

# Objections to Objectification of Woman as Revealed in ‘The Stone Angel’

## OPEN ACCESS

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## Abstract

*Margaret Laurence’s characterization of woman protagonists in all her novels is extraordinary because she clearly portrays the escalation of the characters against the domination of the patriarchy. The Stone Angels is an outstanding novel of Laurence that reveals the life of a woman protagonist Hagar who never compromise with others for her survival and hence her uncompromising attitude has resisted domination. Laurence knows that the creation of such stubborn character could not win the sympathy of her readers but still she wants to make her readers realize that women can resist the domination by any possible ways. She has insisted that women are not just an object to be used by the men because they do have equal abilities. Hence, the paper identifies the feministic notions of the protagonist Hagar in dealing with the events around her. It also studies how Hagar handles objectification. In fact, she has never allowed anyone to overrule her because of her excessive pride. However, pride is the root cause for all the troubles of her life. Further, the paper analyses whether the vicious quality could be a positive force while challenging the patriarchy and whether pride could be a positive element in women self-empowerment.*

**Keywords: Feminism, Canadian Literature, Pride, Transformation, Objectification**

## Introduction

Margaret Laurence being influenced by her predecessors who are the first generation of non-colonial writers such as Earnest Bucker, Sinclair Ross, Huck Evans and many have produced a number of novels holding the rich heritage of Canadian society. Moreover, her sense of the contemporary issues and her personal account have fashioned many outstanding novels that show her intellectual maturity and experience. Her concern for women subjugation is central in her works. Especially, her women protagonists’ knowing of their individual-self tells Laurence’s feministic convictions. In her Manawaka series, all her protagonists are self-empowered characters who fight to establish their identity strongly. The Stone Angel is one among the Manawaka series of novels that details the life of a stubborn woman Hagar who lives her life on her own will and never has gone under the control of anyone such as her father, husband and sons. She has resisted domination in many occasions. This nature is seen in an outsider’s perspective as pride, stubborn and boisterous but when viewing the character through a psycho-feministic view point, her uncompromising attitude has elevated the character as an empowered woman. Hence, the paper has focused on Hagar’s relationship with her family members and others, her conscious and subconscious reflection and her final transformation. Also the paper analyses whether the transformation is convincing the patriarchy.

Margaret Laurence is greatly admired and respected among the Canadian writers for her geniuses in touching across different aspects of Canadian society. She has boldly articulated the social issues in the form of six novels, two short story collections and children’s books.

Her work illuminates a lasting impact on the readers. She has earned readership all over the world that many of her works are being translated into several languages. Apart from her immense contribution in Canadian literature, she has initiated for the growth of many budding Canadian writers and hence she was instrumental in developing The Writer's Union of Canada and The Writers' Trust of Canada. To recognize her, she is given the title, A Person of National Historic Significance in the year 2018 for her lasting contribution to the society.

Margaret Laurence has been the voice for the Canadian women who are under the domination of the patriarchy. All her works are the examples of her feministic vendetta. Her works tarnishes the evils of the society especially the social injustice led to women. Her Manawaka series of works include *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-dwellers*, and *The Diviners* centers on the freedom loving independent women protagonists. She has equally cared for their liberation throughout the end. All these work have reached a roaring popularity among the women readers because of the deep chord that Laurence touches with her rhetoric language. The women characters are dynamic. Hagar in *The stone Angel*, Rachel in *A Jest of God*, Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and Morag in *The Diviners* are shown as leaving their home land Manawaka in search of their identity and to get liberated. They have been once shackled by the stereotypes of the society. Laurence as an author of characters has offered a psychological framework in all her works which makes the readers to penetrate into the internal conflicts of the characters. Strikingly, all the her four protagonists meet with internal struggles in facing the external pressure that Stacey being anxious over her familial issues, Rachel fighting with her sub-conscious and conscious mind, Morag struggles with a confused identity and Hagar the senior most of all Manawaka Protagonists is guilty ridden because of being pride.

*The Stone Angels* is the first of the Manawaka series that exposes the themes of freedom, survival and transformation. The novel has earned a lot of criticism because of its disturbing characterization. The strength of the novel is the bold presentation of a stubborn character's unemotional behavior and uncompromising attitude. The story is a flashback of

Hagar in first person narration revealing her 90 years of life. She recollects her childhood days' events, her youthful days' memory, middle age's struggles with marriage and other issues and her old age problems. Her flash back offers the readers the clear picture of her traits. Hagar takes her father in behavior. He is a rich business man who lacks emotion and he displays excessive pride. Hagar has lost her mother and is grown by her father making her more stubborn and hard. In general, women characters are pictured by most works as naïve, meek, soft, docile and gentle but Hagar is quite different. This unusualness forms the central element of the novel. Hence, this unusualness calls for an interpretation through feministic perspective to evaluate the protagonist's behavior.

There are many feministic theories that approach women's issues at multiples of framework. Objectification theory is one such theory that touches the deep chord of the gender issues. It helps in bringing women equal to men under different socio cultural contexts. It is true that both men and women can be objectified but in most cases, women become the victims of objectification very easily. From the past to the present, women, their body, their appearance and their functions have been seen by the patriarchy as an object. Mainly, women are objectified in terms of sexual orientation. Fredrickson & Roberts define women's sexuality that they have articulated on how women are sexually objectified, why they are treated as objects and how they are valued by other. Moreover, they have identified women becoming victims of self-objectification that they internalize the outsider's view of women being treated as objects and starts to self-objectify themselves in a way they treat themselves as an object to be looked at. Hence, the self-objectification syndrome can lead women to psychological problems such as anxiety about their appearance, anxiety about their safety, body shame, depression etc.

Immanuel Kant has articulated on this issue of objectifying women; particularly his view adds strength to the contemporary feminist discussion. He talks about this in his work *Lectures on Ethics*,

“Sexual love making of the loved person an object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts

away a lemon which has been sucked dry.” (Immanuel Kant, Lecture on Ethics)

Kant states that the society’s view of women has reduced their status as mere objects. Martha Nussbaum, a feminist critic has traced down certain premises where women are made as objects. She has culled out some seven features of objectification through a systematic analysis. They are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, denial of subjectivity. However, her concept of objectification argues both positively and negatively the consequences of objectification on a person’s humanity. She says,

“... objectification has features that may be either good or bad, depending upon the overall context.” She says in terms of positive aspects, “The term objectification can also be used... in a more positive spirit. Impossible combination between objectification and equality, respect, and consent might after all be possible.” (Nussbaum)

Objectification becomes negative when equality, respect and consent are absent. Nussbaum argues objectification becomes problematic when there is loss of autonomy in certain contexts.

Margaret Laurence has created a stubborn character Hagar who seems to fight the social stigma of objectifying women. Hagar in many contexts has never allowed others to treat her as an object instead she has objectified men for her benefits. Laurence has embodied the character Hagar with the virtues of men. Notably, Hagar is always compared with male characters who show excessive hubris such as Saturn in “Paradise Lost”, Mariner in “The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner”, Oedipus in Oedipus Rex, Faustus in Doctor Faustus, Macbeth in Shakespeare’s Macbeth etc. These characters display high level of hubris that has led to their tragic downfall. Hubris is the state of extreme amount of pride, arrogance and self-confidence. As by the old saying, “Pride goes before a fall,” all the above mentioned characters met with a tragic end. Hence, hubris is seen as a problematic trait that leads to negative consequences. In the same way, Hagar, the hubristic person never accepts that she is wrong. She always tries to dominate others. It is also the attitude of the colonizers. She says, “Pride was my wilderness and the demon that led me there was fear... [I was]

never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched.”

However, Hagar undergoes transformation at the final part of her life. Yet, Hagar’s over dominant traits pictures her as a new woman. Laurence is successful in placing Hagar parallel to men in terms of character traits breaks the stereotypes of the society.

Martha Nussbaum’s identification of seven elements under the objectification of woman is falsified by Hagar’s act in several incidents. Hagar plunders equality, respect and consent thought her stubborn and bold actions. She hasn’t allowed anyone to overrule her instead she has exhibited dominance back upon the chauvinistic society. She has resisted objectification by her pride and as a consequence of her pride she has started to objectify others including her male members of the family. Hagar’s this act is not seen positively instead it would satisfy the feminist who may see it as the outpour of one’s repressed feeling from the past. This unusualness has made this character unique and has made memorable.

Hagar being a dominant character has resisted instrumentality that she never allowed others including her father, brother, husband and sons to treat her as a tool for their purpose. In many occasions she avoids being used as an instrument. Her brother Daniel Currie has caught fever after getting drowned into an icy river. He has been counting his last minutes. He requires good nursing. Hagar has been asked to nurse him by wearing her mother’s dress but she resists it.

“Do you know what he’s got in his dresser, Hagar?” Matt went on. “An old Plaid Shawl-it was hers. He used to go to sleep holding it, as a kid, I remember. I thought he had thrown out years ago. But it’s still there.” (The Stone Angel)

She even has considered scaling to be human at the desperate situation would objectify her. In another occasion, due to her intelligence in business management, her father wants her to take care of his business but she disobeyed him. She has other interest like becoming a school teacher. She is not ready to substitute her interest for her father’s wish.

Hagar fights against the denial of autonomy. She takes decisions on her own. When anything hinders her freedom she boldly takes actions. It reveals her

survival spirit. The decision about her career has been taken by herself. She doesn't allow her father to interfere on it. And the decision of her marriage to Brampton Shipley is purely her choice. Her father disagrees with her marriage proposal. Autonomy has been denied by her father but still she surpasses it. Then after her marriage to Shipley, twenty four years later she believes her autonomy is affected so she decides to leave her house. She decides to take a job in a neighboring town as a housekeeper. Even when she is at her ninety years, she feels that her autonomy is denied. When her son Marvin plans to put her in the nursing home, she leaves her home and takes refuge at an abandoned building in shadow point near the seashore. She says,

“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, or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time.”

In certain occasions, she has curbed the autonomy of others especially when her son John plans to marry Arlene Simmons, Hagar has resisted. But later they have married and unfortunately they both are killed in an accident.

Hagar never allows anyone to treat her as a person lacking agency and as a person being inactive. She never shows the inertness because she exhibits excessive confidence and self-esteem. She feels proud in her family's background, heritage. Hence, her stubborn nature radiates her pride in the form of upright gestures. Being a highly educated woman and always decorative has made her undependable on men. She was proud in being the daughter of a business man but her marriage to Brampton Shipley the already married man who is an alcoholic and lazy has disturbed her pride. She opens talk only with people of her status that shows her high self-esteem. These qualities show that she is active and no one could pass her unnoticed.

She manages fungibility that she overcomes herself being interchanged with other objects. When her son Mervin plans to shift her to the nursing home, she thinks that her son is treating her as a burden to him. She doesn't want to be a burden to anyone, and so at her 90s has left her home and goes to the shadow point to find her way with her old

age pension amount. But in the last part of her life she undergoes transformation. She realizes her role when Sandra Wong, a sixteen year old girl has been undergoing a tough time. Hagar interchanged her role as a mother or a nurse to save her. She willingly extends her helping hand to the person in need.

She overcomes ownership that she resists others treating her as being owned, bought, or sold. Hagar has resisted the domination or a kind of ownership by her male family members on her that women of that time have been kept under the control of father, husband or their sons. Hagar releases herself from the clutches of her father Jason Currier from her childhood days onwards. At an incident, when her father whips her, she doesn't cry. It shows her resistance to her father's domination. The relationship between herself and her husband Bram is not a happy one. She never allows him to claim ownership on her. In fact, she marries him purely of physical attraction that reveals she has tried to claim ownership on him. Even after their twenty-four years of wedding, she leaves him and joins to work as a house keeper. It shows her independent nature and reveals she is not being owned by her husband. Also she doesn't allow her sons to take control over her. Even at her 90s, she leaves the house uninformed. It shows that she resists the control and domination of her son. This is how she has not allowed others to objectify her in terms of appearance and other aspects. Moreover, she never self-objectifies herself that she is not caught by the stereotypes of the patriarchy which expects women to be owned by men. In fact, she loves Bram by infatuation that shows her male counterpart is seen as an object by appearance. Likewise, she never gives herself to her husband as an object during intimate situations. Notably, her aversion towards sexual feeling with her husband reveals her attitude towards self-objectification.

She also manages denial of subjectivity. Denial of subjectivity happens when others treat a woman's experience and feelings not into account and so the woman is objectified. Hagar, by nature never shows feelings and emotions which makes her negatively superior at this place. Here, the denial of subjectivity is performed by Hagar. She never understands the feeling of others. She refuses her son's opinion of selling the large house; she refuses her son's desire to

marry his lover; she denies nursing her brother; she denies obeying her father. But, finally she changes herself. She has started understanding other's pain and suffering. She realizes that her pride prevents her to look down up on other's feelings. In a way, Laurence advocates a spiritual transformation in all to be in touch with the society.

To conclude, Laurence the novelist of characters has produced a prototype character. Hagar as a new woman to prove men and women are equal in society. Her depiction of Hagar favors the feminism though the character possesses negative traits. Hubris is seen as a tragic flaw in many characters; however, Hagar's excessive pride has elevated her status with the status of men in the society. Hagar has resisted objectification very boldly. However, as a fight back, she has objectified the male characters for her purpose. Notably when men or women objectify each other for their benefits it is unfair to the society. Laurence ends the novel rationally with the solution that Hagar undergoes a psychological and spiritual transformation. It emphasizes that not only women but also Men must have such transformation to achieve social wellbeing.

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