

## A FLIGHT OF HER OWN—RUMINATIONS AND STRUGGLES IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE STONE ANGEL*

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### ABSTRACT

*Aged people many a times are victims of domestic abuse. Their physical frailty makes them much more vulnerable to their immediate surroundings and circumstances. If financially dependent, the situation of exploitation worsens. In The Stone Angel, Hagar is a brave old woman who defies age in terms of spirit. She is physically weak but she endeavours to surmount her problems in lieu of submitting to others. In order to escape the supposed imprisonment in an old age home, she chooses to run away from her house. This escapade is replete with adventures. As an old woman she becomes an endearing and brave character.*

Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of Her Own* imagined what the quandary of Shakespeare's talented sister might have been, had she run away from her house to materialize her literary ambitions. Woolf states:

Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress.... At last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman...killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle. 1022

Those times were of course that of Renaissance when art, literature, theatre, drama—all flourished but those provinces of intellect were dominated by men. Women were at the margins and attributed with 'feminine' qualities which meant dooming, domesticating and incarcerating themselves within the four walls of the house. Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* is a contrast wherein the old female protagonist Mrs Hagar Shipley finds herself entrenched in emotionally confining circumstances. She refuses to succumb to her situation and chooses to flee from her house (like Shakespeare's imagined sister). She isn't quite talented (like Shakespeare's imagined sister). The difference, however, is that she doesn't lose her heart. There is one more important difference—that of age. Her aspiration to fly like a bird, away from problems and disillusion of life get crippled because of her physical infirmity. That way her ability to exercise her freedom and autonomy are restricted. She is strong in her desires and objectives in life. She defies age in spirit. The speaker in *The Stone Angel*, is Hagar herself and through her personal first-person narrative she oscillates between the present and the past. She is sure of what she wants in life and throughout the novel what is astonishing is her love of freedom. This paper specifically investigates the episode of Hagar's flight from her own house to Shadow Point and her living in a decrepit house to escape staying in the old age home, Silver Threads.

The work is an ideal example of a confessional novel where Hagar accepts that she is proud and recounts the numerous personal accounts of her life. She repudiates her son's and daughter-in-law's efforts to deposit her into an old age home. This is a contemporary situation too, where young couples find it difficult to live with old parents and prefer packing them away to old age homes producing depression/shock to the old ones (as in the case of Hagar); guilt/dilemma as in the case of her son, Marvin; and eagerness to expel the old woman (as in the case of Doris—Hagar's daughter-in-law).

Hagar finds the whole idea of running away from her house exciting and as she states "To move to a new place—that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you—all is canceled from before, cauterized, and you begin and noting will go wrong this time" (155). There is this hope of rejuvenation and a new beginning after all the pitfalls in life. It is this optimism and confidence that makes Hagar an endearing character in the novel. In other words, she faces society that atleast in her eyes, ostracizes old people. In that sense, she is courageous for she faces society the way she is. For instance, she doesn't bother about what the Father from Church that Doris calls home thinks of her when she refuses to agree with his views on religion; and the fact that old women need better care, so they should preferably live in old age homes where they can get professional health care. She is therefore assertive. Of course, there are several popular novels that demonstrate a woman's daring. To name one such courageous character is the female protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*. To be facing society that points fingers at women and not men is no ordinary event. In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, the woman is young. In *The Stone Angel*, the female protagonist is old. The instances in the aforementioned two novels are a contrast in terms of age, as an inkling that at all ages, a woman becomes a casualty of jeopardy. Either she suffers in silence or argue with society to assert her independence or is compelled to flee from her house/society/circumstance to escape hazards.

As a woman and an old woman at that, it is extremely engaging to find Hagar fighting against age, physically as well as emotionally. It is almost as if a young girl is fluttering like a butterfly in the big wide cruel world. Though Hagar is distressed by her daughter-in-law, instead of expelling her from her own house, Hagar argues with her constantly, resulting in pointless fracas.

Nelly Dean, the famous third person narrator in *Wuthering Heights*, made the story memorable with her role of easy, life-like rendering of the characters and events. Hagar dons a similar role, however in first person narrative. Recounting experiences seems to be a very natural phenomenon during old age. It happens to be a route of pondering over and evaluating gains and losses. The fag end of life also makes human beings contemplate over whether things could have been or should have been done differently. Though life seems to be out of human control many a time; very often individuals are not perennially conscious of this notion, so that one naturally feels that circumstances could have been better contrived. Old people often feel that they are burdensome to others since the general perception is that physical instability makes them a liability. Like Nelly Dean, Hagar ponders over her life. However, the difference is while Nelly recounts a past experience, Hagar moves back and forth. It is remarkable that even in her old age; Hagar has the nerve to do what makes her happy. Instead of getting depressed or pleading with her son and daughter-in-law to allow her to stay in her house, she chooses to getaway to a place that would cut her off from her family. She knows pretty well that she cannot remember things, people or places clearly. Several times she forgets where she wants to go. Yet she is determined and certainly remembers that she has to leave her home to create her own, perhaps a new home for survival.

Hagar cannot stir without the help of her daughter-in-law, Doris. This is precisely what she has detested for she has always taken decisions by herself and led life on her own terms—be it marrying Brampton Shipley or starting poultry for her sustenance or running away to work as a governess in Mr Oatley's house or running away from her own house to escape being huddled into an

old age home. Hagar attempt planning her flight and the first thing she does is to take away her cheque without her daughter-in-law, Doris's knowledge. Hitherto, her pension was always managed by her son and Doris. Even the simple act of taking her own cheque makes her feel like a thief and she is excited all the while. She recounts "Doris helps me to dress, and while she's getting my breakfast I go to the den. The check's still there in its brown envelope. Quickly, I snatch it, feeling like a thief, although it's mine by rights" (144). Hagar had not handled her own money for a very long time because of her ill health and her money was being used by the others in her family for daily expenses. Even this generosity on her part doesn't arouse the sympathy and gratefulness of Doris and she goads her husband into admitting her to an old age home. Her physical frailty causes Hagar a lot of strain but she goes to the bank and takes her money to materialize her plan and running away and living on her own. No amount of explanation and coaxing regarding the 'superior' living of an old age home gratifies the resolute Hagar. Her love of freedom to choose and live life on her own repudiates anything else except living unto death in her own dwelling place.

We find that all through her adventure, Hagar endures extreme bodily and mental anguish at the fear of getting back home on account of her inability to reach her destination "My legs hurt—it's the varicose veins. I despise those elastic stockings and won't wear them.... What if I fall? Someone will cart me home, and Doris will be so cross. I won't fall. I refuse to fall" (144). Her forgetfulness is another anxiety for her. At one point she fails to remember where she wants to go and she tells herself, "Drat it, the name's gone. I shan't know. He'll say *Where?* And I'll be standing there like a dummy, without a word. What shall I do? My mind is locked" (146).

The episode of her flight elicits the curiosity of the readers as to what would happen next? At the same time her physical and psychological state and her forgetfulness arouses sympathy. She is all alone having lost her acquaintances either because of age or reasons of social life ( She had married Brampton Shipley without her family's consent and his ill behaviour had caused her enough embarrassment to avoid her people and friends).

Hagar enters an old dilapidated house near *Shadow Point*. The whole episode appears exciting for her since she has eventually succeeded in avoiding her displacement into Silver Threads. She explores the new place, "A door's ajar. I push it and walk in. I set my shopping bag on a floor richly carpeted with dust. Then, unthinking, unaware of anything except my own extremity of weariness, I hunch down in the dust and go to sleep" (152). It is strange that in a eerie, sinister looking place, Hagar is able to unwind and relax while in her own home, in the company of Doris and her son Marvin, she feels despondent and insulted. The house that Hagar enters has dusty rooms:

The living-room is empty, only the puffs and pellets of dust like shed cat's hair or molted feathers, tumbling lightly in corners as the breeze sweeps at them. There was a fireplace, but the grate has fallen in and only a rubble of broken brick remains.... Kitchen and scullery have been camped in, it appears, by tramps or fugitives at some time. This revelation startles me.... May they not come again? What would I do?.... The sink is stained with rust and dirt, and the taps are gone. (154)

In such a peculiar place, Hagar sleeps and the next morning sets forth to see the surroundings. According to "The "wilderness" that Hagar flees to and in which she makes her home is neither the sinful, barren wasteland of moralistic Christian mythology nor a metaphor for the Jungian unconscious, the uncharted new territory of the pioneer: full of exuberance and hardship, and negotiated as all new territories are, with difficulty, using intuition and invention and trial and error" (25-26).

With a bag of food, she sallies enjoying her freedom. Every aspect of nature appears scenic, colourful and peaceful to her:

The morning is light and calm, clean and gold. The old cannery stands quiet and unalarming in the warm air and around the boards at the sea edge I can hear the

water's low rhythmic slapping.... The dust is off the trees. Every leaf has been sponged by rain and now they're displaying a mosaic of greens—half-yellow lime, bottleglass and emerald, peacock tail and pigeon feather. I marvel at such variety. (186)

It is remarkable that despite physical infirmity, Hagar moves on and she accepts her discomfort as a way of life. She keeps talking to herself about her uneasiness throughout. It is as though she finds a solution to her loneliness: "I feel a twinge in my intestines, so I pick up my bag and make my way back, past the silent buildings and into the forest that spreads all the way up the hill. I won't climb far.... Walking is difficult" (186). The entire scene is actually an insinuation of her emotional form too. She keeps reiterating in the novel about "the pain under my ribs" (31). As Brenda Beckman-Long points out "Hagar suffers physically from the duress of old age and from the duress of old age and from a deteriorating medical condition.... Like many confessional narrators, she finds that consciousness itself is a form of suffering" (50). Corinna Thomen, in her book *Old Women in Canadian Literature*, states "Aging is the natural course of life but in our society it often seems to an uncomfortable subject to talk about...older people are often neglected and marginalized by society. They are often associated with negative images like being helpless, rigid and useless" (2). As a matter of fact, this perception is common in most cultures and society. The efforts and contributions of old people are conveniently forgotten. They are treated as a liability and it wouldn't be wrong to state that many a time it becomes a waiting for death either for the old person or the people around her/him.

In *The Stone Angel*, in one instance, Hagar reaches a beach where she witnesses a girl and a boy playing and on an impulse she not only watches but attempts to participate in their game with suggestions. The kids run away. The incident implies Hagar's mental obliviousness of her old age that is reminded of only when she experiences physical soreness and discomfort. Thereafter, she walks through a forest and returns to the dilapidated house. It would be pertinent to refer to Simone de Beauvoir. In her celebrated *The Second Sex*, she asserts:

But a woman hardly has means for sounding her own heart; according to her moods she will view her own sentiments in different lights, and as she submits to them passively, one interpretation will be no truer than another. In those rare instances in which she holds the position of economic and social privilege, the mystery is reversed, showing that it does not pertain to *one* sex rather than the other, but to the situation. For a great many women the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they *do* nothing, they fail to *make themselves* anything. They wonder indefinitely what they could have become, which sets them to asking about what they are. (1410)

We find that in *The Stone Angel*, Hagar is economically and socially privileged. She gets income through pension. It is with that money that she decides to flee from her house. It is interesting to observe that Hagar is perpetually agonized over her looks. Despite her feebleness she desires to appear neat and decent unlike Doris who pays no attention to such things. This contrast insinuates the zest for life and youthfulness on the part of Hagar reminding one, of Shakespeare's "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak". We find a lot of self consciousness in her in the matter of looks. According to Susan Bordo, "In our own era, it is difficult to avoid the recognition that the contemporary preoccupation with appearance, which still affects women far more powerfully than men, even in our narcissistic and visually oriented culture, may function as a backlash phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or transform power relations" (2363). While this idea is partly true in the case of Hagar, that is, she is not able to extricate herself from the desire to improve her appearance; we also see that she asserts her independence when it is the question of leading her life and making choices.

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