship during her early married life. She is also not happy with her husband Bram Shipley. Her life is devoid of joy and love because of her mentality where she seeks excessive pride that is also her father's trait. She lacks sensitivity like her father. Her childhood as the daughter of a rich man makes her rebellious in nature, Hagar as a young woman too fights a battle for independence.

Another trait that Hagar naturally receives from her father is poor communication skills. She is unable to express her feelings because as a motherless child and raised by her father, never gets an opportunity to convey what she wants convincingly. Mothers play an important role in socializing and raising their daughters, set themselves as role models for their daughters. Hagar misses an opportunity to pick up something from her mother. As a child she has learned imitating her father's behaviours and never understands the importance of being social. Hagar's mentality is much like father whose overpowering influence is there on his wife earlier and daughter later.

Another instance to understand her mentality is the marriage proposal episode where Hagar and Brampton Shipley meet one another at a party organised by her father. Brampton has danced twice with Hagar during the party, and he has approached in her in an unusual way, which she liked immediately. "I, mortified beyond words, couldn't look at him except daintily. But when he asked me for another dance, I danced with him." (TSA, p.47) These lines reveal that she likes that company of the people who are a bit aggressive yet loving. They also convey that the protagonist is unhesitant to mingle with like-minded people.

Hagar gives birth to two sons and she is more affectionate towards her younger son. Moreover, she considers strong reasons for her way of treatment of both her sons. Though not the same way she treats both, but she is convinced with her own approach towards parenting. She doesn't even repent for what she is doing in their case. "I never minded for myself. It was on the boys'

account I cared. Not so much Marvin, for he was a Shipley through and through. John was the one who should have gone to college. But Jason Currie never saw my second son or knew at all that the sort of boy he'd wanted had waited a generation to appear." (TSA, p.66)

There was an incident where John Shipley flirts with a girl Arlene Simmons against the wish of Hagar. Though the girl is from a decent family, Hagar is not ready to accept her as a family member. She even gets irritated by the attitude and approach of John towards his lady love. She doubts that her younger son is going on the line of her husband in having relationships with women, which she doesn't like to see in anyone's case. Whatsoever the bonding she had with her younger son, the injustice done to any woman is in the good books of Hagar. Such things irk her a lot as she feels that a bold woman never falls for such people.

Marry? By Christ, no. She'd (Arlene Simmons) never marry a Shipley. It tickles her to neck with one, that's all." "Don't talk like that," I snapped. "Don't ever let me hear you speak like that again, John. In any case, she's not the sort of girl for you. She's bold and —" "Bold? Her? She's a rabbit, a little furry rabbit." "You like her, then?" "Are you kidding? I'd lay her if I got the chance, that's all." "You're talking just like your father, " I said. "The same coarse way. I wish you wouldn't. You're not a bit like him. (TSA, p.161)

As the novel unfolds the story of Hagar with the beginning using a flashback technique and introducing her as an aged woman of ninety, one can anticipate seeing what goes through to this old woman and why she is in the woods? Is she the same as any other woman of her age or different? In what way she is different, in terms of her mentality, is the focal point of this paper. The first few pages talk about her disliking of her elder son and his family. This may be the result of her imaginative worry that Doris will take the control of the house, and she feels that she will be thrown out of her own house.

How it irks me to have to take her hand, allow her to pull my dress over my head, undo my corsets and strip them off me, and have her see my blue veined swollen flesh and the hairy triangle that still proclaims with lunatic insistence a non-existent womanhood. (TSA, p.77)

Hagar is being helped into her nightclothes by Doris and is thoroughly annoyed that she has to be seen naked by her daughter-in-law. Hagar finds her elderly body ugly and is ashamed to have anyone see it. Her body conflicts with her idealized image of herself, and for anybody to see her at less than her best is offensive to her pride. She is also Hagar's daughter-in-law, Doris, is helping her put on her clothes and she is enraged that she has to be nude in front of her. Hagar despises her aging appearance and is embarrassed to let others see it. Her idealized view

of herself contradicts her physique, and anybody who sees her at less than her finest is an insult to her self-esteem. After learning that she would be placed in a nursing home, she now feels more vulnerable than she has in the past.

Psychological Reality and Emotional Outburst as a Recurrent Episode:

Hagar, the irascible mother of Marvin and Doris, lives with her elder son Marvin and his wife at their house since she is too unwell to care of herself. Her voice is quite powerful, yet there is an inner feeling that her life has been in jeopardy. She's sarcastic, unpleasant lady who doesn't want to give her son or daughter-in-law any credit for their contribution to her comfort. "I can't say it. Now, at last, it becomes impossible for me to mouth the words—*I'm fine*. I won't say anything. It's about time I learned to keep my mouth shut. But I don't. I can hear myself saying something, and it astounds me." (TSA, p.303)

The continuous efforts of Hagar to react vociferously about her mental state are often suppressed by something which is unknown to her, and she is quite surprised by the element that is restricting her from expressing what she wants to. There is this contrasting change in her exhibition of discontent as she used to yell at others when they annoyed her with their acts and words. Is it the one happening to her because of ageing, or she has no other choice than compromising herself to go with the tide. She introspects and speculates on these things more in the company of her elder son's family.

Hagar's name appears in the novel so frequently (almost 71 times in the entire novel) as the focus is very much on her and the narration is not shifted to any other person. The author is so clear in her approach that at every point in this novel the memories, that have moulded Hagar's existence, are given importance and such technique is seen in the novels where 'stream of consciousness' is applied for narrating the story. Hagar's loneliness originates mostly from her own self-inflicted wounds, which caused her great misery and even lead her towards loneliness. That she is so isolated from others is due to her disdain, rigidness, and refusal to see things from others' perspectives.

Elizabeth saw what he was doing, and at the first convenient pause, turned to him with an arch smile, and said: 'You mean to frighten me, Mr Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? I will not be alarmed though your sister DOES play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me. (Strange and Austen, 1998, p.218)

Hagar's journey with emotions is a roller coaster; she is fearless and courageous right from her childhood. She is not frightened of her father even at the time of his aggression. In general, any child would get scared of speaking against their father in times of intense furious moments. However, Hagar is neither panic nor terrified by the whole episode as she just expresses herself that nothing would happen. The following lines are the words of Hagar, when there was a heated conversation between her and father, which convey the intimidation of her father in disproving her desire to become a teacher. She expresses her wish to join as a teacher in a school in South Wachakwa, to which Brampton reacts in a different way. It is one instance where she suppresses her emotions though she is very much agitated and annoyed.

You think I'd allow you to go to South Wachakwa and board with God knows who? You think I'd let you go to the kind of dances they have there, and let all the farm boys paw you?"Standing there rigidly on the bottom step, buttoned and armoured in my long dark green, I glared at him. "You think I'd allow that? What do you think of me?"He held tightly to the newel post, his hands working at the smooth golden wood."You know nothing," he said in an almost inaudible voice. Men have terrible thoughts. (TSA, p.44)

In another instance, Hagar just replicates her father when dealing a serious matter with her younger son John. When John introduces his partner, her reaction is similar to her father who discarded her decision vehemently. As her father is too possessive by nature, she too reacts in the same way. She is also overprotective in the case of her younger son and she can't tolerate the indiscipline and unethical practices of him. Here John inherits these qualities of his father, much to the disliking of his mother. This episode between the mother and her son also gives the readers a glimpse of the psychological reality that exists in every household. Following lines are indicative of Hagar's psyche.

John — you'll not marry her? "If I do, it's my concern. There's no point in discussing it." "There is," I insisted. "There is so. You don't think I'd understand — is that it? How can I, unless you tell me? Don't you think I care how you feel, or what happens to you? Oh, someday you'll see. When people are young, they think they're the only ones who can understand anything. What do you know of it? What did she know of it, making sly digs at your father that way? (TSA, p.188)

It is common phenomenon that when individual becomes old, he or she leaves pride and have a steep desire to live with children, grandchildren, and family members. Contrary to this Hagar wants to live in the woods and goes far away from the family. She has full pride in executing

her decisions even at the age of ninety. She justifies the possession of her pride at all the phases of her life, be it as a daughter, as a wife and even as a mother. She claims all the time that her thinking is quite right, and she is moving ahead in the right direction. She never checks with others about her approach or plans regarding her life. She even feels nobody can take away those years where she lived every moment with pride, and she has no regrets whatsoever.

Hagar refuses to compromise with something that shaped the outcome of her life as well as the lives of those around her. She lacks love and the unsuccessful relationships are the result of her arrogance and stubbornness. Her inflated sense of self-importance ruined her relationships with her family members, including her father, brother, and spouse. Her younger son John is met with an accident for which Hagar contributes indirectly. The frustration created in the mind of her younger son resulted in broken ties among family members. Stubbornness is another factor that lead to the breakdown of her marriage, Marvin's dissatisfaction, and her own death. The consequences of her over-the-top pride disabled her to convey love or affection towards people she cared about. She inherits her father's sense of self-assuredness from a very young age and she never exhibits emotions openly. This can be seen as interior monologue by every other person who tries to read Hagar's life.

Conclusion:

To sum up, carrying emotions and strong feelings throughout the life is seen as burdensome in the case of some individuals whereas others never even realize that all the sorrows are because of the untimely outbursts of emotions in the life. The psychological response to an incident or an event may cause happiness or sadness depending on the contexts. In Hagar's case both are present and such detailed representation only adds value to author's narration. *Psychological Realism in 19th Century Fiction: Studies in Turgenev, Tolstoy, Eliot and Brontë* by Debashish Sen (2020) admits the truth about fiction as a presenter of realism or realistic things that happen in one's life. The introductory chapter "Introduction to Psychological Realism" rightly claims about the realistic fiction that

No work of realistic fiction can be drawn from thin air, meaning, that realistic fiction (by the very definition of being 'realistic') must be drawn in some way or the other from real-life experiences. And yes, the fact that these experiences may sometime be the ones that are played out in the imagination of a 'real' person (the author) makes them no less realistic – they're after

all the products of the mind of another person, carrying to us thoughts, ideas and feelings that wouldn't be known to us otherwise. (Debashish Sen, 2020, p.9)

Lawrence's style of writing draws attention of the readers towards the real-life experiences of Hagar Shipley. The author guides everyone to look at the life of Hagar right from her childhood to her old age. The novel moves from present to past and again from past to present using flashback feature, which is also one of the aspects of psychological realism. The experiences that protagonist goes through may not be identical with that of a reader, in his or her life. However, they are not far away from their imagination and quickly get the consent of their possibilities. Sen affirms that 'after all they (feelings, thoughts and ideas) are the products of the mind of another person, here none other Hagar, herself. She speaks of her mind, attitude and opinion on many occasions to let the reader know her thought process.

The fact is that Hagar is afraid of many things. She is afraid of giving too much freedom to others to act upon her and this causes her a lot of pain. She discloses many such incidents where she is assisted by others against her wish. In one of the episodes, where a nurse in the hospital helps her from the bathroom, as a bewildered woman she says "oh, I hate being helped: my voice is pettish and doesn't resemble at all, the fury inside me. I've always done things for myself. Have not you ever a given hand to anyone in your time?" As a conceited woman Hagar doesn't want to surrender to the realities, inconveniences and adjustments of 'aging and dying'. She confronts the trauma of diminished health with courage. She is compelled to understand who she really is. Her life is fully controlled by her self-centeredness. In that way *The Stone Angel* is a realistic journey of a woman who has to come across the reality of life that is imminent and can't be ignored completely.

Hedrick Sandra in her PhD thesis on "Margaret Laurence and Feminine Identity in the Canadian Context" examines the formation of 'Canadian female identity' in Margaret Laurence's novels. She acknowledges that Hagar, in *The Stone Angel*, uncovers her psychological divining for her true self, continues her quest to learn more about her identity, in a language that surpasses the gender disparities. Barbara Helen Pells in her thesis writes: "Laurence primarily views 'real' woman as a victim of society, man and her own fears and frustrations. She must search beyond her role definition to find a personal identity and freedom" (TSA, p.38). The protagonist's life can be seen as wearisome. However, from the feministic perspective, such women need to be protected as they are and to be provided with a space to survive in a male chauvinistic society. For her old age, Hagar is in need of someone's greater

care. Though her daughter-in-law Doris shows interest in helping her in many ways, but she is reluctant and unwilling to depend on anyone's help. She even dismisses the efforts of her son Marvin when he tried to extend his help. She prefers to stay away from others in all such contexts and her only reply happens to be: "I can manage quite well, thank-you... Go on now for pity's sake". (TSL, p.33) Hagar's unaccommodating approach is what eventually kills her. Lawrence is brilliant in her presentation of the psychological aspects that Hagar experiences and in her realistic portrayal of many life changing incidents in which the woman lead survives. Amala Steffi in her research article "Analysing Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* in Feminist Perspective" describes the stone hearted approach of Hagar towards the tragic moments of her life as if she has no human emotions as such to shed tears in such occasions. Steffi compares the character of Hagar with that of 'the speaker' in Alexander Pushkin's poem. She highlights that:

This reminds us of "No Tears", which is interesting..... The speaker of the poem is a lover who learns of the death of his beloved along the course of the poem. He speaks about his lover's demise without shedding a single tear from his eyes. When he received the news of her death, he was unable to elicit any emotional response from his lover. The messenger delivered the news of her death to him, and he was as stunned as a stone. He reminisces on his time spent with her in the past. He doesn't have any tears to shed on her behalf. Hagar is also as stone as she is when she hears the news of her husband's death. (Steffi, 2020, pp.5919-5920)

Towards the end of the novel, the author changes the narration to third person to emphasize the fact that it is not just the story of Hagar but the story of many such people in Canada who continue to dwell upon self-centeredness. The novel elaborated Hagar Shipley's psychological journey across the periods of her life in an attempt to explore her present state of being in a 'realistic frame of mind'. According to another great writer, Margaret Atwood, Hagar is "the most extended portrait of the frozen old women" in Canada. (*Survival*, p.205). This novel is truly a realistic tale of a woman's mentality and her emotional bonding to her own life, in the backdrop of a context within which the significance of those two can be measured. Thus the psychological aspects of the protagonist contributes greatly to the narration and the readers notice this in every chapter of the novel. It is also worth noting that any attempt to connect psyche with sociological aspects gets the approval of every reader as the emotional attachment to the narration is more determined by the connectivity between the characters of the text and characters off the text.

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