Chapter Three

Evolution of Prairie Women from their Crippling Bonds

Women have a greater ability to identify with
others to sustain a variety of relationships and
to attain a genuine reciprocity in these
relationships. Gilligan.

Laurence’s protagonists are women who are ignored by their family and the society or women who do not indulge in any of the social activities. Laurence reveals their full value as human beings. She writes about old women, single woman, women in middle age and also about women who suffer in the patriarchal society. She writes about the kind of people who do not fascinate, and it is her genius that she makes whatever she focuses, interesting. As Howell puts it she “is particularly conscious of a personal need for the imaginative revision of history” (34). David Stouck calls Margaret Laurence “the first writer to create a feeling of tradition among Canadian novelists” (241).

The tone of Margaret Laurence’s voice in her novels has been described as “deeply humanistic” (Howells 39) and Laurence is more concerned on “female subjectivity and what being the subject of one’s own story means” (Howells 39). Many of these women’s stories about the lives of girls and women between the 1950s and the 1960s are concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging limits and glimpsing new prospects. Even though Laurence accepts herself to be a feminist, a woman who believes in equal rights for women, she says: “. . . men are not the enemy – that is men are our brothers, lovers, the fathers of our children . . . the efforts of women to respect and free themselves must be done without
damaging men” (qtd in King 301). Atwood speaks of Laurence’s balanced outlook in spite she being a feminist. Laurence is apologetic in acknowledging her focus only on women.

I’m 90% in agreement with Women’s Lib. But I think we have to be careful here . . . for instance, I don’t think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be reeducated with the minimum of damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers . . . We can’t live without them, and we can’t go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well.

(23)

Thus, she does not take a negative stand against men.

Laurence portrays women powerfully in her Manawaka cycle. As Morley states, “This cycle of fiction constitutes a remarkable gallery of vital individuals, a composite portrait of women’s experience in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the imaginative recreation of an entire society” (81). Nora Foster Stovel appreciates Laurence’s portrayal of a fictional family of women in her Manawaka cycle:

Just as Modern American photographer Edward Steichen created a pictorial Family of Man, so Margaret Laurence creates a fictional Family of Woman in her Manawaka cycle, as she portrays her female protagonists in every possible familial and social role – as mother, daughter, sister, and wife, and as lover, friend and, most important writer. (Stovel 23)
Diana Brydon states in “Silence, Voice and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women,” that her books give ordinary women their voices back. They reach out to their readers to establish a sense of community. “And in claiming full humanity for all her female characters, her novels challenge the stereotypes that have limited women to preordained and constricting roles” (Brydon 203).

Stovel states that “. . . the five Manawaka texts form a cohesive unit, like Scott’s Waverley Novels” (82). Laurence explains, “When I wrote The Stone Angel, I had no idea there would be other books coming out of the Manawaka background, and indeed it turned out that there were five books . . . even though each of these books is, of course, quite independent of any of the others, they can be seen as a kind of whole” (Sullivan 77). Laurence, while writing the novels does not have particular reader male / female in her mind. Instead, “A writer may not have in mind a particular kind of reader at all, he may be superbly indifferent to who reads his work, but a certain kind of reader is already included within the very act of writing itself, as an internal structure of the text” (Eagleton 73).

With the publication of The Stone Angel, Margaret Laurence indulges in a recycling of female-type. With the prime-mover Hagar, she is able to invigorate an active engagement with characters, especially Hagar. The novel covers a range of subjects: characterization, familial pattern, human interaction and humanness. With quite a variegated range of thematic orientations, Laurence develops a new perceptive knowledge of femininity as she draws the readers into apprehending Hagar, pivotal to all the generating subjects.

The ninety year old Hagar could be regarded as an extreme case in that, Laurence illustrates two aspects of the feminine in the art of characterization. Firstly
the novel projects an old lady still curious about the young world, yet resisting to be adapted into it through a “can they force me?” (SA 76) complexion, and secondly, it involves a lady with an extreme effort of will as “they [her son and daughter-in-law] stand transfixed by my thundering voice” (76). Nevertheless, Hagar also generates desperation in a reader to believe that she is just an ordinary old woman, blessed with a long life “rampant with memory” (5).

Hagar, is a product of a Canadian Cultural construct deriving a nostalgic wish fulfillment invoking the Highlander, as she feels to “be the most fortunate of all men on earth, spending their days in flailing about them with claymores, and their nights in eightsome reels” (15). She is also, a genetic residual of the fictional Manawaka prairie, a fitting sample of the bygone days – “so much for sad Regina, now forgotten in Manawaka – as I, Hagar, am doubtless forgotten” (4).

Rather than articulating her own world, she feels that it is more articulated by her son Marvin and his wife Doris as evidenced by the following passage:

I glance from one to the other, and see they are united against me.

Their faces are set, unyielding. I am no longer certain of my rights.

What is right and what rights have I? Can I obtain legal advice against a son? How would I go about it? A name from the telephone directory?

It has been so long since I dealt with that kind of thing. (76)

When Laurence posits the above mentioned passage of Hagar’s conflicts, one could perceive it as a conflict external in its ramifications. The novelist intensifies Hagar’s external conflict with her internal conflict, generated by her sleeplessness and as evidenced in the following lines; “Then, just when I am afraid to sleep, for what may possibly occur, sleep wants to overcome me. I tussle with it, bid it begone, fidget and
fuss, so I may not yield. The result- my feet get cramps, and my toes are drawn up
into knots. I must get out of bed” (77).

Hagar’s conflict, as expressed internally and externally is further developed
moments later, when she sees no point in arguing as also “there is no one to speak to”.
(81) Hagar attempts to annihilate the present misery through a nostalgic lane in which
she finds her father as real consolation and supportive. Her father decides that Hagar
should go to college and not his son Mathew. Her father prefers Matt stay home as
“he’s past twenty – [and] it’s too late for him” (42). Her father seeks to redefine
Hagar’s femininity “a credit to me” (43). Yet, her father is also one of a male clan,
when he bars Hagar from taking out a teaching assignment. He is firm in his stand as
he asserts, “Anyway, no daughter of mine is going out there alone. You’ll not teach,
miss” (44). Hagar does not go out for teaching. She stays home and keeps her father’s
accounts, “played hostess for him, chatted diplomatically to guests, did all he
expected” (45).

Laurence provides early in the novel, a few examples of a sense of loss of
identity in Hagar. For example the following passage is an external manifestation of
Hagar’s inner turmoil:

My bed is 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, . . . The icy whiteness covers
me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught
in a blizzard, and freeze. (81)

Laurence carefully structures the character premising an inter reliant characteristic. It
echoes Hagar’s situation as dependent on her son and at the same time, it contests the
representation of the psyche. While representing Hagar’s psychic condition, the passage is also evocative of the geographically dispersed conditions of the contemporary condition post structural infrastructure. Hagar finds it very difficult, in fact, to organize and fit herself in both the patterns namely the home and the *Home for the Aged*. What is more, Laurence’s emphasis on how Hagar’s once productive and performative body in the sense that she has borne children to the world and also bread to the table, is now a primary site of disuse owing to the contemporary unethical society. Hence, Laurence forces the reader to identify the male-centred definition equating a non-performative body as simply a liability. Rather, as the novel continues, Hagar’s interior monologues come to define her and her unique relationship with her children. With Doris, Laurence marks those moments when they are alone together with Hagar’s moment of self articulation marked with her loss of identity, as she speculates, “How it irks me to have to take her (Doris) hand, allow her to pull my dress over my head, undo my corsets . . . and have her see my blue-veined swollen flesh . . . that still proclaims with lunatic insistence a non-existent womanhood” (77).

Even as Hagar privately seeks to establish herself as an autonomous agent, she challenges some of the traditional ideas of woman in the evening of her life. The issue of interior monologues provides the kind of access the novelist gives to readers. Also, the inner conflict generated by these monologues prelude the assertion and annihilation of Hagar’s self. A tragic protagonist she is, Hagar offers a different perspective of character in that, she administers a cut across the so called patterns of sympathy expressed by Mr. Troy and the Marvins.

Later, as one moves on into the next segment, one is surprised by the way Hagar, the young mother handles John, her son. Through many an enigmatic silences, she brings up John. Though Hagar has money of her own, she “discovered a way to
get some” (126). From the farm eggs she has sold, she buys a gramophone “with a
great black cornucopia on top and a handle you had to crank incessantly” (127).
Though “John didn’t take to music very much”, she likes to play “in the days” all
those records, “Ave Maria, The Grand March from Aida, In a Monastery Garden,
Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms” (127).

With John’s girl friend Arlene, Hagar negotiates a relationship punctuated
with caution. She wonders at how Arlene could set her son right, which she couldn’t.
At the same time, she is proud of Arlene, who “claims he’s settled down now” and
Hagar hopes “she’s right” (210).

To Hagar, Arlene is just a lovely girl and “Being an only child, of course,
she’s had advantages not everyone can have” (210). Nevertheless Hagar does not
relish the very fact that “Arlene was out at our place so frequently it got on my
nerves.” (213). This, of course, generates wrath in John, as he says furiously, “I won’t
bring her here at all. Would that suit you? (213) and the novelist’s comments are
illuminating here as she associates John’s departure with the wind. She writes,

All that long month while the heat haze hovered like a mirage of water
over the yellowed bluffs, and the devil’s breath of a wind charred the
sparse grass and blew the fields away, the two of them had for their
home the ditches . . . I never found out where they went or where they
made their momentary bed or what it was they knew there for a while.
(214)

And here, Laurence presents Hagar as a repelling individual who has embodied
paradoxically the repressive woman in the hostile patriarchal confines of the familial
ambience. Hagar comes as a sympathetic figure, who is haunted by the memories of
John, who is no more. She is victimized by Bram Shipley and her son Marvin and significantly, her daughter-in-law Doris. Laurence, here articulates this criticism of patriarchy in an incident that works up to the events leading to Hagar’s departure for the Home for the Aged. Hagar’s status as a cultural non-being is enunciated in principle and practice at the Marvins as she is terribly hurt by the psychological abuse. Hagar looks for a way out. Hagar’s portrayal has close affinities to the crone defined by Mary Daly, a feminist theologian: “A woman becomes a crone as a result of surviving early stages of the other world journey and therefore discovers depth of courage, strength and wisdom in herself” (16).

Hagar has imposed on herself a self-exile, which she hopes, would clinch for her a self-confidence. This is how the novelist makes of the situation:

Why doesn’t Marvin come? He hasn’t a thought for me. He’s off gallivanting with Doris. At the movies, more than likely, the pair of them, not giving a care whether I live or die. Well I won’t. They needn’t think they’ll get my house that easily. It he tries to sell it, I’ll get the lawyer on him. (SA 218)

At the Shadow Point, Hagar gains sustenance with an unexpected meeting with Murray F. Lees, a gentleman with “a rodent face [and] . . . a ginger colored mustache,” (221). The story of Murray and his wife “a big strapping girl, a redhead” (227) impresses Hagar so much that she is carried away by the life story yet she is appalled by the story and she grows sleepy, listening to him, but something in his voice keeps her awake.

It is significant to note that Hagar approaches towards recognisability as she gestures and nods towards knowing Murray’s past. Though Murray is a minor
character, he becomes strategically important in the hands of the novelist, and also as necessary to the plot. Murray is a representative of another familial pattern in which Hagar is known to see distress and despair. Also the novelist works out a human bond by juxtaposing two familial structures. Especially when Murray speaks of his wife:

‘I was fond of her’, he says defensively. ‘Did I say fond? I was crazy about her. In those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right down from heaven, if she’d been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn’t a sweeter place in this entire world’. (227)

By juxtaposing spirituality with the flesh, Murray brings in his philosophy of life, that life is nothing but strangeness that “gnawing at his moustache” (230). Hagar could identify herself with Murray’s wife and she maintains that both of them to be companions in distress. Consequently, for Hagar, “the pain has quite vanished” (228), and “His strangeness interests me and I wonder how I could have thought him a bore” (230). And a passage from the novel warrants mention here: “I lean forward, attentive, ease a cramped limb with a hand, and look at this man, whose name I have suddenly forgotten but whose face, now turned to mine, says in plain and urgent silence – Listen. You must listen” (232).

Murray plays a structural role rather than a personal one since he hardly emerges a character at all. A catalyst he is, Murray enunciates a new meaning in life which Hagar plunges to clinch it. No one else in the novel knows of Murray, so his presence coincides with Hagar’s present anguish and so bewilderedly, yet relishing
every moment of it, she substitutes herself for Murray. Hagar speculates:

He thinks he’s discovered pain, like a new drug. I could tell him a thing or two. But when I try to think what it is I’d impart, it’s gone, it’s only been wind that swelled me for an instant with my accumulated wisdom and burst like a belch. I can tell him nothing. I can think of only one thing to say with any meaning. (233-234)

More importantly, Hagar has been fixed historically to contextualize strong bonds in terms of friendship. Hagar, like the stone angel, “without the eyes” tends to refer either to the love of mortals or if supernaturally fixed, to enunciate the principle of innocence. Hagar gains the archetypal significance in that she has been reduced, or at least she feels like an innocent lamb to be slaughtered. Like her namesake, she represents, initially, a woman cursed to suffer and then through her marital commitment with Bram Shipley, she emerges into a new being, as evidenced in her love for her children. She, consequently represents a self-sacrificial, possibly, selfless individual.

The novelist fixes for Hagar or rather constructs a situation, contemporaneous with the post structural paradigm in that, Hagar becomes an object of waste, old enough to be thrown into a pitcher. An owner of a huge house, Hagar has been irrevocably reduced to a public ward as she has no other room. The hospital room emerges as the agent of one of the post-structured imperatives which necessitates the hospital room as a preparatory space and time for the other world.

Lord, how the world has shrunk. Now it’s only one enormous room, full of high white iron cots, each narrow, and in each one a female body of some sort. I didn’t want a public ward, but Marvin said the
doctor told him there was no room anywhere else. I wonder. I just wonder...I’m like an exhibition in a museum. (254)

In this bedlam, Hagar lies, “on my slab of a bed, the sheet drawn up to my chin, my belly like a hill of gelatine under the covers, quivering a little with each breath” (255). Helplessly, Hagar attempts to gain for a moment the illusion of privacy in vain.

Hence, Laurence posits the symptoms of cancer on Hagar as the latter feels “the pain beating its wings against her rib cage. Hagar has been engulfed by “the noise of women breathing, the snore, the whimper, and neigh a little near her. Evidently and obviously, “And endlessly, the breathing and the voices flutter like birds caught inside a building” (256). From her once glorious world effaced by the wind that shook the scrub oak and the lilacs that used to grow beside the gray front porch with leaves like dark green hearts. Hagar is fixed in a cosmos of chaos marked by a “constant jingle and ring of curtains . . . the nurse to curtain off my bed . . . so you sleep here as you would in a barracks” (255). Hagar’s world slips out of her hand on to the nurses in white.

Reading Hagar in the hospital ambience is as much situating oneself to the cultural feminist movement. The question and meaning of the presence of the clinical construct could be answered in two distinct ways. And these can give one a veritable way of thinking about the significance of the character analysis.

The first answer tilts in favour of the novel being essentially a feminist oriented since it anticipates the challenging polemics of a woman’s body in disuse and also it negotiates a concern for tolerance and apprehension of the other by presenting the ninety year old Hagar as the protagonist. The novel endorses the fears than an
apparently old feminine psyche will rivet to neurosis under strain, as evidenced in the following act by Hagar in the hospital.

Heaving, I pull myself up. As I slide my legs out of bed, one foot cramps and I’m helpless for a second. I grasp the bed, put my toes on the icy floor . . . There now. I’ve reached the bathroom and gained the shiny steel grail . . . All at once I have to stop and try to catch the breath that seems to have escaped me. My ribs are hot with pain. (300-301)

The second answer might recapitulate similar conclusions, but proceeds from a crucially different situation, that Hagar’s act need to be apprehended historically. Hagar is a product of the Manawaka Prairie deep rooted in the native Indian traditions. Hence, one could grasp Hagar as one of the participants of this historical discourse. This observation could be located in the following passage appropriately apprehended in the historical context. “The thing that bothered me most of all was to hear John’s deliberate rudeness, referring to Telford and Lottie that way, by their first names” (212).

Laurence manipulates the entire text in the awareness of the native legendary tradition which shows motherhood as something divine. Hagar’s position is both diametrically and historically opposed to this, since she is destined to be dumped at The Silver Threads. The second reading locates its meaning not in the text itself but in the text in its historical context. Hence, there is a guess perhaps, that the novel cannot operate other than its own historical assumptions.

More importantly, the importance of family is one of the concerns of history, and hence, Laurence through family and kinship, updates the text into a postmodern
context, still not shedding its historical categories. Laurence maintains this historic continuum without any disruption and negotiates a reckoning with postmodern feminist trait in order to establish the text as crucially uplinked to feminism and freedom. And a passage warrants mention here.

“The Curries are Highlanders. Matt – sept of what clan?”

“Sept of the clan Ranald Mac Donalds”

“Correct. Pipe music, Dan?”

“Clanranald’s March, Sir.”

“Right.”

“The war cry, girl?”

And I, Who loved that cry although I hadn’t an inkling what it meant”. (15)

Hagar of *The Stone Angel*, therefore following the tradition, took and treasured the ancient battle-cry of the Currie clan, “Gainsay who Dare” but ironically her “daring” was the destructive defiance of her marriage to Bram Shipley, against her father, against the town which she pretended to despise, and very shortly against her husband Bram himself. Hagar lived in battle, pitted against everyone who came close to her and, tragically, she betrayed them all—her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons, even John, the younger one whom she loved and would have helped. Hagar becomes a ruined angel in the destructive energy of her pride. “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 within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years” (292).

And the pattern culminates as Hagar does lose her life to find it, in the splendid, strongly-marked symbolism of the final lines— a fighting, dying, stubborn
old woman, a glass of water, the cup of life, the grace of God: “I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There. There. And then...” (308).

Symbolically, Hagar is, of course, a wanderer in the wilderness through her own wilfulness, like the biblical Hagar; the second wife of Bram Shipley, she resents and despises the memory of the first one as biblical Hagar resents Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Hagar flees Bram and the farm and lives self-exiled with her son John, who does grow up to be an Ishmael. Hagar is also “The Stone Angel” whose image presides magnificently over the novel as its blind presence presided over the town of Manawaka but Hagar’s eyes are finally opened and, in the end, she sees. Hagar is a tragic figure, finally redeemed. She is the stone angel of the Manawaka cemetery erected out of pride and not of love.

A reading of Laurence’s *A Jest of God* gives one a first impression of how the concept of self steps beyond the structural pattern of the issue of conflict. Above all, Laurence rejects the explicit or the implicit assumption that there is something like a self that contains conflict, external or internal. The novelist goes a step further by imbibing the inherent Saussurean pattern of externalization of the inner conflict and vice versa. One sees the book as a record of a feminine event which memorably formulates the discomfort and ease simultaneously. The following two passages will reveal clearly the externalization of the inner conflict and vice versa. “I always brush my hair a hundred strokes. I can’t succeed in avoiding my eyes in the mirror. The narrow angular face stares at me, the grey eyes too wide for it. I don’t look old . . . Or do I see my face falsely?” (*JG* 16). And then,
I can’t. Tonight is hell on wheels again. Trite. *Hell on wheels*. But almost accurate. The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling. (18)

While the first passage, through the mirror image emits the protagonist Rachel’s identity crisis, the second passage externalizes her inner conflict generated by her fear, “this waking nightmare . . . weird . . . that has already grown inside me and spread its roots through my blood?” (17). *A Jest of God* is the work of a novelist who owns an authentic and unlimited temperamental affinity with life. Laurence negotiates life through Rachel with a bleak painful intensity. She reserves the chapters to be delineated as against the back drop of human proclivity. In all its philistine glory, one witnesses life, lived essentially attached to characters. Rachel is connected to segments of characters representing individually, a context. Rachel is aware of other people like her family members and the academic circle. They begin to envelop her psyche bringing about deliberation upon her interior chemistry and so naturally, there is something that reveals Rachel as a character of sorts.

The crisis in Rachel’s mind develops into a symptom of “This pain inside my skull” (18) uncovers the grappling images of death with which she has been associated. Her father’s Funeral Parlour, “A nasty word, smacking of mortality” (13), evidences the fear borne Rachel. It is this that constitutes the character of Rachel and Laurence develops the character primarily in her confrontation with her inner view. Rachel attempts to reconstruct her psyche through nostalgia and her present vocation
as a teacher, “the one with the power of picking any coloured chalk out of the box and
writing anything at all on the black board” (1).

Laurence delineates the self consciousness of Rachel through the flow of inner
time, and then beyond the externalization of inner reflection like that “I’m susceptible
to colds, and when I get one it hangs on and on, and really pulls me down” (3). Rachel
attempts to exist for herself and herself only and she is continually given to herself, as
Sleep. Try.” (17) and, by the end of the first chapter, Laurence externalizes her
restlessness or the inner anarchy through the statement, “I can’t sleep” (18). The
novelist foregrounds the statement in preparedness for a worse condition of Rachel’s
mindset which induces her to run away.

Rachel is the novel’s essential character. This could be partly realized in terms
of what Margaret Laurence preserves and what she abandons. What she most notably
preserves is Rachel’s refusal to be intruded upon as evidenced in her discomfort over
Mr. Willard’s act as she says “why should Willard Pry? He has no right to open my
desk” (23). Rachel has to negotiate a mingling of issues, whether academic or
familial, personal or speculative. She attempts at a resolution of a problem and
eventually arrives at either a partial or a tentative solution.

Rachel is imaginative, and frail, hard pressed by the narrow orthodoxies of her
friend, Calla’s Tabernacle and the hovering brutalities of Mr. Willard, the headmaster
and her growing realization of her mind’s drift into fragmentation. Yet, Rachel soon
after, with a sense of an exuberant pride and ego, rejuvenates herself and
progressively develops an overwhelming sense of respite. Laurence fixes Rachel
pitted against her sister Stacey. Rachel always considers her an intruder. For instance,
the following quote might illustrate the point. Laurence writes, “When Stacey was here the last time she came into my bedroom while I was dressing. She never knocked or said could she come in” (20).

Similarly, Rachel is just irritated by her colleague Calla’s overwhelming sense of sin into which the severity of The Tabernacle has precipitated her upon the occasion of intruding upon Rachel’s privacy. Rachel feels quiet restless and so apprehensive that she can hardly accept Calla’s sense of religion “in a pretence of quiet” (34). She is not ready to listen for one simple reason that “People should keep themselves to themselves – that’s the only decent way” (35).

Margaret Laurence generates another Rachel in the book – the one who endlessly, yet consistently communes with herself especially on solitary walks about the River Street. The following passage could be taken as a brilliant illustration.

The day does end, of course. Am I walking home unusually slowly? I feel as though I were. Summer holidays will begin in another two weeks . . . I am trying to recall when I last hit a child. I cannot remember . . . In a year or two, will I have locked today away in some junk box, never to be found among all the other scraps and trifles. (54)

Thus, she is portrayed as a woman who keeps more to herself.

With Nick Kazlik in the background, the novelist weaves a complexity of character in Rachel. Both Rachel and Nick do not belong to the Manawaka Landscape, one of the reasons why they are drawn together. The place they live is filled with immigrants who migrated there for the same reason.
Half the town is Scots descent and the other half is Ukrainian. Oil, as they say, and water. Both came for the same reasons, because they had nothing where they were before. That was a long way away and a long time ago. The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God. (65)

Rachel further perceives him as hovering agonizingly between sublimity and absurdity. Nick is seen actually, yet poignantly shielding himself from the previous immigrant generation who have learnt to clothe their penury in the faded splendours of a bygone poetics. Rachel beholds a secret knowledge and secret power in Nick. She begins dramatizing to “make all this seem mysterious or significant, instead of what it is, which is embarrassing, myself standing gawkily here with no words” (86). While Rachel feels elated in the company of her friends, she is not exactly drawn toward their wavelength. While her friends connect her to boredom, Nick connects her to her legendary, her roots or rather their legendary and their roots.

Rachel does not mind visiting Nick’s place which is about three miles out of town, along the gravel highway where the telephone wires hum like the harps of the wind. To Nick, Rachel is special in that, he is able to see himself in her, a young and silent traveller brought once into this land by their grandfathers. By reason of this semblance of reality, he feels a companion to Rachel.

Rachel’s realization of self takes on a new turn. Her coming to her true vocation is thus by way of successive sensuous impressions on Nick, each of which naturally, has been building herself up. The sort of piety, pride and honour Nick has evinced from Rachel, consequently suggests that he is apt to be the redeemer for Rachel.
Rachel realizes that her destiny is to be elusive of these historical roots and hence, she is displaced and dispossessed of everything. Rachel has to learn, consequently from her own wisdom and so her mind oscillates. She realizes that she has conquered something beautiful from Nick. She will be able to write in her mind, the final truth about herself.

Certainly, it is on the broad current represented by these two, Rachel and Nick, the novelist builds up an esthetics, pivotal to the intellectual sensibility and apprehension of the readers. Yet, the central figure would still be Rachel, who might very aptly be represented as engaged in the quest for the wholesomeness, the sense of the real being. Unfortunately, without Nick, Rachel is found to be pretty well exhausted.

At the same time Rachel tells herself that her case is that of one, who never having known what love is, cannot get beyond it. Eventually there is thus some estrangement between herself and Nick. There is something final about the position she has arrived at, withers her consciousness and burns her up as she speculates, “Women like me are an anachronism. We don’t exist anymore. And yet I look in the mirror and see I’m there. I’m a fact of sorts, a fantasy of sorts. My blood runs in actual veins, which is as much of a surprise to me as to anyone” (117).

Fragmentation is the result of what Rachel does to herself. She indulges in the duplicity of self. She is helplessly drawn towards fantasy. She formulates a self, obviously intent on misapprehension of facts or reality. She ends up a true subject to a sort of reality that is fictitious and hence complicating. This destroys her willpower as she spontaneously considers the outer and the inner world to be an undifferentiated anarchy. Out of this undifferentiated chaos, Rachel attempts in vain to chalk out some
synthesis of morality or rather reasonableness. Hence, Rachel is dished out of her actual being.

She has separated herself from truth by adjusting and falsifying her psyche. Ultimately, she ends up the mistress over those manifold sensations, nothing of which is constructive. Thinking of her being pregnant, for instance, is one state of mind that profiles a conceived reality inherited from her own chaotic psyche. An inherited object of fantasy, Rachel reaches the status of non-entity. Thus, her idea of creating, rationalizing and adjusting prompts her to falsify reality. In short, Rachel fixes her own meaning of things. She has developed a will to exercise control over her fantastic imaginings and her throbbing uterus becomes the modus of her psyche. Although she thinks that she is fixed in truth, it is no truth whatsoever. Rachel is now clamped with a new issue of identity crisis.

Her visit to Dr. Raven and the subsequent surgery rivets Rachel to the real. In fact, her missing the month “Eleven days . . . Eleven days. Never before” (159) ends up in “The tumour [that] turned out to be benign” (184). Rachel becomes the conscious subject of the conscious reality. Much against the wishes of her sick mother, she sets out, of course, along with her mother, to a new horizon, Vancouver. With her psyche, still fragmented, she attempts to take on a new life as “The ironies go on” (200). According to Hammer, “A Jest of God apart from being a psychological study, is also a representation of social historical forces within Canada and its relation to Great Britain”. In explaining this symbolic comparison, Hughes says, “Mrs. Cameron is the mother country, the imperial power and Rachel ‘a Canada seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past and to make its own future’, her tumour, the colonial past and its values, and its removal, the end of the colonial state of mind” (50-51). The novel culminates with the evolution of emboldened Rachel breaking the
fetters and the realisation that Rachel should use her own strength though small and that, the town of Manawaka – her source and inheritance of her identity will go with her always offering her the nostalgic that would sustain her in dire circumstances.

_The Fire-Dwellers_ is special in that it projects the female protagonist in a way equated, at every point, to a specialized self. F.X. Merlin Medow constructs a brilliant defence based on the proposition that the novel “…brilliantly captivates an indefinable abstract fact of love and hate in motherhood [with] the character of Stacey Mac Aindra” (119). While commenting on _The Fire Dwellers_, Sunita Sinha finds Stacey as a woman too independent and individualistic. She writes,

Stacey Mac Aindra of _The Fire Dwellers_ is Rachel Cameron’s sister. She burns to bust through the shadows of her existence to a richer life, to recover the passion, she can only dimly remember from her past. It is an extraordinary novel of a beleaguered wife, mother of four children and married to a struggling salesman who is hardworking but uncommunicative. (_FD_ 68)

She plays all the roles that society has vested on her, in being a daughter, a sister to Rachel Cameron of _A Jest of God_, a mother to four children and a wife to Mac Aindra, the struggling businessman. Of all the roles, being a wife in charge of a family becomes the most challenging as Rohinton Mistry avers, “House wifery is the most important calling, requiring umpteen talents. Without housewife, there is no home; without home no family. And without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into chaos” (175). It is uniquely feminine, done with irony punctuated with subtlety and penetration which extends the readers’ comprehension of human experience. Merlin Medow posits the ideology that the
motherhood is biologically entangled to vacillate both ways – the fulfillment and frustration. This she calls “maternal ambivalence” (119). This causes, according to her, “. . . passions [that] in her resulting in a train of self-reproach, internalized and split off, [ultimately] leading to depression and aggression” (119).

Stacey sways between her sense of self and her responsibilities. As a mother she exercises restraint and is overprotective. She really cares about her children. Mac cannot fully understand the motherliness of Stacey. The conflict between them is brought out through a dialogue. Mac feels that Stacey pampers their son and he is against it.

If you want a pansy for a son, Stacey, you’re going the right way about it.
I don’t think so
I know so
Didn’t your mother ever get up in the night when you had a bad dream? (FD 29)

Thus, Stacey defends her stance revealing her motherly instinct.

Mac in his relationship with Stacey perceives resources of reason and moral enlightenment. Yet, his position as being “on the road” (22) distances him from Stacey. With Mac, Stacey finds it difficult to be herself and her sense of loneliness, she as feels, is aggravated by Mac’s company. Laurence reveals the external conflict of Stacey through Mac who “systematically restor[e] his physical and mental agony through sleep” (27). On the one hand, the peculiarity and strength of *The Fire-Dwellers* is , that it cannot be deemed a pure expression of radical feminism. The instinctive, non-ethical drive of radical feminism towards fulfilling self-at any cost is held in check by the author’s allegiance to the doubtful precepts of radical movements. Stacey’s realization of her duty “Where’s Mum? He [Ian] always thinks . . . I’ve got to get home, right now” (13) epitomizes the struggle within her. She is
highly introspective as she constantly analyses and questions her own perceptions and experience in which she is unremittingly honest. Unlike her name Stacey, which is short for ‘Anastasia’ from the Latin word ‘Stasis’ which means stability, she is highly dynamic and active. She is spurred to action not only by her nature but also due to the needs of the family. She is frustrated only when her actions are not equal to the demands of the situation and when through her action of speaking she is not able to communicate to others.

Laurence draws attention to the dialogue which is sustained all through the novel between passion and reason. Stacey rebels against this masculine authority tyrannical in all its claims as embodied in the person of Mac. Consequently, Stacey is placed under stress and emerges an oppressed individual. Yet her silence offers her a released passion. Laurence submits this moment through an interior monologue. “I will. I will anything. I will turn myself inside out. I will dance on the head of a pin. I will yodel from the top of the nearest dogwood tree. I will promise anything, for peace. Then I’ll curse myself for it, and I’ll curse you, too. Oh Mac.” (30)

Yet, Stacey’s self consciousness helps her to set aside the “I” in her as she recedes to her motherhood passions – “Okay I’ve aged this man, I’ve foisted my kids upon him . . . Tomorrow everything will look better.” (30) Manfred Frank, in one of his lectures on neo-structuralism observes the difference. He says,

We observed earlier the meaning of the expression ‘self-consciousness’ does not coincide with the meaning of the expression ‘I’, or at least does not have to coincide with it. [Hence] subjectivity . . . is not the same as consciousness, even though it presupposes consciousness as the dimension in which it can evolve. (230)
One of the reasons why, Stacey gets herself into intentional acts in the bedroom when Mac repeatedly clears his throat, Stacey is irritated outwardly. She asks Mac if she looks all right. Inwardly “it revolts me . . . to hear him hoicking up phlegm from his inner recesses” (37). Stacey exists “as a being of the sort of inner-worldly existing objects of which the pure transcendental ego is conscious” (Frank 231)

This is the elemental crisis of Stacey’s life. She is pushed to choose between the law of the society and her biological impetus. Stacey takes the second option yet her renunciation of the law of the society is passive, since Laurence reveals them only through interior monologues. It is a known fact that Mac has pulled her into a life of sacrifice punctuated by a non romantic marital existence. The loveless marriage pushes her into her crisis. She depicts every man and every woman in North American urban society, which is characterised by brutality, violence and deception. Stacey’s fears are generated by society and they are both personal and social. In Ten Years’ Sentences, Laurence explains: “Stacey is concerned with survival, like Hagar and like Rachel, but in her case it involves living in an external world which she perceives as increasingly violent and indeed lunatic, and trying simultaneously within herself to accept middle age with its tricky ramifications” (22).

The nursery rhyme in the opening of the novel reflects the world of fire in which Stacey is living, both internally and externally, figuratively and literally:

Lady bird, lady bird,
Fly away home
Your house is on fire
Your children are gone. (7)
In a perceptive article “Exploring Neurosis in the Feminine psyche” Supriya Shukla remarks, “Women writers present an insider’s view of the female psyche, their inner aspirations and their peculiar responses to men and things. The artistic contents of a woman writer reflects her vision and attitude; though her sensibility differs from age and it reflects the social ethos also” (71). Supriya Shukla considers that a woman alone can throw light on the representation of the feminine psyche.

When one tries to garner impressions of the novel, one naturally leans to looking at Stacey as two different sorts. One is that Stacey comes as a lonely and sorrowful lady at the Mac’s household and then the second one being her status as an intentional actor to while away the blues of her life. Stacey quite often experiences “Too much mental baggage . . . More more more than I want” (38). Yet she cannot be comfortable in any other company other than her husband and her children, as revealed in the following passage. “I stand in relation to my life both as child and as parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways, but whichever way I look, God, it looks pretty confusing to me” (46). And Stacey’s confused state of mind is matched by the city elements like “the lights of the city, rearing neons in lightning strokes of color . . . and the sea, salt warmth and decaying seaweed” (43).

The dominant symbol that is suggested in the title of the novel itself reveals both the inner and outer world of Stacey. They are in flames as the television constantly reminds in capital letters:

EVER – OPEN EYE . . . MAN BURNING. HIS FACE CANNOT BE SEEN. HE LIES STILL, PERHAPS ALREADY DEAD. FLAMES LEAP AND QUIVER FROM HIS BLACKENED ROBE LIKE
Therefore violence seems to be present everywhere in different proportions.

Tagore in “What is Art” says, “Woman has realised the mystery of life in her child more intimately than man has done” (147). Stacey feels that she has gained motherhood with her four children Ian, Duncan, Katie and Jennifer. She experiences a sense of wholesomeness. Yet something is lacking. She longs to possess the “I” of her and keep it with her forever and she knows for certain that with Mac this is impossible. Stacey is inextricably linked to the family infrastructure as she betrays feelings of motherhood. She knows her children better than her husband. Speaking of a mother’s dilemma, Nora Stovel Forster says: “Stacey is caught on the horns of her (and every mother’s) dilemma – whether to live for herself or sacrifice herself for her family. Motherhood seems Stacey’s only justification for existing” (64).

Though Stacey enacts a metaphorical renunciation of her wife role in the hands of Luke Venturi with whom she is fascinated and whom she considers as a star role she does want to let go of her mother status. These two of her consciousness constantly surfaces,

Okay, so Mac won’t be home, but the kids will have been home for ages. What’ll I say? What’ll they think? I don’t care. I don’t give a damn. I do, though. Katie? Ian? Duncan? Jen? What if they think I’ve had an accident or something? What if they phone the police? God, just don’t let them phone Mac. (188)
The last and crucial catastrophe that strikes the Mac Aindras — Ian saving Duncan from being drowned — redeems Mac in the eyes of Stacey. Mac praises Ian with just three precious words Ian, “you did fine” (269). Just enough for Stacey to realize that there could be peaceful communication in the absence of many words, for she so long believed in verbal communication. “She moves from the native view that it can be solved by an honest voicing of thoughts and feelings, to the understanding that whereas this may be partial solution, silence and concealment are also necessary in human relations, and communication does not depend simply on words” (Morley 101).

Her interlude with Luke Venturi brings a deep crisis and gets deeper still with Stacey. She sways between fulfillment and frustration and joy and anger. She feels trapped that she has “to get away sometimes” (194). This truancy from her family is a sort of deviation from the set norms of the society. She could be well fitted into the sociological definition of deviance in that she falls into a positively sanctioned deviance. This, as M. Haralambos puts it, is “A third form of deviance [Which] consists of acts which depart from the norms and expectation of a particular society” (406). Stacey’s act is psychologically determined and not culturally.

Haralambos discusses women, men and marriage and consolidates his ideas on deviance. He considers deviance as psychology oriented and not culturally defined. In this regard Haralambos observes, “Compared to single women, wives are more likely to suffer from depression, a range of neuroses and other psychological problems . . . In terms of the gains and losses of marriage, it is difficult not to see the husband as the winner and the wife as the loser” (387).
Stacey’s relationship with Luke is invariably the result of her clustrophobic depression, and it does to some extent relieve her of it. Speaking about the relationship Stacey had with Luke, Morley says: “With Luke, the young stranger, encountered after a bitter quarrel with Mac, Stacey hopes to shed her accumulated baggage. This escapist interlude is Stacey’s last attempt to be eighteen again, and to leave behind the encumbrances of town and family” (105).

Though Stacey did shed the accumulated baggage of her life to some extent through her confession to Luke, she can never be eighteen again nor leave her encumbrances. She realises that she is old enough to be Luke’s mother. Yet she is made stronger in the process and only returns home from her fantasies to take up and cope with the realities of life.

Laurence portrays Stacey as one who has comprehended the full meaning of life and essentially it is the woman’s lot to nurture life and bring forth ultimate happiness and solace. Stacey feels proud and delighted to be the mother of four children and in spite of the distress she experiences in the hands of Mac, she attempts to restore order and happiness in her anarchic cosmos. And restore she does. She becomes another survivor of Laurence wrestling a modest victory over the society accepting it on her terms – Hagar’s spiritual grand-daughter.

*A Bird in the House* points to Laurence’s possible yet unique recovery of the Canadian immigrant experience, the cultural and artistic heritage and indeed, a good deal of history. Foregrounding the human nature, no doubt, everywhere the same, Laurence through her observations on male characters, encompasses a whole range of psyche, capable of dividing and diverging into binary opposites. For instance, the
whole play of vital opposites hinges on the character of MacLeod, who indulges in recalling his colonial rigidness in vain.

Mrs. MacLeod, Vanessa’s mother and understandably, Aunt Edna has been entangled with a chauvinistic male super structure. Vanessa comes as an individual, doubting and contesting the male supremacy as to “why does Grandfather always say ‘I seen’ and ‘I done’? Doesn’t he know?” (BH 20). Nevertheless, she is promptly intruded upon by one of his daughters defending with the point that “He had to leave school when he was just a child” (20).

To Vanessa, her grandmother is the very metaphor of the house signifying a silence that communicates her being relegated to a non-existent status. She is found on the week days with her “knitting an afghan” and on a Sunday “reading the Bible with the aid of a magnifying glass”(23). Vanessa holds her grandfather’s religion as riddled with hypocrisy and prejudice. Religion is just a mother of convenience to him. Laurence seems to ridicule grandfather’s Christianity and his switching over from one sect to another. She writes: “Grandfather had started out a Methodist, but when the Methodists joined with the Presbyterians to form the United Church, he had refused to go because he did not like all the Scots who were now in the congregation. He had therefore turned Baptist, and now went to Grandmother’s church” (24). Vanessa parodies the Methodist prescriptions in her imagination through “a story in which an infant was baptized by Total Immersion and swept away by the river which happened to be flooding” (24).

Vanessa, in the hands of Laurence comes as a model of self-consciousness conceived by the ‘I’ ness of the individual. Laurence uses her as a self-conscious individual who rejects her grandfather’s reflection of knowledge, as insufficient,
incompetent and hence incompatible. Vanessa gains her self-consciousness out of the experiences, she has and eventually on the self-reflection. Through her self-consciousness, Vanessa registers her observation of her grandfather as she tries to determine an impersonal yet individual pact with herself. She attempts to retain a consciousness, a milieu which will take exception to the form of experiences she views. She holds her mother and Aunt Edna’s ego as consciousness in nothing and also they don’t attempt to either unify or synthesize the symbols of domination they perceive.

Margaret Laurence bestows a transcendentalist’s status on Vanessa as she begins to represent what lies within her. As the novelist writes,

But the unseen presences in these secret places I knew to be those of every person … including Uncle Roderick who got killed on the Somme … Grandfather MacLeod, who had died a year after I was born … At the top of the main stairs hung the mammoth picture of a darkly uniformed man riding upon a horse whose prancing stance and dilated nostrils suggested that the battle was not yet over, that it might indeed continue until Judgment Day. (46)

Though Vanessa is the real subject, she remains outside this play of representations. Laurence allows the readers to recognize Vanessa as an image or reflection and eventually she ties her with all the representation in the form of a “monogrammed dresser silver, brush and mirror, nail-buffer and button hook and scissors” (47).

While Vanessa is a self-reflecting human subject, her Grandmother is a continual consequence of male chauvinism. She executes like the deputy anointed thus – “God loves order … you remember that, Vanessa” (49). So, Vanessa, is in a
constant state of warfare with her grandmother who is only endowed with the capability to imitate—“I’ve never forgotten those words of my father’s” (49) and never endowed with the capability to represent herself, possibly in a feminine consciousness.

When Vanessa remarks, that Grandmother MacLeod is “pretty cross today about the girl,” and “why can’t she be nice to us for a change?” (55), her father directs upon her a hypothesis of self-reflective representation in that, she too is a victim of the male normative order.

My father put his hands down and slowly tilted my head until I was forced to look at him. ‘Vanessa’, he said, ‘She’s had troubles in her life which you really don’t know much about. That’s why she gets migraine sometimes and has to go to bed. It’s not easy for her these days, either- the house is still the same, so she thinks other things should be, too. It hurts her when she finds they aren’t’. (55)

Margaret Laurence belongs to the long line of Canadian women writers, who have drawn the Emersonian idealism which represents man, soul and nature as three combinations unified into one big whole. Like Emerson, Laurence perceives the world as an arena in which an individual’s participation in society is marked by a natural acquaintance. Drawing inference from the bleak post-war Canada, Laurence creates characters in nexus with each other swaying between force and victimization and authority and submission.

Eventually, Laurence moving in the track of anti-realism, materializes the passions of characters in order to create a habitual narrative, uniquely Laurentian with a psychic intensity. The psychic intensity could be inferred as that of Laurence’s own
psychic release, passionately heightened through two deaths – that of Grandmother Connor and Vanessa’s father.

The two episodes put Vanessa aware of the natural happenings of life- death by old age and by pneumonia. Grandfather Connor says, “Vanessa, your grandmother’s dead” (79). Grandmother is dead, and the first episode is built upon her death, paradoxical enough, to commemorate Grandfather Connor’s life and image. While the episode ascertains her death on the one hand, it rejuvenates the Manawaka landscape through Grandfather Connor’s “enormous coat made of the pelt of a bear” (62). By associating grandfather Connor with the “giant Kodiak crankily roaming a high frozen plateau … from no more fabled a place than Galloping Mountain” (62) the novelist enunciates the Emersonian precept of man, soul and nature as a unified whole. Vanessa wonders at the unified whole. She also wonders at the heaviness of the coat, “so heavy that I could not even lift it by myself” (62).

Vanessa considers her grandfather as “The Great Bear”, the name having “many associations other than his coat and his surliness” (63). Laurence associates the very gait of Grandfather Connor with the grizzly bear as she writes, “Grandfather would prowl through the living room as though seeking a place of rest and not finding it, would stare fixedly without speaking and would then descend the basement steps to the rocking chair which sat beside the furnace” (63).

Vanessa enjoys visiting the Brick house with her grandfather and in his company, she thinks of the story much occupied by the themes of love and death, and she draws her materials from her experiences “gained principally from the Bible … or the collected works of Rudyard Kipling” (65). Vanessa is extremely fond of her grandmother exactly as she is comfortable in the company of Aunt Edna.
If one were to concentrate on Laurence’s use of Vanessa as a character could
deduce a significant presupposition that character becomes a *being*. Once the
character metamorphoses into *being*, it becomes a knowledge within and without.
Vanessa in the sense of a *being* becomes an irreducible yet “transcendental knowledge
subject” (Frank 146). Manfred Frank, in one of his arguments about the subject as
knowledge draws a cue from Schopenhaur’s observation “No subject, no object” (Qtd
in Frank 146).

Vanessa in the hands of Laurence, becomes an epistemological caricature in
that, she is a knowledgeable *being* who scripts human relationship into a human
science inextricably fixed into a new paradigm, of feminine consciousness.
Eventually, Vanessa becomes a self, reflecting human subject. She restructures the
classical continuum of feminine myth as according to her own self reflexive
representations. The old mythical claims of enlightenment have been thwarted
through the act of absolute self-consciousness. In his notes to his lecture, Frank draws
in Kant’s “finalist viewpoint” of character as a *being*. As he quotes Kant, “Life … is
the transition from the taxonomic to the synthetic notion of life which is indicated in
the chronology of ideas and science in the early nineteenth century of vitalist themes.”
(qtd in Frank 139). And for this purpose an artist needs the medium of language for
language “is no longer a system of representation [for] … it designates in its roots the
most constant of actions, states and wishes” (462). Thus, Language is rooted in the
active subject in that Vanessa’s self-reflective knowledge is no longer linked to the
knowing of things but to her freedom.

The first thing to notice about the novelist’s language is its astonishing power
to capture human relationship by marriage and even by relationships outside marriage.
What Vanessa perceives is not an object but a theme characterized by the network of
family relationships. Family ties and a shared sense of grievance make up the core of the work. And these are branched down through episodes. It is evident that Vanessa as a being is meant to be taken special notice of in that, one can suspect some reference to Laurence herself. Vanessa, perhaps, might not be merely a reflection of some character, and hence one could find her embedded to the claim that Vanessa must be Margaret Laurence.

Vanessa’s perception of the outer space happens more rightly in a spacious Manawaka, accurately observed, than in the narrow world of mere women. Vanessa grows in wisdom and in knowledge of psyche and culture that enunciate her simple process of living. Margaret Laurence does not want to adapt herself perhaps, with the changes of type, which usually takes place in her prominent female characters. One of the reasons why, Vanessa passing from childhood to early womanhood forms the pivot of the novel is that the novelist encapsulates character as manifesting the post structural feminist paradigm. Vanessa vascillates between emotions revealing delicacy of heart, refinement of instinct, impulse and appropriate apprehension of experience.

An intellectual girl she is, Vanessa stands by the side of character types – both male and female, over confident, adaptable, yet defiant. As creature of passions, she is filled with sorrow, and passionate indignation towards those who seem to be good to her. In all the episodes that belong to Margaret Laurence’s dexterous perception in the rhetoric of arts, one can find that she generates unity of art and experience through her delineation of one Vanessa, a single living force that animates the whole. The unity of art and experience, eventuated by the depiction of Vanessa, helps not only to strengthen the structure of the book but also helps to blow in a passionate record of vital experiences of community living. And therefore, Laurence, perhaps, has no apprehension about the other character as drifting off into an insubordinate status.
She, with her aesthetic perception lets them develop so as to supplement and sustain the character of Vanessa.

In the hands of Laurence, Vanessa comes as an individual who doubts, contests and questions. Vanessa is an individual in that her individuality could be considered a nucleus of self-identity that cannot be further fragmented. An authentic individual she is, she questions the dominance of patriarchal form that ill wills and intimidates the growth of womanhood. Margaret Laurence portrays Vanessa as a individual who is capable of pinpointing the reason for the cause. She is in nexus to the inter related parts of life as epitomized by her aunts, father, mother and grandparents. Thus, she is brought into a delimiting relation with differentiality. By being in touch with the differentials, Vanessa installs meaning and signification that help her comprehend the essentials of life. Thus, Vanessa as an individual brings forth signification by means of interpreting the various components of experience. Simultaneously, she attempts to alter it, only in vain as evidenced in the last line of the book - “I looked at it only for a moment, and then I drove away” (191).

With the publication of Laurence’s *The Diviners*, a new consciousness of the need for either a feminist or a historical theory emerged. The novel hopefully pushed quite a big literary circle “to formulate a new conception of literary history — of literature in history” (Wright 83). Laurence’s writings here proclaim her strong commitment to a familial model deep seated in history. The text suggests another form of temporality, a subversion of myth. The whole text suffers the effect of this mythical subversion, in its very frankness. While Laurence’s text offers a paradigm for the predicament of woman, it also excludes the very nature of things that encircle a woman’s existence. Laurence draws widely from the tradition of the Victorian novel.
At the outset, one could perceive Morag, the prime mover of the story, as a composite figure. She is reminiscent of a good many Victorian heroines. She acts the woman of Hardy. More surprisingly, she bears a striking resemblance to Hardy’s Eustacia from *The Return of the Native*, who is all set to deter the manly views and norms. She shares the bitter resentment of Hardy’s Tess in her low status, as well as her displaced fear of men, associated with female sexuality.

Significantly, in all its psychological ramification, Morag comes as a worthwhile character to be lifted out of the modernist paradigm and eventually fitted into the post modern feminist frame. If one were to scrutinize the novel alongside the modernist literary conventions, there emerges a historical context, very much Victorian and readily contemporary.

Laurence’s *The Diviners* encapsulates the story of Morag – As “The river flowed both ways”, one is given to understand, that Morag evolves as an independent, oscillating her little known past, the Scottish origin, as evidenced through the Piper Gunn’s story and her present at the “still and all, a farm or whatever at Galloping Mountain” (*TD* 358). Morag’s conflict envisages a hatred for the city as illustrated in the following passage.

May be I should’ve brought Pique up entirely in cities, where she’d have known how bad things are all over, where she’d have learned young about survival, about the survival tactics in a world now largely dedicated to Death, Slavery and the Pursuit of Unhappiness. Instead, I’ve made an island. Are islands real?. (292)

Though she regrets for not having brought up Pique in cities, there is then a paradoxical manifestation of city metaphorically fixed as a symbol of perdition.
Laurence postulates this concept as foregrounding principle in her novel as she fixes Morag as against the backdrop of the river flowing both ways an “apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible” (3). Through copies of snapshots, Laurence categorizes Morag in various patterns. The snapshots are evocative of the familial structure, the immigrant experience and the conflicting moments encompassed by a snapshot ecologically poised. To Morag, the snapshots are much important “not for what they show but for what is hidden in them” (6).

Morag Gunn is introduced as the daughter of Colin Gunn and his wife Louisa “concealed behind the ugliness of Louisa’s cheap housedress, concealed in her mother’s flesh, invisible” and Morag’s life of despair begins even when she is connected “unthinkingly with life, held to existence by a single thread” (6). The snapshot also reveals Alisdair Gunn, “Morag’s grandfather who came here a long long time ago and built the house and started the farm when probably nothing was here except buffalo grass and Indians” (7). Morag recollects her father Colin Gunn as one of whose “people [who] came to this country so long ago, from Sutherland, during the Highland clearances, maybe” (8).

Morag’s concentration on the snapshots is indicative of her interest in her parentage and even enthusiasm. Though she is conscious of her recollected memories, she considers all those moments of the past as just another happening in another woman. Yet, she also vascillates into a feeling of blankness all of a sudden since “they aren’t faces I can relate to anyone I ever knew. It didn’t bother me for years and years” (9).

After the death of her parents by the infantile paralysis, Morag is adopted by Christie Logan and his wife Louisa Prin. They are kind and since they have no
children of their own, and also as Christie was in the army with Morag’s dad, they bring her up with love and tenderness. This is the beginning of the conflicting moment in Morag and the novelist brilliantly captures the situation:

They remain shadows. Two sepia shadows on an old snapshot, two barely moving shadows in my head, shadows whose few remaining words and acts I have invented. Perhaps, I only want their forgiveness for having forgotten them. I remember their deaths, but not their lives. Yet they’re inside me flowing unknown in my blood and moving unrecognized in my skull. (15)

One sees Morag evolving out of this conflicting moment and Laurence introduces Morag in Christie’s household, through “memory bank movie” (28) pattern. The snapshots script a new awakening in Morag as she proudly clings on to the past and the unforgettable history as she contemplates,

I’ve kept them, of course, because something in me doesn’t want to lose them, or perhaps doesn’t dare. Perhaps they’re my totems, or contain a portion of my spirit . . . old snapshots which I’ll still be lugging along with me when I’m an old lady, clutching them as I enter or am shoved into the Salvation Army Old People’s Home or wherever it is that I’ll find my death. (5)

Morag does not even know how much of the memory has really happened “and how much of it I embroidered later on” (15). Yet, she remembers “it just like that” as she recalls “it with embellishments which don’t seem likely for a five-year old” (15). Though she remembers with impassion the deaths of her parents, they still remain
imbedded in her topped by the question, ‘why?’, as she still could feel them inside her.

The other thing that baffles Morag is Christie’s profession. She wonders as to “why is Christie called Scavenger?” (30). She does not know the meaning of this, yet, “she knows what he does, collecting the town garbage and taking it to dump in the Nuisance Grounds” (30). As she rides on the wooden cart with Christie, the boys yell. Laurence pictures the situation:

Then, like a song, like a verse, but mean.
Christie Logan’s the Scavenger Man –
Gets his food from the garbage can!
Laugh laugh laugh . . . I got a better one. Hey, wait, listen! Listen, Ross!
Mo-rag! Mo-rag!
Gets her clothes from an ol’ flour bag! (31)

And soon after, the novelist writes of the reaction it generates in Christie: “Oh. Christie is grinning. He is twisting his face, like different crazy masks. His tongue droops out like a dog’s tongue. He crosses his eyes, and his mouth is dribbling with spit. Then he laughs. Oh. He laughs in a kind of cackle, like a loony” (31).

The insult heaped upon the Christies mark the end of Morag. Morag begins to evolve into a quintessentially radical figure particularly, when she doubts and contests the adumbrated lower middle class underdog status. With a measurable standard of feeling that all that was crazy, of course, and quite untrue, Morag enacts her metaphoric rebellion. Morag contemplates: “If you want to make yourself into a doormat, Morag girl, I declare unto you that there’s a christly host of them that’ll be only too willing to tread all over you” (88).
Further the novelist makes of Morag a preparatory individual of rebellion as she writes, “You gotta be. If it comes to a fight, she doesn’t need to fight like a girl, scratching with her fingernails . . . If a boy ever teases her, she goes for him. The best way is to knee them in the balls. They double over, scream, and chicken out. Hardly any boys ever tease her these days” (49-50). Morag stands in a significant contrast to Eva Winkler and “Maybe Gus beats her because she’s gutless, like Mrs. Winkler (50). Contrastingly, “Morag is the best girl pitcher on the ball field, and also a good short stop” (50). She can negotiate her status with the boys and the girls do not like her. Christy accelerates the radical in Morag calling the English as “bloody liars then as now” (51).

Christie is a realist since he is fatefully fixed in drawing the dirt of every citizen of his locality to the Nuisance Grounds. He fuels his desire for rebellion through recalling the ‘Tale of Piper Gunn’ and ‘the Long March’. Morag is his only acquaintance. She is enamoured by his very presence and also by the history he evokes now and then. The pipes blaring in the hands of the Piper Gunn enunciates the very principle of Shakespearean Chorus to awaken Morag into the dreadful reality – “what in the fiery hell are we doing in this terrible place?” (69).

Morag is swelled up with the questioning spirit as she oscillates between her love of Jesus and also the hatred for him. Laurence juxtaposes this situation through the “Memory bank Movie” in which “Morag loves God . . . And . . . she does not love God” (97). Morag begins her independent status when she starts working at Simlow Ladies’ Wear. She spends the money she earns on clothes and especially during leisure hours, she puts her hand on writing poems. Miss Melrose is the one who identifies the latent talent of creative writing in Morag, as she finds Morag’s composition as “one of the very few that showed any originality” (99). One could
presume that this is the second segment of Morag’s existence in which, she finds herself not only talented but also individually and independently liberated.

Morag draws support from both Jules Tonnerre, her one time classmate and boy friend and Christie, to strengthen her independent state of existence. She frequents the place where Jules stays with his father. She finds a significant resemblance of the Tonnerre shack with Christie’s house.

Morag develops a romantic attitude towards life and emboldens into a new woman who attempts to rewrite a new definition of herself as she speculates, “Now it does. Now she knows one thing for sure. Nothing – nothing- is going to endanger her chances of getting out of Manawaka. And on her own terms, not the town’s . . . . There are other ways. But how would you find out, or get whatever it is, if not married? May be you might in a city, just maybe, but not here” (124).

With Lachlan Maclachlan, the editor and owner of the Manawaka Banner, Morag sets on into a new venture. While Morag wants to rewrite scripts, Lachlan prevents her from everything rewritten and so Morag is only permitted to “clean up the punctuation, grammar and spelling” (125). Thus, she keeps filling her pocket to realise her dream of leaving Manawaka.

Morag’s third phase of life begins with her leaving Manawaka in the fall “to go to college, having been adding as much as possible to the bank account which Henry Pearl started for her, when her parents died, on the proceeds of Louisa Gunn’s piano” (130). Morag is just thrilled of leaving Manawaka “At last. At last. Jubilation. Also, guilt” (130). After all, this is Morag’s “Another shed skin of another life” (140). When Morag settles herself inside the coach, one finds her slowly yet “swifting into life”. She supposes, on the train to Winnipeg that she has attained freedom. But the
irony of her thought is that, there can be no real freedom and “she will not write, either a meaningful letter or a true story, until she admits that there can be no farewell to what she has inherited from Manawaka” (Wainwright 299).

Morag’s enunciation of her individuality takes on an added significance when at college, she “is daring the world of the elect”, (144). Her friend Ella’s poem, “part of a long narrative poem about the Jews in Europe during the war. Auschwitz”, adds up more meaning in her life, since she too finds Ella as part of history – the history of victimization and torture. Mrs. Gerson, Ella’s mother means a lot to Morag. She provides Morag a sense of oneness and meaning in life. Mrs. Gerson provides the magic combination of remedy “for most of the psychic ills to which the humanskull is prey” (151). She “has adopted Morag in some way or other, and is going to give her the same benefits as her own daughters receive” (151).

After her association with Mrs. Gerson, Morag clinches the new image and the true meaning of life dawns on her. She feels she can bear loneliness but not the very “sense of being downgraded, devalued, undesirable” (151). As she speculates, “She knows men feel pain, too. But does not yet wholly believe it, having never really seen it, except in Christie. Or Lazarus. Or Lachlan. Or, in some way she doesn’t understand Niall Cameron . . . They are old and she is not” (151).

Morag’s knowledge of Native history, her own and the Jewish history equips her to have a redefinition of her psyche. Once conscious of her psyche, she realizes the importance of herself as a talented individual. Margaret Laurence, as she is dealing with individual reflection of femininity rather than stereotypes, provides a degree of credulity to Morag’s character. She makes Morag hit the groove of certainty in order to become more and more definite and distinct. The hues and lineaments of
the phantom fear and anxiety begins to get fainter. Morag, now, distinctly is aware of her body and psyche.

Her acquaintance with Dr. Brooke Skelton, her English Teacher, takes on an added significance to her life. She meets Dr. Brooke Skelton at the cafeteria and she is impressed by his accent and figure. With all her inhibitions gone, she feels that she is almost perfectly equipped to take on new manly encounters. Morag, as an individual, begins to install the significations detected from the universal by a singularity. Her singularity arises out of her capability to take on life on her own terms. And in that, Morag possesses a potential reservoir to hold the formation of meaning of life. She sees to it, life does not or rather, should not get stranded for one reason that a woman may not be incapable of generating meanings. With Dr. Brooke Skelton, she embarks on an experiment of testing life through the institution of marriage. She proposes entering this institution projecting a meaning which precedes the mythical interpretation of woman, as she “remembers how, in medieval times or somewhere, if the sheets weren’t bloody, the bride was considered a disaster and a jezebel” (163).

Precisely, Morag’s negotiation of relationship with Dr. Brooke marks a swaying between individuation and mythical subversion. Morag’s sense of individuation precedes her sense of identity by right as obviously evidenced in her extra marital nexus with Jules Tonnerre. Jean Bethke Elshtain says in “Feminist Discourse and its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning” that “Mothering is a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic and emotional” (140). Her intimate nexus with Tonnerre erupts with the why of Morag negotiated with her husband Dr. Brooke Skelton.

Morag, consciously attempts to shape the individual in her, by bringing forth signification in the individual of her novel. By means of interpreting the individual of
her fiction, Morag enriches her individuality with a sense of wholesomeness of being. She surely asserts the mythical form and grammar which exist only in her previous self and not as of today. At a later point, Morag specifically wishes to assert emphatically to Dr. Brooke Skelton that her novels carry her name as Morag and certainly not Morag Skelton. This is another way, in which Morag, individually appropriates and interprets the mythical grammar of femininity.

In Morag, there is a characteristic opposition that separates her from her husband. Dr. Brooke Skelton is evocative of a distant past Morag once has cherished, and not now. Hence, she considers the present insult heaped upon her and the humiliation set upon Jules as a situation which reiterates a rupture of the consciousness of both Morag and Jules. At Jules’ joint, Morag is comfortably driven to an ecstatic sexual intimacy by Jules, and with no sense of regret in Morag. Back home she proudly proclaims having gone to bed with Jules. The situation worsens, with Brooke calling her a bitch. And these final words, precisely, connect the mechanism of going back to the roots in compliance with the violation of the intersubjective rules and conventions.

Morag redefines her femininity by thwarting the ideals of humanoid perceptions. Her ego, largely tampered with insults and pain, modifies the blind compliance with rules. She proposes to dig meaning out of something else and is not ready to act according to a convention. It is precisely this truth she cannot digest in the case of Harold, the broadcaster. She detests the very arrogance of his voice and his philosophizing for, she knows for certain, ego rests on something that precedes the act of the body and also ego is subordinate to the category of meaning. Morag regrets her association with Harold in that he has deprived her of her identity and Morag in her
company with Harold, has only produced a non-identical meaning which could only be conceived as the result of her compliance with his extreme egosity.

While Morag’s relationship with Jules is intentional, her affairs with Harold, Chas, one of Fans men, and Dan Mc Raith are expressive acts. With Jules, Morag betrays the pre expressive intention of retaliating her husband Dr. Skelton. This is a pre expressive intention, which creates a present intuitive consciousness. But by the same token, she is both amazed, and ecstatic. Hence, though Morag does not entirely feel comfortable about her acts in the pretext of her quest for identity, they generate, instead, a loss of meaning and personality in Morag. Hence, her exercise of the quest for meaning in life constitutes the paradox of the situation, a game that characterizes the post-structural feminism. Through sexual encounters, Morag attempts to withhold the metaphor, of stratification, the inversion of the common man myth. To Morag, a male company eventually is formation of new intentional influences. Morag does not wish to escape the forged manacles of this representational male models, for, she begins to perceive every new man she encounters as her clinical rats. Thus, objectively drawn towards them, she exercises a retroactive effect on her intentional function. Significantly, the following passage asserts the very idea mentioned above:

A peculiar way for a relationship to begin, a relationship which is plainly going to be sexual . . . And yet Morag is drawn to him now by both sex and spirit, and senses this is true for him as well. It is as though, both of them, not being young and new and uncommitted, must sound each other out about their areas of commitment. (305)

The novel comes to a close with Morag’s authorship. According to Edward Said, “an author is one who gives existence to something, a begetter, father...or founder
suggesting that making a home is part of gaining authority” (83). And this Morag does. She gives authority in a unique manner, with making O’ Connel landing her home coupled with her authority as a matured writer, who has seen all the facets of life.

Both Deshpande’s and Laurence’s women are individuals who are driven to fight their fight in this male dominated society. The struggle essentially brings in certain features which they inevitably face, either to compromise or to overcome. They are not cowed down completely by the severity of the situation but instead cruise through the situation, moulded and refined in the process. The next chapter analyses the problems the heroines face, which project them as females subordinated by their men, but who through tenacity, courage and wisdom prove their stand.