CHAPTER IV

THE THEME OF SURVIVAL:

THE FIRE-DWELLERS
Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* epitomises the dehumanizing, hellish state of urban existence. Margaret Laurence in this novel depicts the plight of Stacey Macaindra, the protagonist, a middle-aged woman, who became a victim of the bedlam in which she lives. Her consciousness of the chaotic wide world batters her sensibilities from all sides. The milieu is grotesque due to the encroachment of meaningless violence. It looks as though the universe is on the brink of conflagration. Stacey is perforce made to rely on her own internal resources for help, something to act as a bridge between the internal and the external world of her experience. Stacey’s problem is that of the marginalized woman. The novelist utilises thoughts, memories and inner monologues to constantly keep us aware of the action unfolding within the mind of the protagonist. Aptly asserting the narrative technique employed by Laurence to dispel the pathos of Stacey, Coral Ann Howells sums up:

Throughout her narrative, realism is interspread with a vivid subtext of fantasy, which provides the breathing spaces for Stacey and is indeed the means by which she survives coming to terms with herself and the world she inhabits.
Stacey Mac Aindra, thirtynine years old, is the wife of Mac Aindra, a salesman and the mother of Jen, Duncan, Ian and Katie, aged between two and fourteen. She has a deep anxiety about the family, about the hellfires of city existence, about the tension of modern-day living. Stacey places before us the picture of a confused, anxious, self-doubting, contemporary housewife. "It's the confusion that bothers me. Everything happens all at once". Stacey is prey to myriads of threatening horrors, both real and imagined, which lay unremitting impressions on her consciousness from all sides:

Lady bird, Lady bird
Fly away home
your house is on fire,
your children are gone.

Crazy rhyme. Got it on the brain this morning that form trying to teach Jen a few human words yesterday. Why anybody would want to teach a child a thing like that. I wouldn't know. Half those nursery rhymes are gruesome. When you come to think of it......
Hung above the bed is a wedding picture. Stacey, twenty-three, almost beautiful although not knowing it then and Mac twenty-seven, hopeful confident lean. Agamemnon king of men or the equivalent, at least to her. Sitting on the bed, Stacey sees mirrored her own self in the present flesh, in sufficiently concealed by a short mauve nylon night gown with the ribbon now gone from the neckline and one shoulder frill yanked off by some kid or other (1-2).

Stacey finds herself and her family imprisoned by the city’s power structures which rob the people. Of their acclaimed identity and disintegrate the family. Furthermore, accidents, crime, international catastrophes have become part of everyday existence and make mockery of harmonious family life. The violence reported by media breeds violence among the younger generation. Stacey is affected by the images of war and violence shown on television and by newspaper headlines which interact with her maternal fears for the safety of her own children. Hallucinations of burning buildings, forest fires and Roman Centurions flash across in her inner vision Stacey fears that her children become victims of sexual violence, murder, accidents, or even war.
These are very real fears arising out of her immediate environment. Moreover, the occurrences are reflected inevitably in the home environment. Stacey is succumbed into a state of anguish by witnessing the behaviour of Mac’s violent fits of temper, Ian’s sullenness, Duncans nightmares and Katie’s rebelliousness. Even the baby’s inability to talk is an indication of the more fundamental problem arising out of modern-day city experience. Roshan Shahani asserts thus:

Laurence views the Mac Aindra house as emblematic of the vulnerability of contemporary living where the house, the city, the very world, are on the brink of disaster. Thus in contrast again to the conventional associations of "home fires burning" are the fires both real and metaphorical that flare up in this novel.³

Stacey recognises the nagging urgency to find wholeness in the oppressive landscape of meaningless violence and insane fragmentation. She feels lonely, bewildered, frustrated, desperately trying to find the person she once thought she was - a waif caught up in the universal search for identity. Stacey’s dilemma acquires other, more serious
levels of conflict and crises where even survival becomes an ordeal and the desire for fulfilment becomes unthinkable. Therefore the novelist herself admits, "the heart of Stacey's problem is that society forces so many roles upon her that she can find no clear line of continuity connecting one posture to another. By turns wife, mistress, mother, neighbour, all she knows is that she is expected to be beautiful, efficient, radiantly cheerful, and she is an abject failure in every department".4

These stereotypical roles in the process harm or destroy Stacey's social or familial structures. Her relationship with the people closest to her is characterised by a sense of isolation. Stacey is terrified because the child struck by the car at the corner could be her own; yet she does not find out until weeks later that the child had been Peter Challoner, a friend of Ian's, and that he had been killed. She had no idea of the desperation that lay behind her neighbour Tess Serene and perfectly groomed facade. And when Tess swallows rye and sleeping tablets Stacey is wrenched by a sudden understanding of the uncertainty and pathetic insufficiency of Tess's wise-cracking husband, Jake: "I don't know what the hell she ever wanted to tell you the truth. She was so goddam beautiful it seemed incredible that she would mally me at all" (272).
Stacey yearns for a mental affinity with her husband, but he does not respond to her. Their relationship is not characterised by trust and understanding. Mac is reticent, while Stacey is talkative. When Stacey wants to share her joys and sorrows with her husband, he asks her to leave him alone. Such discouraging conversation induces in her the fear of being unwanted and insecure: "can you imagine what it is like to live in the same house with somebody who does not talk or who can't or else won't and I don't known which reason it could be" (197).

In human relationships when temperamental incompatibility becomes insurmountable it gives rise to an inability to communicate. Speaking of the importance of verbal communication, Laurence in her interview with Michel Fabre, says:

This is true. Between human individuals much of our deepest communication is at a non-verbal level, but at the same time... This is the only way we have to exchange views; we can exchange emotions without words but we cannot exchange views. People can make love, people can hold and comfort their children, but in terms of exchanging our views of life and our responses to it we have to use words.5
But the lack of communication between the spouses is the bane of all marital relationships. Stacey is aware that Mac fails to communicate even with his father. He firmly believed, "there isn't any use in talking. It doesn't change any thing" (59). The sense of isolation generated by the impossibility of communication with Mac widens Stacey's sense of crisis.

Stacey's intense desire is to have a warm full-blooded relationship with other inmates of the house so that they cease to live as strangers and become a "family" in a meaningful way. But she lives in constant dread like the proverbial lady-bird, her house "on fire" and "her children gone". These fires, the creative fires of life, not the destructive fires of death, also lay buried in Stacey's heart. It is precisely this warm sensibility that makes Stacey hopeful of reaching out to the core of her family so that the house can become a home. She dreams of the unknown ideal home and feels "there must be, there has to be such a home : out there in unknown houses are people who live without lies, and who touch each other. One day she will discover them, pierce through to them then everything will be all right and she will live in the light of the morning" (90).
In Stacey's nightmares, she sees her house burning and her family destroyed. Her waking moments are equally nightmarish. More than other article of furniture in the house, it is the television, the "Ever-open Eye", which brings the violence of the outside world into the house:

A man burning. His face cannot be seen. He lies still, perhaps already dead. Flames leap and quiver from his blackened robe like excited children of hell (125).

This piece is followed immediately by Stacey's recall of other incidents of violence reported on the T.V. and in the papers. Nancy Bailey, speaking of her state of being says as follows: "The tremendous energy produced by the conflict of conscious and unconscious in the interest of the feminine wholeness creates confusion within Stacey as wild as the bedlam of her external life." 

Stacey is introspective and she constantly questions her perceptions and experiences. She engages in a dialectic with herself. Often her self-doubt is moderated by her sense of absurdity and sometimes by a sheer, tough spirit of refusal. She is bolstered and strengthened by her own common sense defiance of her demon: "I see the dead faces in
a mocking procession looking at me, looking again, shrugging, saying there is stability for you. Do I deserve this? Yes and yet dod dammit, not yes." (7)

Media reports force themselves into Stacey's consciousness and increase her sense of powerlessness. Clara Thomas speaking of Stacey's attitude says, "Stacey Mac Aindra is a woman who looks at herself at all time with unremitting honesty and, who sees all of her negatives and a few of her positives."

This negative self-concept is the product of her small town background and inadequate education. They make her feel inferior in a city like Vancouver. This attitude makes her suspicious of the actions of Mac. Nevertheless it leads her to fantasising by transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary where hair dressers' assistants become 'beautiful priestesses' and Vancouver street is seen in a more sinister way:

The buildings at the heart of the city are barsh flashing with colors, solid, and self-confident. Stacey is reassured by them until she looks again and sees them charred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken
like vulnerable live bones, shadows of people
fray splayed on the stone like in that other
city. (8)

Consequently her fantasises are of escape to a new world or
of the destruction of her children by atomic explosions.
Even these dreams, fantasies, memories fail to satisfy the
craving for self-expression. Nancy Bailey says:

Stacey's memories and fantasies are indicative
of unconscious health and vitality but at the
same time they increase her awareness of the
multiple selves that go to make up one
individuality, without a firm sense of
self."8

Stacey is acutely, constantly, but also
reassuringly aware of the corporeal self. She is spurred to
action both by the needs of her family and by her own nature.
Her frustrations almost overpower her only when her actions
cannot be equal to the demands of the situation. She is
beset by crowding anxieties and grotesqueries of the world.
Mass media and a consumer-oriented society, which are the
excrescences of city life, undermine and fragment family
relationships. The more powerful mass communication becomes
the less powerful is true communication among human beings. As lack of communication exists between Mac and Stacey, when Buckle tells Mac that he and Stacey had been to bed together and Mac accuses her, she is outraged and insulted. Her action is, however, not despair. She gets into the car, drives to the seashore and meets a young artist, Luke Venture. Luke not only gives her physical satisfaction but listens to her tale of woe also. This journey of escape from the excrescences of city life gives Stacey the freedom and joy for which she has been yearning. She asks Luke to lift her as a leaf and help her migrate to that fairy land where she lives as a freed prisoner. But Luke makes a mockery of her wishes and says in a parody:

Lady bird, Lady bird
fly away home
your house is on fire
your children are gone. (228)

He identifies her with water and calls her Merwoman because she was suddenly there on the seashore in front of his cabin. Stacey welcomes a temporary unreality and she enjoys the play-mystery of her Merwoman role. He sees her quite simply and exclusively as a woman. Therefore he helps her to see herself momentarily as a singular being freed of the kaleidoscopic wife-mother-house keeper roles in
which others see her and with all of which simultaneously she constantly tries to identify herself. Furthermore, Stacey's brief affair with Luke provides her with a real guilt of being unfaithfulness to Mac. Even she admits Mac to full and equal parenthood with her when he rescued Duncan from ocean waters:

- He's never held Duncan before notever. Why did I think he didn't care about Duncan? Maybe he didn't, once. But he does now. Why didn't I see how much, before? He never showed it, that's why...

- That's the most Mac will ever be to say. They're not like me either of them. They don't want to say it in full technicolor and intense detail. And that's okay. I guess Ian gets the message. It's his language, too. I wish it were mine. All I can do is accept that it is a language and that it works, at least sometimes. (295)

Stacey's terms of life have included a belief in and a prescription for verbal communication that she now knows she must relinquish. Luke's function for her is
symbolic of the Biblical Luke's - he is a physician to her: He helps her to regain a truer perspective of herself. As she says: "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one heel of a long time now." (303)

Stacey gives a twist in her orientation towards her dual landscape by recycling the negative aspects of experience by instituting change at a personal level rather than at the level of society. She stoops to accept her own kind of sensitivity, her own ways of apprehending things or occurrences:

I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light. Someday, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I am like. I'm pretty well stuck with it for life. Hell of a revelation that turned out to be. Will the fires go on inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world. And then I'll never know what may happen in the next episode. (298-307)

Stacey's new-fangled knowledge about herself, after being a refugee of blighted landscape, gives to her a
nagging urgency to find wholeness in an oppressive landscape. She gives scope for optimistic preoccupations of life. Ann Howells aptly expresses this thus:

The world outside is much the same as it was in the beginning and the conclusion focuses on personal and family survival within the nightmare world. It is a precarious position but the only one available outside the self-enclosed worlds of fantasy which Stacey has successively inhabited. Yet her fantasising has given her the necessary inner space to come to terms with world she inhabits as forty year old Stacey Mac Aindra, a world constituted for by human relationships as mother, wife, friend, sister and daughter.

An awareness of her victimization enables Stacey to keep an even balance and to reach out to her family instead of reaching out for meaningless objects. The mass media’s proliferation of commercial and artificial images of identity is appropriately related in the novel when Stacey is trapped into watching a demonstration of “polgram-plastics.” The contrast between myth and reality makes Stacey’s life miserable, though she resists conformist adaptation. In
these terms Stacey exhibits a power to recycle the negative aspects of experience by instituting change at the personal level. It is in these terms that survival acquires a meaningful dimension in the context of Stacey's search for integrated identity. By the end of the novel we find that there is a note of hope in the novel. Stacey counters her dilemma by finding "within herself an ability to survive - not just to go on living, but to change and to move into new areas of life." It is in this movement towards hope that the final triumph of the novel lies. By painting the positive aspects of the dark vision of Stacey, Margaret Laurence reveals two dimensions of the fire symbol of the novel - the fire that burns and purifies in the process and the fire that gives warmth and succour.
REFERENCES


2. Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers. Toronto : McLelland and Stewart, 1969. Further references are to this edition and page numbers are mentioned in parentheses against the quotations.


