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# Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*: Race, Truth, and Reconciliation

**[*1]Dr. Vivek Kumar Dwivedi and [2]Dr. Pradeep Sharma**

[*1]Associate Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

[2]Independent Researcher, Vancouver, Canada.

**Abstract**

Margaret Laurence's four Manawaka series novels– *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners* – are at the outset the stories of some obscure Canadian families trying to make the ends meet under difficult circumstances. However, the novels also carry traces of the concept of 'reconciliation,' that was to appear on Canadian socio-political scene much later. Laurence was the first Canadian novelist to raise the issue of marginalization of the indigenous communities in Canada. So, the novels can be interpreted from a postcolonial perspective as well. The present paper is an analysis of *The Stone Angel*, also touching upon the themes of other three novels as a connecting thread. The lives of all the major women characters in the four works are intertwined with the lives of characters who carry forward the history of colonization of their communities and who cherish the struggle for freedom their forefathers had undergone as well as who cherish their traditions and cultural values, but now live as marginal elements in the powerful and influential communities of the colonizers. The present paper theorizes that the portrayal of indigenous people in Margaret Laurence's selected novels bearing alienation, rootlessness, identity crisis, fight for survival, desire for freedom, and communication gap, constitutes a narrative metaphor employed by the writer to articulate the liminal existence of the whole communities representing a coherent expression of their simmering discontent with repression and erasure of their histories, even erasure of the stories of children who suffered untold miseries under Canadian residential school system.

**Keywords:** Margaret Laurence, Manawaka Series of Novels, Marginalization, Indigenous communities, Reconciliation.

## Introduction

Margaret Laurence (1926-87) was one of Canada's most esteemed, celebrated, and innovative novelists and was also the founder of the 'Writers Trust of Canada.' It can be argued that Laurence was one of the first writers to kindle a feeling of an 'indigenous tradition,' among Canadian novelists by bringing to readers' attention the rampant racism in Canadian society as she spoke vehemently for the rights of the indigenous communities (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis). She earned international acclaim for her realistic fiction focused on the individual's quest for self-discovery and for what is termed in the current political climate as 'reconciliation' (Brink, 2023; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018) [6, 17], the subject of discussion in this paper. During her fertile literary career, she wrote five full-length novels and a number of short story collections. Laurence publicly spoke on social issues, especially world peace, social justice, equality of women, environment protection, literacy for all, and nuclear disarmament around the world (Hashad & Ahmed, 2016; Tony *et al*., 2024) [20, 48].

The thematic-semantic perspective chosen to be investigated in the present paper derives from the lives of fictional characters drawn by Laurence in her Manawaka series of novels, i.e. *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974). However, our chief focus would be on the storyline in *The Stone Angel*. The stated perspective emerges from a preliminary analysis of the novels and a closer scrutiny of *The Stone Angel*. The selected fictional characters are only supporting, and thus subaltern, characters in these works, although their lives are inextricably intertwined with the lives of the chief protagonists and other important characters. These characters are either the direct descendants of the colonized native peoples/Aboriginals of Canada or the products of interracial marriages between the Aboriginals and the white settlers – given a distinctive name Métis. The lives of these characters are impacted, one way or the other, by the colonial history of Canada and the Canadian wars, and therefore, they cherish the struggle for freedom their forefathers had undertaken to save their lands from economic, social and cultural invasion. They wish to preserve their traditions and cultural values against the fast-paced cultural upheavals taking place around them which, in fact, they see as harming to their mode of living (Aquash, 2013; Starzyk *et al*., 2024) [2, 45]. In the present-day Canadian society, these fictional characters are found to live *real lives* as marginal elements in the powerful and influential communities of the settler-colonizers. The point brought up for discussion in this paper is that Margaret Laurence's fiction was a timely, and much-needed, intervention in the colonial problematic of interracial relationships and their postcolonial

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

consequences, especially for some specific communities in the Canadian society, bringing to her readers' attention the necessity of multicultural, multiracial acceptance and inclusiveness in present-day Canadian socio-economic milieu. The paper is specifically focused on the portrayal of characters belonging to Lazarus Tonnerre family, that is, Piquette Tonnerre, Jules Tonnerre, Valentine Tonnerre, Jacques Tonnerre, and Piquette Jr. Tonnerre, who live on the margins of life. The working hypothesis is that Margaret Laurence's portrayal of ambivalence in the tragic lives of the Métis as a community mourning for the loss of political and social power and the death of their cultural values in Canada, displaying both complicity as well as resistance, reveals Laurence's own unease with the situation, symptomatic of the general unease among the descendants of white settlers to discuss the subject in Canadian contexts. Today the topic is not easy to broach without the feeling of unease, discomfort, and sometimes the feeling of guilt. Laurene was really much ahead of her time (Reynolds, 2008) [39]. The issue is that Canadian Aboriginals have seen colonization, but there hasn't been any 'postcolonialism' for them in the real sense of the term, therefore, Laurence's literary intervention in the issue is to be taken more of an advocacy for 'decolonization' of cultures and communities (Jackson, 2012; Jones, 2011) [24, 25]. Though colonial powers haven't left Canada as happened in other colonies in Asia and Africa, the issues related to the lives, cultures and traditions of the indigenous peoples of Canada are taken to be postcolonial issues since they are the issues affected by the presence of colonial powers in their midst. Margaret Laurence has taken up the issue of marginalization of the indigenous Canadians in her fictional works.

### *The Stone Angel*

*The Stone Angel* is the story of Hagar Shipley, a strong woman character who dominates the narrative from beginning to end of the novel. Hagar is past ninety when the narrative opens, and in a flashback mode she reflects upon the major events in her past life, eventually providing a glimpse into her present state of mind as well. Her story is narrated employing stream of consciousness technique for most part, and therefore the readers get a good peep into Hagar's thoughts and her unspoken reactions to various events, dialogues, and her often-occurring annoyance with people. Hagar Shipley was born Hagar Currie, daughter of Jason Currie, one of the founding fathers of Manawaka, a small town in the Canadian prairies. Hagar inherited that family pride. Jason Currie had three children–two sons and a daughter. The daughter (Hagar) was the youngest in the family and Jason's wife died after giving birth to her. Hagar was the only one in the family to go to university. However, she married, against her father's will, a widower farmer much below her social standing. She more two sons, John and Marvin. John was very friendly with a Metis man, Lazarus Tonnerre, whose family lived in a shack at the outskirts of the town. It is through John's contact with this family that readers get a glimpse into life in indigenous community, and their struggles for survival.

## Literature Review

The theorization and hypothesis on the postcolonial reading of Margaret Laurence's four Manawaka cycle novels, with special reference to *The Stone Angel*, is premised on a review of existing critical literature on Laurence's works (Atwood 1988; Beckman-Long 2005; Buss 2001; Davidson 1991; Duncan 2008; Franks 1997; Godard 1990; Hartveit 1997; Irvine 2006; Jackson, 2012; Jones, 2011; Kearns 1980; Martin 1994; Neneve 1996; Powell 1991; Reynolds, 2008; Riegel 1997; Siddall 1995; Smith, 2003; Stovel 2001; Taylor, 2019; Torpor-Constantin 2013; Wilson, 2015) [1, 3, 7, 10, 12, 16, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 33, 35, 37, 39, 16, 43, 44, 47, 49, 52]. Past research studies on Laurence's works have been reviewed with a view, first to establish the present research work in a continuum of such studies, second to appraise myself and the reader of the diverse opinions of Margaret Laurence scholars on her works, and finally to justify the relevance of the present research work. The term 'Canadian literature' in this paper refers to literature originating from Canada, specifically in English language. This clarification is important since Canada is a bilingual country, and there is enough creative literature originating from Canada in French language as well.

Increasing number of scholars have come to believe that Margaret Laurence's fiction yields better interpretation of the dominant social forces if tackled with contemporary critical theories. For instance, Arnold Davidson (1991) [10] observes that Margaret Laurence's works can be profitably interpreted using new critical tools. What Davidson means by newer critical tools, to my understanding, is the tools provided by contemporary critical theories, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and deconstruction, postmodernist literary theory, and postcolonial investigations. Take, for example, Martin's (1994) [33] study of Manawaka cycle of novels from a postmodernist perspective, with a hint of psychoanalysis. Martin reads Laurence's Manawaka series novels as instances of attack on the modernist desire enacted in the form of grand narratives such as Oedipus complex, organized around patriarchal themes.

Margaret Laurence's postcolonial concerns are invariably linked to the colonial history of Canada. Margaret Laurence, as we have noted above, raises post-colonial concerns in Canadian society in her fictional works, but only a selected few researchers have explored the theme of post-colonialism in Laurence's works, such as Zabus (1985) [53], Osachoff (1980) [36], Hughes (2016) [22], Godard (1990) [18], Howells (1990) [21], Buss (2001) [7], and Donaldson (1992) [11]. Zabus (1985) [53] compares Laurence's anti-imperialist outlook with that of Frantz Fanon, a leading figure whose seminal texts *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) left lasting impression on post-colonial studies. Osachoff (1980) [36] provides the reader with a general glimpse of colonialism and post-colonial issues in the work of Laurence, especially her work on African society and on the Métis in Canada. Hughes (1978) [22] examines *A Jest of God* and argues that this novel has all the potential of being read as a political text, emphasizing that critics mostly read *A Jest of God* as a psychological text, which does not exhaust all the thematic possibilities of the text. Godard (1990) [18] displays how *The Diviners* is a parodic rewriting of canonical texts, such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and a subversive text on the dominant ideological discourse in Canada. Similarly, Howells (1990) [21] discusses feminist concerns in Laurence's writings.

In Canada, colonialism deprived the native inhabitants of the land-the aboriginal peoples –of their lands, and of their future in the emerging nation. Laurence describes their condition, "once lords of the Prairies," they were "now refused burial in their own land" (*The Diviners*, 268). They were now reduced to live on the margins of the white society. When the white settlers took the political affairs in their own hands, the colonial center virtually lost control over the colony, but the fate of the colonized remined the same. The Manawaka

society best describes this new reality, as Neneve's (1996) [35] comment sums it up: "Manawaka is marked by imperialism in the relationship between Anglo-Scots settlers and the colonized Metis or even non-British settlers" (p. 89).

**Methodology**

For the study of postcolonial interventions and their impact on the lives of indigenous peoples, I build my arguments mainly on the works of postcolonial theorists, such as Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967) [14, 15], Edward Said (1979, 1994) [41, 42], Mary Louise Pratt (1992) [38], and Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994) [4, 5]. Frantz Fanon was a very influential critic of colonialism and its impact on indigenous cultures, and Laurence appears to be affected by his ideas. Fanon's concept of decolonization, especially to use the past to open up the future is present in her works. Laurence puts this technique to use in *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*. Hagar's tale is the tale of her past going back to four generations, and Christie's tale of Piper Gunn is used to the similar effect. In addition, we have the tales of the Métis' ancestors retold by Jules Tonnerre. The perspectives of other postcolonial theorists offer diversity to the understanding of Laurence's work. For instance, the theory of a discursive power existing to legitimize and sustain colonialism presented by Edward Said (1993) [42] adds a different dimension in our analysis. Said's contention is that the discourse of the colonizers on the culture and knowledge of the colonized is a ploy to maintain the colonizer's presence in the colony (Pratt 1992) [38], on the other hand, it helps us understand the way Europeans classify and systematize the colonial "other" as a strategy to maintain their authority over the subaltern. Homi Bhabha's analysis of mimicry (1994) [5], that is, an act of the colonized which is the unwanted outcome of a colonial indoctrination process, is crucial to grasp the behavior of the colonized. Mimicry could be a discursive maneuver to destabilize the authority of the dominant discourse, or it may be just to come to terms with the changing powers. One finds Bhabha's theory valuable in understanding Laurence's work. Laurence denounces colonialism in her works, and presents resistance to the hegemonic impulse of the colonial culture through the actions of her characters.

**Discussion**

The review of related literature shows that racial issues got attention of the Canadian federal as well as provincial governments during 1960s (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Macklem & Sanderson, 2016; Miller, 2017; Starzyk *et al*., 2024) [17, 32, 34, 45]. Starzyk *et al*. (2024) [45] observe that Indigenous peoples have fought against centuries of colonial oppression in Canada. Canada is currently embarking on what is probably going to be a protracted and convoluted truth and reconciliation journey in response to their resurgence and demands for justice. In 1963, the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson set up the Royal commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. And of course, this was the time when Laurence began publishing her fictional works raising the issues concerning racial injustice and marginalization of the Indigenous Canadians.

**Decolonization**

Laurence favours decolonization of Canada using the past to open up the future, as the idea is present in Fanon's concept of decolonization. In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley relives her past going back to four generations to reconnect better to her present, and in *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey Cameron is suddenly thrown into past reveries of Manawaka life by her chance encounter with Valentine. The memories bring to her mind the pathetic life of the Métis family of Lazarus Tonnerre in Manawaka, though the pathos may also have been triggered by Valentine's flashy appearance who was trying to hide her pain under revealing clothes and smoking weed. Stacey is reminded of the "Tonnerre family shack surrounded by discarded tin cans and old car parts and extending in a series of lean-tos, at the foot of die hill in Manawaka" (p. 240), and the memory extends to the Tonnerre past, the story she must have heard from her parents as a teenager, or it must have become a kind of folklore in Manawaka since she knows that the shack was:

> …originally built a long time ago by old Jules Tonnerre, who was a boy then, when he stopped off and stayed in the Wachakwa Valley on his way back from the last uprising of his people, on his way back from Batoche and Fish Creek, from the last and failed attempt to save themselves and their land, the last hopeless hope which was finished the year Riel was hanged in Regina. (p. 240)

The four Manawaka series novels are interconnected by several threads, one of them being the story of the Métis Tonnerre family, which, beginning with Lazarus Tonnerre in *The Stone Angel*, continues with his daughters- Piquette in *The Diviners* and Valentine in *The Fire-Dwellers*, concludes with Jules Tonnerre, his son with whom Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* fell in love in her school days and later gave birth to his daughter, Piquette junior. In *The Stone Angel* Lazarus Tonnerre was a war veteran, like Hagar's elder son Marvin, but there is a sharp contrast between their lives after the war. Marvin is settled well, while Lazarus, when makes a family, provides for it by hunting and trapping, which is not a foolproof means of providing for a family, which is rather large. His shanty shack is at the outskirts of the town in the river valley, while Marvin lives in a good house with his wife and children. In Tonnerre family's shack, the abode was a modest square cabin constructed from poplar poles and sealed with mud, erected by Jules Tonnerre some fifty years before, upon his return from Batoche with a bullet in his thigh, coinciding with the year of Riel's execution and the onset of a prolonged silence for the voices of free Métis. What we can glean from Laurence's narrative in *The Stone Angel* is that although the oppressive social conditions need to be abolished for both, yet the action is more urgent for people like Lazarus since the routes for social progress are blocked for them, not for the whites, therefore, they live and die in poverty, penury and subjugation.

In *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, and *The Diviners*, Laurence appears to deconstruct, historicize, and recommend substitutes of the Oedipus complex and its inferences. In each novel, Laurence picks up a changed setting for the rearticulation of desire: Rachel uses personal sphere to redevelop the structure of her desire; Stacey dwells on the thin boundary between public and private spheres and dissolves the opposition of the two to come out of her Oedipal cage; Morag as a writer reworks the Oedipal arrangement of the symbolic order. The Manawaka cycle of novels augur well to their thematic interpretation from postcolonial lens (Gillian Siddall, 1995) [43]. Canadian history has been riddled with biases, and the colonized natives who lost their identity in the process of acculturation feel it deeply, highlighted in *The*

*Diviners* by the classroom scene when children sing the anthem "The Maple Leaf Forever":

In days of yore
From Britain's shore
Wolfe the donkless hero CAME (titters: but what means
Donkless?)
And planted firm
Britannia's flag
On Ca-na-da's fair do-MAIN.
Here may it wave
Our boas' our pride
And join in LUV together
The THISTLE SHAMROCK ROSE entwine
The MAPLE LEAF FOREVER! (pp. 69-70)

Morag loves this song very much and "sings with all her guts" (p. 70), but she also notices that Skinner (Jules Tonnerre), a Métis boy, is not singing the song though he had the best voice in the class. Why should he sing the anthem that denies his whole existence but provides a strong identity and belongingness to the white children, like Morag? Look what Morag thinks about Skinner: "He comes from nowhere. He isn't anybody" (p. 70). They are a conquered, colonized race. The anthem joins in love together only 'thistle,' 'shamrock' and 'rose' to form the 'maple leaf' (the national symbol of Canada). And Siddall quotes Margaret Laurence's comments following the anthem, which very succinctly sums up the historical bias in Canada since what all these emblems mean is an obvious obliteration of the presence and history of the conquered natives, a complete elimination of a race:

> She also knows what the emblems mean. Thistle is Scots, like her and Christie (others, of course, too, including some stuck-up kids, but her definitely, and they better not forget it). Shamrock is Irish like the Connors and Reillys and them. Rose is English, like Prin, once of a good family. (p. 70)

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada, like Skinner, do not share the heroism of Wolfe, the Donkless hero, since, in fact, it was their land where Wolfe planted the flag of Britannia firmly, uprooting them as well as conquering his French rivals fighting for supremacy in Canada.

Scholars notice that Margaret Laurence denounces in her works, fictional as well as non-fictional, British colonialism in Canadian society (Buss, 2001; Neneve, 1996) [7, 35]. Laurence was acutely aware of the oppression, inequality and colonialism in Canada, and she gives a voice to it. Researchers find Laurence's characters highly persuasive figures (Irvine, 2006; Riegel, 1997) [23, 16]. Beckman-Long's (2005) [3] observes that through her fictional characters Margaret Laurence promotes her [own] ideology obliquely. In her writing on Africa and Canada, Laurence was trying to look for a common denominator for the three groups – the Africans, the Métis, and the Scots (Torpor-Constantin, 2013). Torpor-Constantin endorses this view and uses Homi Bhabha's words- "to turn the present into the past" (Bhabha 150).

**Anti-Indigenous Racism and Reconciliation**

Covert and overt anti-Indigenous racism is obvious in Canada. To cite just one example, Cooke and Shields (2024) discuss, in a scoping review of literature, anti-Indigenous racism in Canadian healthcare system, which reflects, of course, the situations exactly similar to those observed in other spheres of life. The researchers report that Indigenous patients meet an entirely different treatment from non-Indigenous patients. First of all, they are ignored, and if attended, they are treated more slowly compared to others. Second, their illness histories and other narratives are not believed. They are looked down upon as junkies, substance users, poor patients and poor parents who cannot afford good life for their wards. It is reported that Indigenous women and girls at higher risk to specific stereotyping, everywhere (Cooke & Shields, 2024) [8]. The term 'reconciliation,' which is closely concerned with Canadian Indigenous peoples, is now used much in Canadian social and literary contexts. What is meant by reconciliation is the course of founding and upholding a reciprocally courteous relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the country (Craft & Regan, 2020; Macklem & Sanderson, 2016) [9, 32]. Indigenous children were abused in residential schools; there were attempts to erase their languages and cultures as they were forbidden to speak their native tongue, and indigenous women were sterilized (Stote, 2015) [46]. Reconciliation as a term rose to prominence in Canadian socio-political circles in the late 1990s. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), an agency to deal with anti-Indigenous racism and especially to document the impact of residential schools on the lives of Indigenous children, was established in 2008 (*The Canadian Encyclopedia*). It is in this broader socio-political and literary context that Maragaret Laurence's portrayal of certain characters in her fictional works is discussed in this paper.

**Colonial Perspectives/Racial Attitudes**

A close reading of *The Stone Angel* reveals that Hagar Shipley, the protagonist, mirrors the socio-political prejudices of her time. Her upbringing, especially her father's attitude, reflects a colonial mindset that often discredits Indigenous identities. Laurence's portrayal of Hagar is a reminder of the racial hierarchies that were the basis of colonialism, traceable in early 20th-century Canada (Smith, 2003) [44]. Hagar is clearly dismissive toward individuals outside her elite social class, and though she fell in love with Brampton Shipley, she never regarded him her equal. So, obviously, Indigenous people to her were no more than social scum. Laurence offers in her works a critique of this eternal colonial biases in Canadian society (Jones, 2011) [25]. The setting of the novel, the fictional town of Manawaka and its social structure, also mirrors Canada's struggles with racial prejudice and the efforts towards reconciliation. Although the presence of Indigenous characters is dismal in the novel, yet that too is indicative of the historical erasure, silence, suppression, and marginalization of the Indigenous community, of their exclusion from the dominant cultural mainstream (Wilson, 2015) [52]. It is worth noting that despite raising racial injustices, Laurence does not explicitly foreground race. However, the absence of explicit reference to race in her works is itself a commentary on Canada's history of marginalization (Taylor, 2019) [49].

***The Stone Angel*: Reconciliation**

In *The Stone Angel*, reconciliation seems to work on several levels and under several layers of meaning. For instance, Hagar finds herself unable to accept the new realities in her life. That is symptomatic of Canada's struggle to confront historical injustices towards Indigenous communities. In the words of Reynolds (2008) [39], Hagar's personal journey is a

metaphor for broader Canadian reconciliation since the prejudices are deeply ingrained, which can only be undone through self-awareness and self-reflection. It is also to be noted at this juncture that the contemporary notions of reconciliation (defined by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) are different from what Laurence's fiction are engaged with, yet in essence they align well with her themes and illustrate the required acknowledgment of past wrongs. Eventually, Hagar accepts her son, Marvin, and also realizes her past mistakes. Of course, that is slow and painful process of reconciliation, but Canadian society is coming to terms with that (Jackson, 2012) [24].

**Conclusion**

To sum up, *The Stone Angel* is not overtly centered around the themes of race and reconciliation, but race is an underlying factor in the novel, and Hagar's reconciliation with her son and his wife is a hint of the things to come in Canadian society at a later stage. In that sense, Laurence was a visionary novelist. Her fictional works are critiques of the racial hierarchies, prejudices, marginalization, and efforts towards reconciliation in Canada. Laurence suggests that for meaningful reconciliation, the society must essentially confront the past, though that is extremely painful to many. While race remains peripheral in *The Stone Angel*, its presence underscores the novel's engagement with themes of identity, history, and healing. Margaret Laurence's contributions to this changing scenario to Canadian identity landscape is extraordinary (Dudek, 2000). Margaret Laurence's Manawaka cycle of fiction (between 1964 and 1974), chiefly contributed to the Canadian literary landscape bringing a distinct awareness towards the struggles of marginalized communities, Indigenous people being one of them. Laurence also shaped a distinct Canadian identity which was at odds with the exclusionary politics of the Canadian government (Dudek, 2000).

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