

Society, Self and Alienation: Woman in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence

Kaptan Singh

After the Second World War the theme of alienation has become one of the prominent themes in world literature. Canadian literature is no exception. In modern age, mostly people are, "doomed to suffer the corrosive impact of alienation, which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the credibility loss or gap. The compartmentalization of life, the stunning of personal development and the conspicuous absence of sense of meaningfulness of life, and so on" (Pathak 12).

The "experience of alienation differs from culture to culture both in the specific spheres which are alienated and in the thoroughness and completeness of the process." (Fromm 114) Canada, before its freedom in 1867 from British rule, was a colony of France and England. Since then English and French are official languages of Canada. But after immigration act a large group of immigrants migrated from China, Japan, India, Pakistan, etc., and settle around Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. In 1988 after the adaptation of the policy of poly culturalism, Canada has become a land of mosaic culture. Canada has been the colony of British Empire and now a member of commonwealth.

In contemporary scenario the Canadian literature is one of the most acclaimed literatures of the world. It is not surprising that women writers are major force in Canadian literature. Search for identity, struggle for survival, self and social isolation and alienation are major themes in Canadian literature. As Aldous Huxley says, "Nations are to a large extent invented by their poets and novelists", (Singh 57) Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch, Alice Munro, Rudy Wiebe etc., through their writing, have tried to trace the Canadian identity. In their efforts they have also tried to create symbol and myth for Canadian culture and history.

Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Carol Shields are celebrated female voices of Canadian literature. Through their works they have delineated the fractured and alienated psyche of Canadian women. As writing, "displays its own conventionality which explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice and thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction", (Waugh 481) these writers have tried to bare the reality of the struggle of women characters in power structure.

Canada, till nineteenth century, was a very rigid and conventional society. But in the beginning of twentieth century, a close encounter with the Western philosophical thoughts and the changing patterns of globalization and industrialization, have changed the phenomenon. Gradually exile and alienation comes into full swing and become an eminent theme of the modern Indian literature. As well as woman's condition is concerned, since time immemorial, man has subjugated woman for the sake of his pleasure and comfort.

Woman, even in the advanced age of modernization, is treated as an appendage to her counterpart; neglected and deprived of her rights. Even in modern age condition

of woman is not much improved. She is still marginalized and deprived of 'shared culture' of the family. In Canadian culture there is much imbalance of power between two sexes. Man is considered as a domineering and the center of the family but woman is regarded as subordinate to man. Their suppression on the basis of sex compels them to live in their alienated world. Through interior monologue, flash back technique, stream of consciousness, soliloquy and memory bank movies, Laurence has portrayed the perturbed psyche of her female protagonists. She holds alienation as main theme to depict the position of women in the society.

Margaret Laurence, rather to expose the adventures of the heroes or legends of the society, has tried to portray the life of people, "who have so easily become either heroes or anti heroes in our literature. These are people largely ignored for lack of interest: old women; single women in middle age; people on the fringes of society who do not fully participate in the system" (Gunnars IX). Laurence, a champion in portraying the deeper psyche and sufferings of her characters, presents sufferings and dilemmas, of the isolated and alienated souls of her protagonists. She accepts -

As a writer, therefore, I feel I have a responsibility, not to write deductive fiction. That would be in many ways, a betrayal of how I feel about my work. But my responsibility seems to me to be to write as truthfully as I can about human individuals and their dilemmas, to honour them as living, sufferings, and sometimes joyful people (Laurence 'My Final Hour' 196).

Thus Laurence eloquently has portrayed the frustration, inferiority complex, disillusionment, depression, fear-psychosis, rootlessness and meaninglessness of alienated characters.

In her Manawaka novels (*The Stone Angle* 1964, *A Jest of God* 1966, *The Fire Dwellers* 1969, *A Bird in the House* 1970, *The Diviners* 1974), Laurence has vocalized the position of Métis people in Canadian society. Before Laurence Métis people have been frequently marginalized by the non-native Canadians. They portrayed them as uncivilized and savage. Laurence challenges this inhuman treatment and decides to rewrite the history of her people. Her Métis characters seem more human. The characters of Jules, Christie, and Marvin attract readers' attention and sympathy. Their delineation of isolation and alienation from society is really heart rending. The life like delineation of pains and sufferings of women character represents Laurence as a feminist. Hagar Shipley, Stacey MacAindra and Morag Gunn, the protagonists of *The Stone Angle*, *The Fire Dwellers*, and *The Diviners* respectively, represent the suppressed soul of women in the advanced Canadian society. They struggle to create a life of their own but in process they suffer a grievous blow of alienation. Their sense of the separation from the self and alienation from the out-side environment isolate them from the society and self. Laurence, though takes the theme of alienation to its extreme to portray the perturbed psyche of her alienated characters and "the strong outside figure...has been central to all Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels in the person of both women and men" (Thomas: 57) yet she cannot be mentioned as existentialist.

Alienation from the self and society and the quest for individual identity are the basic concerns of Laurence's novels. As a typical Canadian novelist she is a master of telling a story with a distinct Canadian flavor. Her attempts to discover the true identity,

the isolation and alienation of her characters have so much in common with the twentieth century Canadian woman writers.

The first hand reading of her novels seem depressing as her novels are criticized for the lack of zeal and enthusiasm but a profound study of her novels reveals the triumph of the protagonists at the apparent futility of their lives at the end. Though her woman characters feel depressed and helpless in process to achieve value in life yet she concludes her novels with an element of hope.

Laurence is an expert analyst of the human mind. Her writings seem a gallery of vivid and artistic portraits of alienated and isolated women characters. Her characters expose the strength and weakness of ordinary human beings. Her novels present a variety of isolated and alienated figures. Laurence's *The Stone Angel* poignantly reveals the physical and mental dilemma of elderly woman. Hagar, the chief protagonist of *The Stone Angel* suffers from the severe blow of solitude, negligence, isolation, alienation and sense of not belonging.

Hagar's character has been discussed from various viewpoints. In Canadian hospitals *The Stone Angel* is used as inspirational book to teach young nurses the old age psychology. The novel realistically discusses the anger, pride, frustration, agony, and dejection of the alienated soul. Her character has become an epitome of physical, social and psychological problems of the old people in Canada or elsewhere. At the advanced age of ninety years, though torn and fatigued, she attempts to hold her past tightly and refuses to accept and adjust with her present which results in her isolation and alienation. Past plays a prominent role in the lives of Manawaka heroines. It is inescapable and plays a negative influence upon the protagonists which ultimately leads them to live a life of alienation. Hagar throughout the novel remains trapped in past without understanding it. So she wants to keep herself busy in works to avoid her isolation and feels that she would have gone demented if she hadn't found something to do. Thus to refuse the angst of alienation she remains busy in work. But at the ripe age of ninety it was all not so easy.

Her struggle to live a life of self-respect keeps her always in challenges. In the constant struggle to create a space for herself in the power structure she experiences alienation from her- self and the world around. She refuses to make compromise with society. At last through 'Nursing Home Episode', Laurence tries to depict the emptiness of modern Canadian society where old people are treated as economic liability or social burden. They have sacrificed their life for their children and family and now in their old age, of course, they deserve the reciprocity of relationship. But like Hagar, most of them are compelled to live in 'Nursing Home'. Such negligence by their own family alienates them from their family and society. Thus through the character of Hagar Shipley, Laurence has weaved a physical, social and psychological alienation of an old woman.

Laurence, one of the most prominent authors of Canadian literature and culture, "has raised the voice of all sectors of society by showing the full humanity of the most neglected and forgotten among us" (Gunnars VIII). She successfully has attracted sympathy of readers towards the pulse rending stories of her alienated character.

Through subjectivity and inner-self of her protagonists she presents the growing angst of alienation and isolation.

In *The Fire Dwellers* Margaret Laurence has depicted the isolation and alienation of middle aged and middle class house wife who feels dejected and deprived from artificial life of metro cities. Stacey MacAindra, thirty nine years-old woman in *The Fire Dwellers*, represents the fractured psyche of post war woman. The problem of communication or the lack of communication is the central theme in the novel. Stacey MacAindra, a middle aged house wife, a mother of four children feels neglected and alienated from the world of her inarticulate husband and children.

Stacey's childhood experiences; the suppression and negligence of the self from her early age make her subjective and introvert but "subjectivity creates alienation....Absolute subjectivity would form an absolutely alienated consciousness and the man as protagonist of such consciousness would lose the possibility of subsistence" (*Psychology of Alienation* 2-4). Stacey feels disjointed from the self and disconnected from the society. Stacey in her early age was a good dancer and loved to dance in 'Flamingo Dance Hall' in Manawaka. But as a young girl she was not allowed to participate in dance competitions. Even she was deprived of education. She accepts "Everything would be all right if only I was better educated", (*The Fire Dwellers* 8) and due to the lack of proper education she feels inferiority complex where she is unable to adjust herself with changing patterns of modernization. Consequently her constant negligence and deprivation throws her into the world of alienation. Impact of war on the fragile psyche of women has apparently been depicted in the works of Margaret Laurence. Stacey is scared and horrified into the flux of modernization. The daily news of suicides, accidents, police bullets and bombardment disturb Stacey and post war reality of cruelty, immorality, drugs, crime make her scared and worried about the future of her children, "What would happen to the kids if that happened?" (*The Fire Dwellers* 106).

Though her novels represent the protagonists deponent and helpless against the futility of their lives but at the end her novels share a positive approach and some elements of hope are interwoven in the conclusion of the novels. Stacey seems existential character in the beginning but at the end of the novel she seems to be better equipped to deal with life. She does not sit passively. She recognizes her future difficulties and efforts positively to resolve the problems. She has strengthened to cope with whatever life presents to her. She makes a compromise and her acceptance and adjustment makes her attitude positive.

Lack of communication is one of the prominent themes in the novels of Margaret Laurence. Up to a great extent her protagonists pine for communication. Hagar, Stacey, and Morag, pine to discuss and share the mystery of their wounded soul with their husbands to redeem their frustration. But their inarticulate and rigid husbands leave them on their conditions without caring anything about their perturbed psyche. Stacey, beside the inarticulate behaviour of her husband, also suffers from the reticent and self-centered nature of her children. Stacey starves to communicate with her daughter Katie and husband Mac. She desires, "Katie – talk to me. Mac talk to me" (*The Fire Dwellers* 121). But they are too reluctant to discuss any matter. As communication is

essential to maintain healthy relations but in reference to Stacey and her family, the growing cult of inarticulation, pull them apart to one another and their inability to discuss anything leads Mac and Stacey to extra-marital relations. Mac turns to Miss Appleton and Stacey caged and alienated in the four walls of house ultimately tries to redeem her insufferable angst of loneliness and establishes a short time affair with Luke Venturie.

Such inability to share and talk deprives her from physical and emotional world of their husband. As an astute interpreter of human psyche, Laurence ardently reveals out the role of physical and emotional union and communion between spouses. Laurence seems to vindicate that marriage is not only an agreement to live together but she feels no hesitation to accept the significance of 'Libido Satisfaction' for marital harmony. Most of Laurencean heroines as a twentieth century women keep an independent and liberal attitude. They do not count sex as crime but consider it as a part of their growing up. Stacey pines for the union of body and soul. The absence of her husband frustrates her, "Why doesn't he get home? I want him. Right now, this minute" (*The Fire Dwellers* 21).

The Diviners is the culmination and completion of Margaret Laurence's celebrated Manawaka cycle. The chief protagonist, Morag Gunn is not only a mouthpiece of Margaret Laurence but up to a great extent Morag Gunn's struggle as a writer obviously seems a pen portrait of her own life. In her memoir she accepts, "*The Diviners* came closest to being not precisely an autobiography but certainly a spiritual autobiography" (*Dance On the Earth* 6). So for Laurence, Morag, "may be a spiritual sister or shadow self, a mirror image reflecting her creator" (Stovel 101).

The Diviners is a life portrait of forty seven years old writer, who struggles to trace her own identity in the society governed by male dominated power structure. She faces a lot of ups and downs merely to give a proper shape and meaning to her life.

In her childhood Morag experiences the blow of alienation and isolation. Her aloofness from society and the outside world widens her sense of aloneness and ultimately, to protect herself from the drastic impact of alienation, she creates 'a room of her own' and devoted herself to the writing career. About such condition of women writers Virginia Woolf significantly remarks "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (Woolf 13-14).

Laurence presents Morag as a struggling writer; who is always, "with a note book in front of her and a ball point pen in her hand" (*The Diviners* 185). As a writer Morag seems a persona of Laurence herself. Through her character, she wants to expose all the dilemma of a woman writer. Morag's struggle for survival and individual identity reveals anguishes, agony, frustration and alienation of a writer. Laurence, as a feminist, shares the challenges which a woman has to bear if she desires to be a writer. She demonstrates- "Writing by women in those and following years, were generally regarded by critics and reviewers in this country with at best in amused tolerance, at worst a dismissive shrug. It still makes me angry, how thoroughly I had been brain washed by society" (*Dance on the Earth* 5). She has had a firsthand experience of the challenges of a writer. Such experiences enabled her to express the inner agony of a

struggling writer who encounters a lot of illogical and malicious comments by critics and reviewers, but instead of making surrender before the 'amused tolerance' and 'dismissive shrug' they (Morag and Laurence) keep their struggle continue and are determined to overcome all these impediments of their ways. So her protagonist Morag Gunn keeps pondering over her life and its problems while she does not communicate her reactions and views or to be more precise her domineering husband never pays any regard to her words. She is a lone fighter in her struggle of existence. Due to lack of emotional support she is always in a state of perpetual alienation.

Struggle for survival and identity crisis are major themes of Canadian fiction. Being a land of many cultures and identities, it has a mosaic culture. Originally it was a colony of France, and then colonized by the British Empire till it acquired freedom in 1867. From then onwards it is an economic colony of America. So in this complexity of cultural environment they are suffering from the perplexity of identity crisis. Neither they are considering them as Canadian entity nor they forget their French (Scotties) identity and even couldn't come out from the flux of inferiority complex of being colonized. Morag Gunn represents the same society. On the basis of Christie's fictitious stories she regards herself a Scottish; a member of an honorable Gunn family and disconnects herself from Christie's real world. Her encounter with Brooke Skaletton, an English professor, whom she married, on the other hand, reveals the colonial roots in the Canadian history. Morag willingly accepts, "Brook – I am happy, with you. And anything else – Manawaka and that it's over. It doesn't exist. Its unimportant" (*The Diviners* 215). So Laurence has successfully projected Morag to capture all the identical quests of Canadian society. She uses third person voice to expose "the fact that this is not exclusively Morag's story but a story of many people, of a country of the past (itself)" (Grace 67).

Laurence, a great supporter of equality and liberty of women, considers alienation of women from society and their self as a result of faulty power structure, and without any hesitation she has portrayed women characters as she experiences in the society. She never cares about consequences. As Virginia Woolf says, "At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial and any question about sex is that... one cannot hope to tell the truth" (Woolf 14). But in this context Margaret Laurence seems exceptional. She honestly uncovered the hidden reality of woman's suppression where male uses her body and soul to satiate his thirst and then precedes her into the world of loneliness. Laurence enthusiastically takes step forward to challenge all the enmities of the female world. She advises, "I think we must learn to recognize our enemies, to counter inhuman ranting with human and human beliefs and practices" (*Dance On the Earth* 267). But her effort meets sharp rebuff when *The Diviners* was bitterly criticized and labeled as a pornographic and blasphemous, and was considered not to be fit to be taught at grade thirteen level students aged seventeen and eighteen and even some critics revolted to throw it out of school library. She feels humiliation and negligence but society she takes the challenge positively and boldly responds to the comments and exposes the significance of her *The Diviners*–

It affects not only, my books, but the books of all Canadian – and all contemporary writers, and I suppose I will never cease to grapple with the issues

because I dare not stop, on my own behalf, and on behalf of writers every where
(*Dance On the Earth* 213-214).

But in the climax of the novel a change takes place in Morag's persona. Her visit to the land neither attracts her nor does it redeem her alienation. She still feels as a stranger at this land. She shares her emotions with Dan –

"It's a deep land here, all right". "But it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it is not."

"What is then?" McRaith raises his curiosity.

"Christie's real country. Where I was born" (*The Diviners* 415).

At the last Morag's reconciliation with her 'real country' quenches her quest for identity and sets back her alienated root in the real world. Up-to a great extent, Laurence through Morag presents a significant answer to the quest identity crisis of Canadian society. All the protagonists of *The Diviners* are symbolical. They do not only delineate their own person but represent the different communities. Two important historical contexts are represented by Jules and Dan McRaith; as a Mètès rebellion and Scottish immigration respectively. For a long time Canada was a colony of United Kingdom. The third male character Brooke here represents British empire; a colonizer and Morag Gunn, as a representative of Canadian identity who always shuttles amongst these three persons and communities, but she feels alienated among all these people. Her return to 'Cristie's real world', at the end of the novel, is Laurence's answer to Canadian quest for identity. Her call "there must be pride and roots. O my people," (*This Side Jordan* 22). is to connect her people with Canadian National identity. Their self-sufficient approaches and intellectual capacity make them feel pride and honour to be Canadian, where they will get success to outreach the walls of alienation.

The Diviners presents realistic and panoramic prospects of the modern Canadian society and intentionally exposes perpetual dilemma of multi-faceted Canadian identity. The protagonist seems as eternal quester, struggling to divine her own identity and as a lonely fighter, in the process, she feels isolated and alienated. Laurence depicts the alienation and isolation, perplexities and paradoxes of her protagonists who are determined to derive the meaning of life. Through the process of alienation and loneliness she analyses the significant problem of identity crises and effectively portrays a canvas of desperation, frustration, fear-psychosis, inferiority complex meaninglessness and rootlessness of her isolated and alienated characters.

To sum up, it can be stated that alienation is a very prevalent theme in the works of Margaret Laurence. Her novels depict heart rending facts and bitter realities which women have to encounter in the modern emotionless society. Patriarchal structure being prevalent in Canada society categorizes women as second rate citizens. As they do not enjoy financial power, their families treat them as liabilities and in the absence of any economic, social, emotional and financial support, they also consider themselves inferior to men. Time and again they revolt against the mercenary, mechanical and merciless treatment of their family and society, but in the process they remain all alone after being cut off from their family. This fact alienates them from their family and some time they choose isolation as a safeguard against callous and selfish treatment

of the family members. Their inner desire to revolt against oppressive society and the dominant culture increase their isolation. Margaret Laurence has unraveled the tortured psyche of over sensitive women, who cannot even share their feelings with others and are destined to live an emotionally deprived life. Certainly this is a negative trait that demands sensitive and sympathetic treatment from their society and families towards women – who represent half of the globe, only that can really emancipate and empower women and may form the basis to create a progressive society.

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