
The Elixir of Life: Hagar and Damini

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Abstract:

Post World War I, it had been a phenomenon yet to be seen, how Canada had been struggling for its cultural and literary independence amongst others, and how it had been still in its nascent stage with respect to the kind of independence India had achieved with respect to the aforesaid arenas. The portrayal of women in literature, the crux being in the gender discrimination in the Commonwealth nations, is symptomatic of the overall socio-cultural image of a nation. The 'women' in question, find a distinct space in their literature. The rather 'desire-less' female entity in the society is given a strong space to be occupied in the pages of literature. Both Margaret Laurence and Rabindranath Tagore, though geographically and generations apart, allow their protagonists break open the bindings of their confinements to emerge quite strongly in the social scenario. The radicalism in their thoughts makes their texts relevant for the modern readers. In my study I have tried to analyse the leading female protagonists, as depicted in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (specific to the Canadian context) and Rabindranath Tagore's *The Broken Ties* (specific to the Indian context).

Key Words: Women, Protagonist, Socio-Culture, Nation.

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THE PAGES OF HISTORY

The Canadian and Indian contexts, in the socio-cultural and the socio-political arenas, are distinctively unique in their own ways. The pages in history are reminiscent of the fact that both the contexts, though geographically demarcated, have similar phases in their literary pursuits.

To start with, there are four phases in the Canadian literary history –

- The colonial infringement that brought about cultural upthrusts from other countries.
- The phase of moulding of such imperial inflow into the Canadian context.
- The struggle to induce an independent and distinct voice of its own – The strive towards creating a unique identity.
- Being a colony, Canada, as a nation, was psychologically and economically characterized by self hatred and a growing sense of inferiority. The struggle towards creating an individual identity, very distinct from the immigrant identity, proved detrimental towards literary pursuits.

The credo of Canadian context lies in it being a multicultural mosaic – The different cultures seem to retain their uniqueness in one whole. The history of Canada pays allegiance to several other mother countries, which has led to its constant struggle towards the reception and recognition of its importance in the global platform. Due to its mosaic culture, Canada, as a nation, exists within the ethnic and regional conflicts and tensions. The tension of the French and the English is at its core of this dialect and this gives Canada its apparent uniqueness. The mosaic pattern operates against the sense of national unity. The aim towards cultural homogeneity remains in a dark area.

The basic indifference to literature has been a crystal-clear reflection of the country's colonial mentality. The land of beauty and bounty, and that of ultimate promise seeks to have its own separate identity as a nation. The quest for identity and an attempt to establish them as an independent nation is deep-rooted in the Canadian mindset. The immigrant literature constantly strives to justify its positions and decisions. The diasporic nature creates a tension that gets reflected profoundly in their literature.

The crux in the Indian context lies in it being an ethnic tapestry – A land of mixed heritages, languages, all striving towards creating an identity that is 'Indian'. As different from Canada, since ancient times India has been a land of literary richness – The 'then' cultural and social phases paved the way towards developing the literary heritage of India.

The Indian literary pursuit had a three phase development –

- The phase of light – India's economic bliss and rich heritage found apt reflection in the literature of those times.
- The phase of darkness – Though the Mughal invasions had an economic impact, the influence of Sufi and other Urdu literary nuances eventually enriched our literature.

- The return of the phase of light – The onslaught of imperialism brought about by the British rule, created radicalism in every field. Eminent thinkers conformed to Western ideas and this got reflected in their writings.

Both India and Canada are nations surviving the thrusts of colonial rules. Even though the nature and the extent differ, the commonalities of experiences do exist. Canada and India seem to be the ultimate land of promise and land of wisdom respectively – Yet, one can find the profundity of racial, class and racial discriminations in both these lands. In any country, racial and gender discrimination is an aid to the social stratifications and also stretches its influential wings on the social and cultural heritage of the land. The notions of assimilation and acceptance become too small as umbrella terms to encompass the idea of a nation devoid of discrimination. It was an aftermath of the attitude of the separatist government that in French Canada (except the French) people found it difficult to get assimilated in the mainstream arena. Both French and English literatures in Canada pose conflicting ideologies by relating and distinguishing without the least objective to unify. The extent of class discrimination in India covers the sentiments and emotions of the people who remain confined to the rigid class structure and status quo. Entwined with such degrees of stratification, both at the racial and class levels, the position of women in the society comes into question. The two authors in my scope of study, Rabindranath Tagore and Margaret Laurence, vividly portray their female protagonist, vis-à-vis the rigid, conventional society, in a more humanist perspective.

SPACE FOR WOMEN IN NOVELS

Throughout all the phases in literatures spanning across the ages, a very special position has been given and attributed to the woman in various literary compositions. More than man, the woman has been portrayed as a very distinct character that can have many different interpretations in varying contexts. Moreover, it has been always the endeavour of mankind to understand the different behavioural patterns of the instincts and mannerisms of a particular society, the way it deals with the strengths and weaknesses and the way it shows how certain suppressed elements in it try to break free from the dominating ones into a space where equality and freedom become major considerations – It reflects the entities at the periphery and the entities existing at the core of the society. The peripheral entities, who portray a complex behavioural pattern altogether truly demands an extensive study, and hence, such a wide dominant coverage in so many literary compositions take place.

Women have been always known for their passivity unlike the active existence that man enjoys. Their passivity possesses the secret power to turn the harder aspects of life into the sweetness of tenderness, as being one of the necessary elements towards healing, nurturing and nourishing life. Besides other genres that form a part of the world's literary traditions, the form of the novel has been able to give the scope to the women, of 'then' and 'now' to appear in the mainstream and prove themselves. The novelistic form possesses the strength to voice the

problems of our times, the turmoil of the various transitional phases in our history. One of the major attributes of the novel is that it takes unto itself the task of forming resistance to the various unwilling forces acting on mankind.

Besides the writings of the other periods, the post-colonial literatures and the pieces during the colonial periods were more profound in incorporating within itself the problems of men and women. Revolutionary characters were portrayed who proved to be a sort of 'breakthrough' in the 'then' existing society. For the Indians, Tagore's *Home and the World* was a sort of an eye-opener for the women. The female protagonist is shown to be educated and aware about western education. As filmed by Satyajit Ray, her movements in slow-motion depicts the long path that has to be traversed by the women to come out of her inner household world to walk hand in hand with the men to participate in the national movement for freedom. With *Gora*, Tagore enters a new world – He portrays the women bound into the familial space and her gradual movement towards the central space. In a time when women were confined by taboos and norms, giving priority to her cognitive processes could be well termed radical. The radicalism in Tagore is also portrayed through the female character of Anandamoyi, to whom Gora confesses –

“You have no hatred – you are the only image of our welfare! It is you who are India!”
(page 407, *Gora*).

The more advanced Western world is characterized by incomparable progress vis-à-vis industrialism and capitalism. The restlessness of women in the western world has seemed to haunt them into wilderness. As a result, they tend to lose touch with their reality and existence. With this severe degradation of the self, they hanker for a world which is far away from the real, thereby stressing and straining their effective inner powers. The characters of Anna (in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*) and Emma (in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*) are shown to have fed with their family life and degraded selves, and finding death as the only source of respite from the hostile world. Both the characters embrace death as a result of the unending search to realize the self. The shredding of the motherly and nurturing instincts in women as Emma and Anna is an important feature in the novelistic form.

The plight of the women in the Canadian society forms a major issue in their literature. Writers, such as, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and others, project on the gender differences that form a part of the Canadian lifestyle – The crux lies in the 'black woman' and the 'white woman'. The 'black woman' movement is very much apart from the 'white woman' movement. The woman of color becomes the 'Third World Woman'.

One of the most important forms of portraying women in the novels is the 'Mother-figure' – The symbol of women being motherly has been done to justify that it is women who pave the way for a male protagonists ultimate goal. Both in Western and Eastern literature, the mother-figure emerge as the supreme manifestation and embodiment of one's inner conscience and selfhood. In *Gora*, Anandamoyi becomes the living manifestation of the Mother. Through

this character, Tagore entered the world of internationalism, which helped him nurture his reformist thoughts. The imagery of sensuous women, described vividly in various novels, is not without its ultimate symbolic interpretations – It is only through love can a woman show the right path. One needs to understand the feminine qualities and values which help a man to come to terms with his own self and his existential dilemma.

Literature is known to be the mirror of life. With this as one of the factors, I feel that the form of the novel gives a realistic and true picture of all that actually happens around us. A problem may arise as far as the renderings of the endings of these novels are concerned. If the protagonists' 'problem' gets to be 'solved' in the novel then there can be no scope for a hope to put an actual end to such problems, since our modern degenerated world, the only hope lies in conscious and positive struggle. Hopeful endings, which provide for possible solutions within the textual problems, leave the reader feeling safer and wiser and more entrenched in a conservative world view. The stories that celebrate struggle, those that are graced with an open ending that do not falsify their promise, the stories that leave the reader actively thinking long after finishing them, make a point of pride on the part of both the reader and the author. The texts are contingent on the gender of the protagonists.

HAGAR AND DAMINI – A JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF REALIZATION

Margaret Laurence portrays the character of Hagar, who has been in retrospection of her life in her death bed and is shown to have passing through a phase of regeneration – A dilemma between what she is and what she could have been. In the other text, Rabindranath Tagore portrays a woman who is bold enough to confront the prejudices of the society – She is shown to be fearless to the extent that even being a Hindu widow, she gives vent to her thoughts and sexual desires.

The character portrayed in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* very aptly brings out the social and literary psychology of a society which is struggling to search its roots and identity, since it is dominantly pre-occupied with an immigrant psychology. This also aids to the questionable position of women in the society. Both the gender and generation gaps play a major role in our female protagonist's life who steps out to review and re-vitalize her position as a daughter and as a wife.

The protagonist in the Canadian novel is Hagar Currie (before her marriage), a woman character with an essentially masculine nature which she had imbibed from a male dominated patriarchal society – Nothing has been portrayed as smooth or beautiful about the character. Her father, Jason Currie, symbolizes the rigid patriarchal society amidst which Hagar has been brought up, and where she and her mother are relegated to the position of human entities having 'weaker' qualities like love, compassion, politeness and tenderness. She grew up with a sheer masculine instinct – The rejection of feminine qualities within her has been vividly portrayed when she even refuses to wear her mother's shawl. The shredding of feminine attributes forced

her not to adjust to her married life with Bram Shipley, to the extent when she suppresses her sexual instincts –

“It was not so long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and I made certain that the trembling was all inner”
(*The Stone Angel*, page 70).

The two phases in Hagar’s life brings out her attitude towards her own life in a male dominated society – Hagar Currie and Hagar Shipley (after her marriage to Bram Shipley). Bereft of her mother since childhood, she had developed an adamant consciousness. She remains disturbed and makes the readers disturbed because of her unique portrayal – She is shown to reject her family status quo to the point that she ends up marrying Bram, who worked in her father’s store, a result of the forced confinements that her father had showered upon her. The – “Why on earth should I?” (*The Stone Angel*, page 36) attitude dominated throughout her life and due to which she could never come to terms with her husband and two sons.

She never did actually ‘see’ the things in the right way, as they would appear to be – As Marvin points out – “You never looked to see.” (*The Stone Angel*, page 99). Moreover, she never tried to think deeply. The externalities of things mattered most to her. Laurence is critical of Hagar in a sense that she is seen to suppress all her nurturing instincts within her. Hagar is seen to behave in a manner that does not go in conformance with the positive notion of motherhood and motherliness, whose love is unconditional. Her powerlessness in being a good mother is also determined by the years of reigning patriarchy. It is the power of the fathers to lay out and determine the supposed mannerisms which the woman shall play, bound up all together in a cocoon where the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.

Hagar had always lacked the hope that things shall work out for the better. It is in her deathbed that she takes the resolution to think. Laurence shows that sleeping (symbolizes ‘rebirth’) was the last thing that Hagar wanted as it is in sleep that men finds revelation – Hagar’s revelation was spared for the last moment. With each of her realizations, Hagar actually expands her psychic space. At the last moment she acknowledges the need for a healthy and fruitful family life, such that she ‘embraces’ her family at the moment when she ‘embraces’ death. Her ‘re-birth’ dawns with a new understanding and with a new acceptance when she accepts the lily of the valley eau-de-cologne from her granddaughter, Tina. She has been the willful wanderer in herself created dark labyrinth of wilderness, an important feature due to which she was completely alienated in her own family life.

Hagar’s confession at the deathbed shows Laurence’s portrayal of patriarchy which instigated the culprit in her tragedy. The seed of patriarchal pride which she had nurtured throughout her life seemed to leave her at deathbed –

“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 mine? Nothing can take away those years.” (*The Stone Angel*, page 261).

The repentance made is joyful – The silver lining in the story makes the narrative remarkable in all its aspects.

Gender discrimination is seen to be so profound that even the female protagonist shreds her feminine attributes to survive in a male dominated society. As her revelation was spared for the last moment, she envisioned a future where a relationship shall be determined including the likes and dislikes of both men and women. Her realization of the feminine qualities within her shows the resurrection of the position of women and of her beliefs on an intellectual plane which can be enjoyed in the space within the family along with the men who can realize the co-existence of both the genders on the platform of equality.

In ‘The Broken Ties’, Rabindranath Tagore portrays the characters which reflect the social psychology in a more matured form. Tagore explores deeply the cognitive processes and instincts of the female psyche. The female protagonist, Damini (very much unlike Hagar), is shown to defy all the prejudices that were meted out to the women in the rigid Indian society.

To understand the character of Damini, we need to make a comparative study with another supporting female character, Nanibala. Nanibala is the manifestation of the subaltern element in the text. Her plight is determined by her uncle and cousins. The male character of Purandar ruins her life and later it gets revealed that Nanibala, even though unmarried, was impregnated. Sachish gives her shelter but Nanibala embraces death. Perhaps with the death of Nanibala, Tagore wants to celebrate the feminine values and the traditional Hindu woman who would love only once. As brought about by the suicide note written by Nanibala –

‘I have tried my best, for your sake, but I could never forget him’ (*The Broken Ties*, page 124).

With the character of Damini Tagore completely inverts the picture of the traditional Hindu woman. She is a Hindu widow, whom her husband had bequeathed to Swami Leelananda. Yet, her attitudes and mannerisms were the least in conformance to the traditional norms of widowhood. It is only after reading Sachish’s diary, a fictional device used by Tagore, do we come to realize the traits of womanhood as portrayed by the characters of Nanibala and Damini

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“In Nanibala I have seen the Universal Woman in one of her aspects, ---- the woman who takes on herself the whole burden of sin, who gives up life itself for the sinner’s sake, who in dying leaves for the world the balm of immortality. In Damini I see another aspect of Universal Woman. This one has nothing to do with death, ----she is the Artist of the Art of Life. She blossoms out, in limitless profusion, in form and scent and movement. She is not for rejection; refuses to entertain the ascetic; and is vowed to resist the least farthing of payment to the tax-gathering Winter Wind.” (*The Broken Ties*, page 135).

Damini is the embodiment and reflection of the latent desires that a person conceals within. She is an epicurean in her attitude and it forever anxious to leave or miss nothing in life, unlike Hagar. She is forever willing to enjoy life to its fullest, with all her desires and wishes fulfilled, due to which Sachish finds in her the symbol of the archetypal woman. She is dashing and daring enough such that there is nothing forbidden or rather attainable in her moral code. Being a Hindu widow, she does not fear in reddening her lips. Moreover, being young, she had yet to celebrate her marital bliss to the fullest which finds vent in securing pornographic novels. She is obstinate enough to question the status quo. But, the only person for whom she can give her life is Sachish. The portrayal of the cave-incident is the most famous reflection in the literatures of the world. The imagery of the 'primordial beast' portrays and instills the nature of unfulfilled desires, which when reaches the brink, overflows violently in a beastly manner. As Sachish points out

– "...that I was the victim of a blind hunger which was licking me with its slimy saliva, through which I could be sucked and digested noiselessly, little by little." (*The Broken Ties*, page 143.)

She was temptation incarnate which even Sachish could not deny, even though he was treading the roads towards spirituality and salvation – He needed to acknowledge Nature and the natural instincts that have been bestowed upon man by Nature itself.

Damini never sought to do any harm to Sachish, nor did she try to divert his attention from his spiritual pursuits – Seen in this light, the character of Damini emerges as a powerful mother-figure. From being a seductress, always trying to fulfill her desires, she eventually shows Sachish the path towards salvation. It is due to her that Sachish paved his way towards self-realization through meditation. Her feminine instincts do not allow her to see Sachish suffer while she was alive. Her instincts for earthly passions which were leading her to imminent moral ruin recede after she gets influenced by Sachish's grace. She sacrifices her life for Sachish, by marrying Sribilash (Sachish's friend), not out of a desire for sensuous pleasures but to clear the way for Sachish in his quest for Truth. To quote Sribilash, discussing about the presence and importance of Women in our society –

Woman is a natural phenomenon who will have her place in the world, however much we try to get rid of her. If your spiritual welfare depends on ignoring her existence, then its pursuit will be like the chasing of a phantom, and will shame you so, when the illusion is dissipated, that you will not know where to hide yourself. (*The Broken Ties*, page 151).

In both the novels, *The Stone Angel* and *The Broken Ties*, we find the stubborn and obstinate character traits in the two women, Hagar and Damini, respectively. It is not that, that in being the female protagonists they are devoid of any negative traits. It is instead a journey for our women towards their truer selves. The degraded selves of the two women finally succeed as winners – Winners in the sense of their acknowledgements, confessions, and their ultimate realizations. The position of women in the social space, whether we consider Canadian or Indian contexts, reflects the cultural and social psychology of the society. The literary works

that are presented here show the rebellious nature of women, in distinct ways, in an eventual patriarchal and male dominated social structure, to come out of her 'supposed' cocoons (termed 'weak' by the male ego) into a pluralistic world, where she can create her own central position. The female protagonists as shown to 'grow down' initially, gradually emerge as winners and we actually watch them 'grow up' in their process of self realization and in their movement towards a more conscious state of individuality. Thus, the position of women as perceived by the society reflects the national ideal of building a pluralistic world view where no dominance of a particular gender or generation exist, but, where there shall be an equal opportunity and participation of both the individual facets of man and woman.

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