IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS OF STACEY MACAINDRA IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE FIRE DWELLERS*

1. Ms. X. Amala Steffi,

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

2. Dr. A. Josephine Alangara Betsy,

Supervisor & Assistant Professor of English,

P.G. & Research Department of English,

St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi

Abstract

Margaret Laurence, an influential Canadian writer is known for her Manawaka novels. In most of her novels she deals with the dilemmas of women relating them to their roots and community. Her fictional world deals with various issues related to identity, survival, ethnicity, multiculturalism and awakening of self. Laurence is a spiritual writer who aspires to transform the existing society into a better and worthier place. In the novel, *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey MacAindra questions the conventional and traditional ways of establishing identity and tries to create an identity of her own. Whenever she tries to surpass the limit she is haunted by sense of guilt that she is unable to be her real self and finally she finds the survival strategy to balance her dual world. The present paper aims to provide a new discourse in finding the social identity by the applying the ideology of Marxist Feminism through the character Stacey MacAindra and her role in the formation of identity.

Key Words: Self, Identity, Ideology, Marxist Feminism, Survival

Full Paper

Margaret Laurence is renowned for her portrayal of women's struggles in the changing social and cultural landscapes of Canada. *The Fire-Dwellers*, authored by Margaret Laurence, presents a poignant exploration of womanhood during the mid-century, where Laurence's Manawaka series, shapes her current identity, "delving into themes of personal identity and the formidable obstacles women encounter in a swiftly evolving society" (Berry 63). The character Stacey MacAindra, who serves as the central figure in the novel, exemplifies the complexities associated with navigating the roles of wife, mother, and individual within the context of the societal expectations prevalent during the 1960s. Stacey's

16848

journey reflects larger societal issues related to gender, class, and the quest for personal fulfilment. This paper employs the framework of Marxist Feminism to analyze Stacey's character, focusing on her efforts to transcend conventional roles and establish her own identity.

The Fire Dwellers extensively explores Stacey's internal conflicts and introspective moments as she navigates the various expectations imposed upon her. Stacey MacAindra is introduced as a middle-class housewife living in Manawaka, struggling to find meaning in her seemingly mundane life. As an individual residing in suburban Vancouver and fulfilling the role of a mother to four children, she encounters daily life's mundane aspects and pressures. These encompass challenges within her marital relationship and concerns associated with nurturing and guiding her children amidst an uncertain societal landscape. The challenges above serve as the contextual framework within which she contemplates profound existential inquiries about meaning, purpose, and self-esteem. Through Stacey's internal monologues and interactions with others, Laurence reveals her deep-seated desire for self-actualization and autonomy. Stacey's dissatisfaction with her role as a wife and mother reflects larger feminist concerns about women's limited opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The Fire Dwellers presents a captivating examination of the complex interplay between societal norms and an individual's innermost aspirations. Stacey MacAindra is an individual burdened by societal expectations regarding her prescribed roles, while simultaneously struggling with the persistent reverberations of her personal aspirations. The conflict between traditional gender roles and personal ambitions represents a larger challenge experienced by numerous women, particularly within the context of the 1960s, a period characterized by significant social upheaval, as depicted in the novel. Marxist Feminism provides a useful framework for understanding Stacey's predicament. According to Marxist Feminists, women's oppression is rooted in capitalist structures that exploit both their labour and their bodies. Stacey's role as a housewife can be seen as a form of unpaid labour that sustains the capitalist system.

From the beginning, Stacey's life is characterized by the obligations and roles associated with a conventional homemaker and caregiver. She resides within a domain characterized by a multitude of on-going responsibilities, including household duties, transportation of children to and from school, resolving conflicts among children, and the frequently unacknowledged obligations that sustain a family unit. The domestic sphere serves as both the domain and confinement for the individual in question. Laurence adeptly portrays the monotonous and mundane nature of Stacey's everyday existence, skilfully juxtaposing it with the passionate aspirations and ambitions she once possessed.

The conventional societal expectations and responsibilities imposed on individuals, although occasionally providing instances of happiness and satisfaction frequently appear to suppress Stacey's sense of personal identity. Stacey is actively engaged in fulfilling the conventional responsibilities associated with being a homemaker and caregiver, consistently encountering the repetitive patterns of household chores. Stacey in *The Fire Dwellers* asserts,

"The walls of the house were a shell, and I was the soft creature inside, vulnerable and unable to exist outside for any length of time" (183). The state of confinement described herein encompasses not only a physical constraint, but also a figurative entrapment within the confines of societal norms and expectations.

In a particularly evocative moment, Stacey casts a fleeting gaze upon her own reflection, only to be taken aback by the unfamiliar countenance that meets her gaze. This phenomenon reflects the sense of detachment she experiences from her true identity, which has been compromised due to her prioritization of familial responsibilities and adherence to societal expectations regarding her roles. Within the narrative, there are intermittent instances that offer glimpses of an alternative manifestation of Stacey's character, one that transcends the confines imposed by societal norms and expectations. These instances typically manifest as recollections of past events in which she was younger and more liberated, or as her concealed yearnings for experiences that transcend the confines of her family.

Stacey's yearnings for individuality are evident in various aspects of her life, such as her recollections of youthful rebellion, her covert admiration for a bohemian artist, and her endeavours to explore spirituality and other avenues of self-expression. These desires for personal autonomy and distinctiveness remain latent but perceptible. In contrast to the state of confinement, Stacey harbours an internal yearning for a life that transcends the limitations imposed upon her by societal expectations. The individual's cognitive processes often gravitate towards past instances of personal liberation and aspirations that transcend the confines of her domestic environment. In Laurence's written expression, the author conveys in *The Fire Dwellers*, "Sometimes I want to drive and drive and drive and never come back. Or else just dissolve" (114)

Laurence effectively conveys these desires by employing Stacey's introspective soliloquies, replete with nostalgic contemplations and profound inquiries. The utilization of an interior stream of consciousness narrative grants readers a profound insight into the tumultuous realm of emotions and aspirations that Stacey encounters on a daily basis. While the exploration of Stacey's personal journey serves as a focal point within the narrative, it is equally imperative to consider the societal backdrop. The 1960s witnessed a period of significant upheaval and profound societal changes, particularly in North America. The emerging feminist movement posed a challenge to conventional gender norms, prompting women throughout the continent to pursue increased autonomy and liberation. As Usha Pathania states, "Stacey's internal and external conflicts serve as a reflection of the broader societal changes, as well as the personal traumas experienced during this period" (78).

The personal challenges faced by Stacey can be regarded as a representation of the larger societal turmoil. The protagonist's engagements with other characters, ranging from her seemingly content husband Mac to her unconventional friend, highlight the diverse ways in which individuals either adhered to or challenged established societal conventions. The broader societal context of the 1960s serves as a significant backdrop to Stacey's personal challenges. The feminist movement has posed significant challenges to deeply entrenched societal norms regarding women's societal roles and expectations. Stacey's life exemplifies

the aforementioned overarching conflict. Sophie, a close acquaintance of Stacey, stands out due to her rejection of societal norms, thus providing a striking juxtaposition to Stacey's lifestyle.

The notable impact of *The Fire Dwellers* lies in Laurence's deliberate avoidance of providing a straightforward resolution. There is no profound realization in which Stacey relinquishes her conventional societal roles and wholeheartedly embraces her personal aspirations. Conversely, the individual in question exhibits a fluctuating disposition towards these options, thereby exemplifying the intricate nature of human sentiment and the process of making choices. Upon reaching the conclusion, readers are presented with a multifaceted depiction of a woman endeavouring to discover a balanced standpoint.

Stacey's endeavour to embark on a solitary retreat, her exploration of spirituality, and her instances of defiance, exemplified by an impromptu encounter with an unfamiliar individual, demonstrate her earnest endeavours to reclaim various aspects of her identity. However, she consistently reverts back to her familial unit, thereby emphasizing the profound and enduring connections of affection and duty. The resolution of the tension between the protagonist's roles and desires proves to be a complex and challenging task, thereby enhancing the authenticity of the narrative. Laurence's narrative does not offer readers a conclusive resolution, but rather presents an authentic depiction of the on-going conflict between obligations and personal longings. Stacey's occasional deviations into personal desires, such as her withdrawal or her intense encounter, are counterbalanced by her inevitable reintegration into the familial unit, highlighting the intricate dynamics between societal obligations and individual aspirations.

Stacey's marital relationship with Mac is punctuated with gulfs of emotional distance. While Mac is portrayed as a loving husband and father, the emotional disconnect between the couple is palpable. Laurence's portrayal of their relationship subtly reflects a broader societal dynamic where women, often confined to domestic spaces and roles, grapple with feelings of estrangement from their partners. In *The Fire Dwellers*, Stacey muses, "We live together, sleep together, produce children together, but what else?" (120), underscoring the emotional chasm between them. From a feminist perspective, Stacey's experiences can be viewed as a critique of the patriarchal structures that confine women to traditional roles and limit their opportunities for self-actualization. Her frustrations with her husband's indifference and her own feelings of invisibility and stagnation speak to broader feminist concerns about women's autonomy and agency.

An essential aspect of *The Fire Dwellers* is the paradox of motherhood, an experience that, while profoundly connecting, can also be deeply isolating. Stacey's role as a mother, though filled with moments of affection, often plunges her into profound loneliness. She feels alienated by the repetitive routines, the relentless demands, and the weight of responsibility. This sentiment is encapsulated when Stacey reflects, "These are my children, and I do love them, but sometimes I don't like them" (91). This raw, unfiltered emotion shines a light on

the darker, seldom discussed aspects of motherhood, where love and duty sometimes war with feelings of detachment.

Throughout the novel, Stacey's interactions with other characters serve as temporary reprieves from her isolation. Whether it's her fleeting encounters with the enigmatic poet, or her heart-to-heart conversations with her sister, these moments provide a contrast to her prevalent loneliness. Yet, even in these interactions, there's an undercurrent of solitude, suggesting that while others can offer moments of respite, the feelings of alienation are deeply entrenched within Stacey. Stacey's individual experience of loneliness is a reflection of a broader societal context. The 1960s were a time of flux and change, with women beginning to question traditional roles and seek greater autonomy. Stacey's feelings of alienation can be seen as symptomatic of this transitional period, where the old norms were being challenged, leading to feelings of displacement and uncertainty.

Stacey MacAindra's character in *The Fire Dwellers* offers a complex portrayal of a woman grappling with societal expectations, personal identity, and the quest for fulfilment. Despite the obstacles she faces, Stacey ultimately finds a way to navigate her dual roles. She learns to prioritize her own needs without completely abandoning her family. This represents a form of survival within the patriarchal structure, as Stacey finds a way to assert her identity without completely rejecting her role as a wife and mother. Margaret Laurence's *The Fire Dwellers* is a deep dive into the emotional and psychological landscape of a woman grappling with the complexities of her roles and responsibilities. The motifs of loneliness and alienation, articulated through Stacey MacAindra, resonate powerfully, painting a vivid picture of the human quest for connection and meaning amidst a sea of societal constraints and personal uncertainties. Through this portrayal, Laurence bequeaths a timeless narrative that speaks to the universal human experience of solitude and the yearning for genuine connection.

Works Cited

Berry, Charlotte. "Reputation, Marginalization and Space." *The Margins of Late Medieval London*, *1430-1540*, University of London Press, 2022, pp. 171–200. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2bfhhwh.12. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

Cameron, Deborah. "Introduction." *Feminism Ideas in Profile: Small Introduction to Big Topics*. Profile Books Ltd., 2018.

Godard, Barbara. "Ex-centriques, Eccentric, Avant-Garde: Women and Modernism in the Literatures of Canada." *Room of One's Own: A Feminist Journal of Literature and Criticism* 8.4 (1983): 57-75. https://tessera.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/tessera/article/download/23492/21688.

Gunnars, Kristjana. "Listening: Laurence's Women." *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections*, edited by David Staines, U of Ottawa P, 2001, pp. 121–28. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ckpc4t.10. Accessed 04 Sep. 2022.

Hogg, Michael A., and Deborah J. Terry. "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts." *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2000, pp. 121–40. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/259266. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

Johnston, Eleanor. "The Quest of the Diviners." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1978, pp. 107–17. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777170. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

Laurence, Margaret. *The Diviners*. The U of Chicago P, 1989.

Pathania, Usha. "Psycho-dynamics of Interpersonal Interaction in Margaret Laurence's Fiction." *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*, edited by Sudhakar Pandey, Prestige Books, 1994, 49.

Thomas, John D, "The four points of Margaret's compass: An appreciation of novelist Margaret Laurence." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1996, pp. 155-160. *ProQuest,* https://www.proquest.com/docview/203531956. Accessed 11 July 2019.