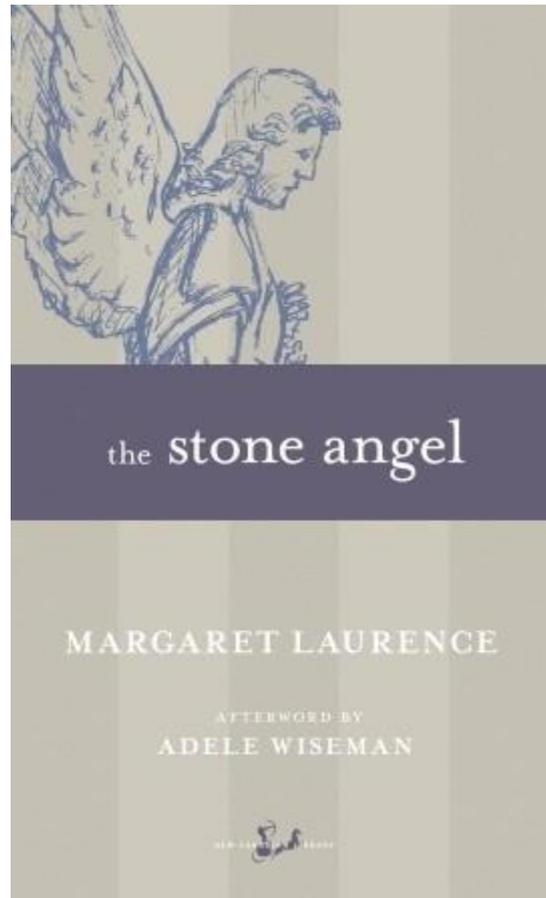


The Concept of 'Self' in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*

Dr. R. Sundararaj



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Stone-Angel-Phoenix-Fiction/dp/0226469360>

The Stone Angel

The Stone Angel (1964) is the first novel penned down by Margaret Laurence in the series of her works situated in the fictional city of Manawaka. As Bharathi Harishankar rightly points out, Laurence's construction of the fictional city Manawaka is in itself a unique creation, which can only be matched with the fictional South Indian Town created by R. K. Narayanan in his novels and short stories (21). The popularity and much acclaimed critical reception for *The Stone Angel* can be attributed to Laurence's ability to represent the 'self' of the protagonist Haggard Shipley and other characters as an integral and inevitable part of Manawaka's life and culture. It is also one of her richest novels in which the reader is offered a clear glimpse of the concept of 'self' and its related problems that Canada is always associated with. The exemplification of 'self' gets an in-depth thematic significance due to the feminine gender and extreme pride by which the character of Shipley is shaped.

This paper makes a critical examination of how the concept of 'self' is presented in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, as this particular theme is found recurring not only in *The Stone Angel*, but also in all most all of her novels.

Margaret Laurence (1926-87)

Margaret Laurence (1926-87) was a Canadian novelist, short story writer, author of children's books and an academician of most respected stature throughout her life. She gave a new identity for Canadian literature by her distinctly fictional and uniquely realistic representation of the Canadian life, culture and imagination in her fictional as well as non-fictional works. One of Canada's most esteemed and beloved authors by the end of her literary career, Laurence began writing short stories shortly after her marriage. She published her writings in literary periodicals while living in Africa. Her early novels were influenced by her experience as a minority in Africa. They show a strong sense of Christian symbolism and ethical concern for being a white person in a colonial state, It was after her return to Canada that she wrote *The Stone Angel*, the book for which she is best known. She became one of the key figures in the emerging Canadian literature tradition.

Her published works after *The Stone Angel* explore the changing role of women's lives in the 1970s. Her later works like *The Diviners* depict very different roles for women than her earlier novels do, Laurence's career remained dedicated to presenting a female perspective on contemporary life, depicting the choices — and consequences of those choices — women must make to find meaning and purpose.

Opens with the Narrator

Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* opens with the narrator, who introduces herself as 'I', setting out to narrating the story of her life, but in a highly fragmented and cinematographic manner. The reader soon learns that the narrator 'I' is a ninety year old woman by the name Hagar Shipley, and the place she where she stands at as the novel opens is her mother's monument built by her father at the top of Manawaka, a fictional town in Canada. Shipley narrates her life in two sequence, one telling of her past and the other one depicting her present. In her present life, she has just escaped from her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris who try to deposit her at the Silver Threads nursing home. This is her last rebellion in a long, rebellious life. She escapes to an old cannery, where she has a confessional conversation with a stranger, Murray F. Lees. Then she is taken to a hospital where she makes two friends before she dies.

Hagar's Memories

Interwoven with this simple story are Hagar's memories of her life and of her strained relations with men. Her past life involves a number of struggles, losses and proud moments. Through her fragmented narration, the readers are given to understand that Hagar was born to a Scottish father who was absolutely orthodox and severely strict. Against her father's wish, Hagar later married Bran Shipley, a careless but affectionate man with whom she found her life more bitter than happy. After her sons Marvin and John were born, she showed an unfair favour for her younger son, and he accompanied her mother when she broke off her relationship with Bran and came out of his home. She then preferred to work and toil as a house maid and was ready to undertake any menial work in order to sustain herself rather going back to her care free husband. John soon became uncontrollably adventurous and unthinkingly sportive, which resulted in his untimely death. Bran also had died well ahead of John's death, and she was almost orphaned except for the care and company of her elder son Marvin. Marvin and his wife, we learn, did their best to make her comfortable at their home, but Hagar would not be convinced until her death. In the present, Marvin and his wife, have decided to send her to the nursing home for quite reasonable purposes.

But Hagar has escaped deep into the woods. She shares her past with a stranger just for her own satisfaction of confession, mistaking the stranger for her son'. even at the verge of her death, while she is admitted in the hospital, she confesses that she has been unkind to Marvin and his wife but does not repent as she thinks the past is irrevocable.

Self

The subject of 'self' has attracted much scholarly and philosophical attention down the centuries. The Self is both the most basic and the most difficult human problem - that is apparently why philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists from Plato onwards have grappled with it. As Anthony Elliott points out, "On the one hand, the imperfections and perils afflicting human society, both local and global, can probably be addressed most effectively by addressing the core of the human individual; on the other hand, this core is arguably an appearance only. The Self under scrutiny is hardly a reality. The Self may be an illusion, at best an artefact in constant process of re-creation" (143).

The idea of 'self' has been the point of focus largely for the existential philosophers till the mid-twentieth century. Descartes, John Locke, Kant and Sartre are only a few of the eminent existential thinkers who have spent their critical energy in defining what constitutes the 'self' of a human being. Most of them defined 'self' as a self-conceived notion of an individual based on his/her existence and future life. Even a rationalist philosopher like Kant could not define the 'self' more intensively than an experiential reality of a man moulded by his learnings and envisioned about his future.

Feminist Critics and the Concept of Self

The twentieth-century philosophers, especially the feminist critics, have effectively dismantled the traditional definitions given to the idea of 'self'. While the linguists and structuralist theoreticians point out that the notion of 'self' is a linguistically constructed, but undefinable entity, the feminist writers and critics have categorically questioned the central place given to the 'self' of the man, not woman. In Anthony Giddens' terminology, such a project of defining 'self' as a male-centric notion and an idea locked in the future would imply 'colonisation of the human self'.

For Anthony Giddens, "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (53). Simultaneously, the role of history and culture in the shaping of an individual's 'self' was emphasised in response to the reductionist conceptualisation of 'self' and 'identity' as mere constructions determined by the existence of a particular individual.

History and Culture, and Self

For instance, Jerome Bruner, in his much-acclaimed book *Acts of Meaning*, accords a historical and cultural root for the idea of 'self': "...Selves are not isolated nuclei of consciousness locked in the head, but are 'distributed' interpersonally. Nor do Selves arise rootlessly in response only to the present; they take meaning as well from the historical circumstances that gave shape to the culture of which they are an expression. In the end, even the strongest causal explanations of the human condition cannot make plausible sense without being interpreted in the light of the symbolic world that constitutes human culture" (138).

This new interpretation of 'self' as a cultural and historical construct was specifically useful for the feminists, postcolonial critics and subaltern writers who strived to establish an identity for their respective marginalised sections.

Female Self

In particular, the female 'self' was foregrounded as an equal and integral part of human existence after the 1960s, when the second wave of feminism found its steady progress in the western academia and culture. The feminists like Kate Millet, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler have defined 'self' as a liberating space for the female body as well as her psyche, as this space is hard to break for patriarchy. But unlike the existentialists, as Anthony Elliott points out, they saw 'self' as a source and path towards breaking patriarchy in its cultural and social dimensions, thereby leading to female autonomy and assertion of feminist identity (127).

Self - One of the Most Significant Themes

Margaret Laurence, as a feminist and an advocate of Canadian cultural aesthetics in literature, has accorded 'self' as one of the most significant themes in her *The Stone Angel*. The concept of 'self' is embedded not only in the plot, characterisation and thematic subject, but also in the very form and structure of the novel.

The narrator 'I' becomes the 'self' through which the entire story is narrated. That is, we are given to see and understand the entire series of events only through the eyes of Hagar, and her stream of thoughts, flowing back and forth—the past and present, forms the narrative structure of the novel. Greta Coger precisely states that the 'I' narrator of the novel marvellously takes the reader into the thinking spell of Hagar, and her 'self' becomes the magic charm that binds the interest of the reader. Margaret Laurence defined herself as “a writer whose fate or task or vocation was the creation of character” (Xiques 29). Undoubtedly, the characterisation of Hagar Shipley as an old woman struggling with her own 'self' is a spectacular creation of Laurence.

As Laurence states her conception of the 'self', “even people who are relatively inarticulate...are perfectly capable within themselves of perceiving the world in more poetic terms...than their outer voices might indicate” (Staines 24). It is apparently perceivable in her novel that she Laurence is on the side of Hagar and she is quite anxious to make Hagar articulate her 'self' before her life fades away into the store of memories.

Not a Self without Flaws

As David Staines indicates, “Hagar is not a 'self' without flaws and follies, still the reader is invariably drawn to like her, sympathise with her, identify with her 'self' and understand her stubbornness as well as follies just as they are taken for natural parts of human existence” (59-60). Hagar's 'self' is constructed by at least three major figurative aspects running as symbolic references all throughout the narrative: rigidity, dryness and blindness to her own psychological and physical needs, as well as to those of others. Patricia Morley elucidates, the female 'self' of Hagar Shipley becomes all the more important and realistic only with the follies, rigidity, stubbornness and utter disregard for repentance embedded within it. She further states that Laurence has not stopped with showing Hagar as an assertive female 'self', but she has attributed the darker part of her character and behaviour as a construct of history, culture and society, which are largely symbolised by the image of the stone angel (39-41).

Self-narration

Hagar's self-narration of her entire life reveals her 'self' to be an unrelenting spirit, but fallen from its moments of heightened pride to the unexpected extents of pathos. After her long reminiscence of the past and her unrelenting gestures of vanity, Hagar recounts her present thus: “My bed is as cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and

they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be the outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard and freeze. (Laurence 81). Even though Hagar presently finds her in a devastating plight, her 'self' still remains unrelenting. It is this unrelenting 'self' implanted in the characterisation of Hagar which makes her a deeply tragic figure in the modern Canadian culture and society.

Becomes More Emphatic in Vulnerable State

From a feminist perspective, even if Hagar's 'self' 'fall's short of normal expectations, it also proves a happy fall, for when stripped of her mask of strength, she confronts her destructiveness and her fear of death majestically. She identifies her elated 'self' through her tragic experience, some sort of belated spiritual regeneration which Margaret Laurence presents very convincingly. Nancy Bailey explains the process that leads up to this (re)identification of the female 'self' by Hagar as, "The retreat and descent to Shadow Point, the meeting with another liminal, and the confrontation of past ghosts, the apologies she deliriously makes to John, and so on". The assertion of female 'self' becomes more and more emphatic in the moments of her vulnerable state.

Although Hagar seems to be coming down from her pride and assertion of the 'self' towards the end, she does so only for her own satisfaction, and not to satisfy anyone else, including her son Marvin. She assumes the natural surroundings of deep jungle into an imagined court room, where she subjects the 'self' of her own into trial. She herself prosecutes and defends her 'self', of course understanding the harsh reality of her inability to reverse the happenings of her past life (Laurence 185-89).

Part of Canadian Culture

In her novel, Laurence does not depict Hagar's 'self' as a liberated aspect remote from Canadian culture, rather as an enduring assimilation of a woman's past and present. The 'self' of Hagar is the construct of a woman dominated by pride and frustration, love and hatred, in-depth affinity and superficial contact. Her every action is designed to demonstrate that her will is free, yet despite this her experience is continually of frustration. In the book's most quoted passage, she says: "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" (Laurence 292). Her relationship with Bram is only of the flesh: "his banner over me was his skin," she acknowledges (Laurence 47).

Contradiction between the Stone and the Angel

The story of a woman who has failed to mother her family in peace; to know a husband in spirit, and to adjust her temperament is the essential centre of the female 'self', which culminates in evolving into a feminist 'self': the contradiction between the stone and the angel.

The oxymoronic phrase 'stone angel', though seems an imagery, becomes the formidable tool for comprehending the concept of 'self' as portrayed by Laurence through her remarkable character Hagar. The angel is an all-perfect image, but she is meant to sacrifice everything, behave good-tempered and gracious all the time. The image of stone represent an absolutely opposite signification, the unrelenting, unbent, rough yet enduring 'self'. Towards the end of the novel, the two entirely different images (stone and angel) of Hagar dissipate to become unified within one 'self', the 'self' that merges compassion and firmness. Just a few minutes before her death, she calls out for help. Mistaking the nurse for Doris, Hagar demands to hold it herself, spiteful in her insistence, but compassionate in her inner mind: "I only defeat myself by not accepting her. I know this , I know it

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very well. But I can't help it - it's my nature. I'll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be held for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There. There. (Laurence 308). These final words of Hagar offer a telling revelation of the 'self' as envisaged by Laurence and enacted by the character of Hagar Shipley.

Self and Inhibiting Pride

As Woodcock concludes, Hagar's recognition of her 'self' through her own inhibiting pride is intensely individualistic in structure and narrative pattern, yet at the same time one can generalize her situation into a description of the state of mind of a whole generation of English speaking Canadians (135). The Stone Angel, though a piece of stunning realism, is also profoundly concerned about the 'self' of its female protagonist. As discussed in this paper so far, the concept of 'self' has been at the centre of Laurence's creative impulse as well as in the characterisation of Hagar Shipley. In her reflection of a long journey extending up to ninety years, Hagar finds her to have been unjustly unkind and stubborn in many occasions, but hers is an unrelenting 'self' which is hardly concerned about repenting or reversing the past. To conclude, Laurence's concept of 'self', as vividly found in *The Stone Angel*, is a tool for advocating female autonomy and celebrating female existence with all its follies, tragic notes and compassionate moments.

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