

Women's Simmering Discontent, and Emancipatory Attempts in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*

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Abstract

The Fire-Dwellers (1969) is one of the Manawaka series novels of Margaret Laurence. The novel was written at the time when women's emancipation movements were gaining momentum, primarily in the United States, but in other parts of the world as well. So, clearly, the narrative is largely affected by women's simmering discontent with their stagnant lives in Canada too. The novel reflects Canadian women's desire to free themselves from the common drudgery at home and to be part of a more active populace working outside the home, themselves writing the rules of their lives. The woman protagonist in the novel, Stacey MacAindra, is a common housewife taking care of her husband and their four children. She feels she is happy keeping the societal values intact but suddenly feels frustrated realizing one day that she is the only one in her family whose existence in the family is only for others, while to everyone else in the family their lives are important for themselves, not for others. However, my reading of *The Fire-Dwellers* is that Margaret Laurence was not in total disregard of family values, or for complete independence of women from the patriarchal system as we see it in women's emancipation movements today.

Keywords- Emancipation, Feminism, Discontent, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Dependency

1. Introduction

The women protagonists of Margaret Laurence survive various phases of ups and downs in their lives. In the present paper, I will take up for discussion the portrayal of the character of Stacey MacAindra in Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) vis-à-vis Laurence's representation of women's simmering discontent with the patriarchal system of her time, and an [strong] advocacy for women's emancipation in this novel. The novel was written when the Second Wave Feminism was surging up in the US and women had started questioning the domestication of themselves in the name of family

values. The protagonist Stacey MacAindra believes in family values, but at the same time, she is disillusioned with it as it was she who lost sense of being in her family, since to all other members of her family their lives were important, and they ignored the fact that Stacey was also an important human being who had all the rights to a satisfying life. Through this work, Margaret Laurence represents the extraordinary choices of a woman's life that would be beyond the family boundaries.

Stacey MacAindra was the elder sister of Rachel, is the protagonist in *A Jest of God* (1966). She married Mac and left Manawaka at a young age. Rachel thinks Stacey was lucky and happy with four kids and enjoying her life with her handsome husband. Of course, Stacey was happy in her family life and cared for her family a lot, but inwardly she felt there was stagnation setting in her life, since, as the kids were growing up, they needed her the least and were seeking their own pleasures. Her husband was becoming a little aloof and her domestic life didn't bring her any joy. She missed the old days and wished for some rejuvenation in her life. At one point in her life she seeks fulfillment outside her marriage, but finally returns to the same gruelling life because she felt that in her absence her house was on fire and everything was just going to burn down.

The discontent I have investigated portrayed in the narrative is an outcome of the conflicting situations in women's lives in general, and in Canadian women's lives in particular, depicted by Laurence. The conflict lies in the patriarchal idealization of domestic life for women and women's individual existence as well as their desire for self-fulfillment, which is almost impossible to achieve in the family atmosphere where a woman is reduced to being a mere worker with no individuality. Women essentially need emancipation for self-fulfillment. In the following sections/sub-sections, I will explicate the major points of discontent in Stacey Cameron's life as Laurence has portrayed her, and will also discuss that although Laurence is for women's emancipation as reflected in the selected novel, she does not advocate for an outright rejection of patriarchy since, after experimenting with the ideas of freedom and sexual liberty, Stacey returns to her domestic life, even making room for her father-in-law, a widower, to live with her family. In fact, the poetic tag line repeated in the novel, "Ladybird, ladybird, Fly away home; Your house is on fire, Your children are gone" is the subtle way of representing how the patriarchal structure of society made women feel about the sanctified status of home in their lives, but at the same time, it takes away women's liberty to have self-fulfillment.

2. Discussion

2.1 Feminism and Women's Discontent

The series of incidents in the life of the fictional character in *The Fire-Dwellers* are pointers of the larger issues with the real-life women's emancipation in Canadian contexts, chief among them being the two issues: the idealization of housewives, and lack of recognition of their work. At that time Canada was on the verge of women's emancipation, and things were changing from their traditional path, as notes Dudek (2000):

Canada in the 1960s and early 70s was a country that was experiencing an identity crisis based upon her desire to leave behind traditions and institutions that linked her identity to another country – either Great Britain or to the United States – and to create her new identity based on her own distinct characteristics. A gynocentric Canadian literary modernism emerged from this climate of change. (78)

Much of the action in the novel takes place within Stacey's mind as she struggles with herself, with her husband, with her children, and with the fake society. Through *The Fire-Dwellers*, Laurence is trying to support women's emancipation when she says, "I am 90% in agreement with women's lib. The change must liberate them [men] as well" (Atwood 1972, p. 23). Demystification of the idea of

the housewife as an 'ideal woman' began with the arrival of the Second Wave Feminism, and Margaret Laurence endorsed the new theory in her writings. Writers, especially male writers, before Margaret Laurence, commonly painted the pictures of 'ideally happy housewives' in their fiction, eulogizing and idealizing the work at home, idolizing family and family life, especially for the woman in the family, putting emphasis on the centrality of family in the life of a woman, and stressing upon the point that taking care of the children is the sole responsibility of the woman and that motherhood leads to her self-fulfillment, while the man was the breadwinner for the family. At the same time, woman's work at home was not recognized as 'work' as such in the idealized conditions, though womanhood, motherhood, and family life were eulogized by all. It restricted women's individuality in two major ways. First, by lowering their worth as workers equal to men, and second, by stigmatizing women who questioned this idealization and sought fulfillment outside the family sphere. *The Fire-Dwellers* challenges these notions in a major way by portraying women as dissatisfied in the claustrophobic atmosphere at home and as claiming for their space/agency outside the home.

Stacey MacAindra represents Canadian women who put up a struggle to debunk the idea of family as the ideal space for a woman, to find their independent identity as an individual, not to live in the shadow of their husbands. Though she is most of the time worried about the well-being of her family, that in her absence her beautiful house would go to pieces, yet, she doesn't hesitate to freely step outside and experiment with sexual gratification outside wedlock. For the examples of assertions of her individuality, we can take a look at the incidents of Stacey's behavior at Mac's office parties. She always stands out, even if it is for the so-called 'wrong reasons,' like misbehaving with others when drunk. Stacey brings to the fore the contradictions in the seemingly integrated lives of housewives. She rejects the idea that familial integration is essential for stability and self-fulfillment in a woman's life.

2.2 Identity Crisis

One of the major conflicting situations in the narrative is the identity crisis in the life of the protagonist. Stacey married early, at the age of nineteen, and left Manawaka for good, never to return. Her husband, Clifford MacAindra, was a salesman, with a vitamin company. There are very few common traits between the husband and wife, but nevertheless, they pull along. There are only a few common traits between the two sisters Rachel and Stacey too as Stacey is outgoing while Rachel is reserved; Rachel takes a bold decision to leave her past- that was dragging her down- behind, whereas Stacey knows that the conditions in life were dragging her down but displays lack of determination to leave everything behind to start a new life.

The problem of identity crisis in the life of housewives was highlighted by the second-wave feminist scholars who brought to attention the lack of recognition and credit to the work of housewives, although womanhood, motherhood, and family-life were eulogized by all. Laurence demystifies the traditional representation of women in Canadian literature as 'happy housewives' through the story of Stacey. Stacey is aware of the contradictions in her seemingly integrated life, and she is ready to explore various avenues for self-fulfillment, thus discarding the idea of the essentiality of familial integration for stability and self-fulfillment in life. She begins to question her own sense of being, what she wished to be while what she had become, and what has dragged her down.

Stacey is a mother with four children, the eldest of whom is a teenage girl while the youngest is just a toddler. Stacey's life, from morning till late night runs around her family. She has to play various roles at the same time – that of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. A woman in a modern family, she has to fight a constant battle, with herself as well as with others and is still supposed to

keep herself together, even being engulfed by her family. Over and above all that, the prevalent socio-religious norms made her feel she wasn't doing justice to any of her roles as a woman. She lost her sense of certainty about everything: "At the Day of Judgment, God will say "Stacey MacAindra, what have you done with your life? And I'll say, Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids. And he'll say, Are you certain about that? And I'll say, God, I'm not certain about anything anymore" (p. 8). What may be the precise genesis of this uncertainty? Perhaps, the origin point lies in her feeling that her work and her contribution to the family comforts and integrity are recognized at all, neither by her husband nor by her children; that her own life is a meaningless existence. We may need to turn for more information on this point to her formative years, spent with her parents in Manawaka. The novel is silent on her childhood or younger days, but, since *The Fire-Dwellers* is considered a sequel to *A Jest of God*, the reader gets to know about her mother Mrs. Cameron from *A Jest of God*, who dominates her sister Rachel's thoughts and life.

Mrs. Cameron inculcated in her daughters the well-defined stereotypical gender roles which give the home to women and the world outside to men. She emphasizes in her talk with them (and expects them to emulate her behaviour) that taking care of her husband and children was a precious job for a woman. In that scheme of things, a woman has no personal space, or rather, an ideal woman has no independent existence in her own right as such; she exists either for her husband or her children or the whole family. If a woman seeks a different life for herself, she deviates from the norm and is an abnormal delinquent. So, if Stacey desires a little space for herself as now and then she feels the needs, she does it with a strong guilt-feeling. That's the reason she is constantly haunted by the nursery rhyme that opens Chapter One in the novel- "Ladybird, ladybird,/ Fly away home;/ Your house is on fire,/ Your children are gone." The rhyme summarizes Stacey's condition not only metaphorically but also literally. She is uncertain about whether she loved her children or not since she feels her children do not love her anymore; that her grown-up children were gradually moving away from her. Thus, Stacey suffers from an identity crisis as to what her own existence is.

2.3 Communication Gap

Stacey is losing connection with her children. She feels she has lost connection with her husband as well since she hardly has any free time for a romantic get-together with him and when he comes back home, he generally looks overworked and tired. Mac, her husband, shows no interest in her or in her affairs- he occasionally makes love to her, that too only in a perfunctory way. His prime interest lies in his job, how to get a promotion or how to keep his job secure. But, as the story unfolds before the readers, they know that Mac has established a romantic liaison with a girl, Delores Appleton, in his office. Mac takes Stacey's sexuality for granted, that as a housewife she is a sexless creature, only devoted to her children and household chores and keeping the home in order. Stacey wishes to reach out to Mac, but in the first instance, he is unapproachable, and second, he communicates very little. Frustrated, Stacey seeks comfort outside her home, even sexual gratification outside wedlock. She takes her first chance for sexual fulfillment with Buckle Fennick, her husband's one-time friend. But Buckle betrays her. Buckle turns out to be a sexual psychopath who needed a woman's presence in front of his eyes only as a catalytic stimulation in his self-gratifying masturbatory act. This was rather crude and shocking to Stacey. Moreover, her heart was filled with guilt and remorse that she was going to unwittingly cheat on her husband, though she thanked her stars that she narrowly escaped being dishonest in her family life.

Stacey's second attempt at out-of-wedlock sexual gratification was with Like Venturi, a guy much younger than herself, and she enjoyed his company, though once again with a double sense of

guilt. One, because she was cheating on her husband, and two, that she was hiding from Luke her real age for the fear that he might not make love to her if he knew her real age. This connection also ends in fiasco as, after a while, she spotted Luke with a young girl. Ultimately, Stacey turns to Mac and makes attempts to reconnect and establish communication essential to go on in their family life.

2.4 Discontent of a Solitary Fighter

In contrast to a feminist and individualist reading, the character portrayal of Stacey may also be interpreted as the character-portrayal of a woman who is fighting to save her family integrity against external social aggressions. For instance, Pell (1972) comments that,

The heroine of *The Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey MacAindra, is haunted by the violent threats of society, and its pressure on her marriage and her sanity. But when she abandons her escapist fantasies and faces the reality of life and death, she realizes that she can survive. (Pell iv).

Pell does not recognize any issues in the family organization, rather she calls Stacey's adventures outside her home as her 'escapism,' a tendency to run away from real-life problems and seeking refuge in a make-believe world. According to Pell, Stacey suffers from a disturbed inner life caused by the pressures of external society: "Stacey is conscious of the perils of her external society and its pressures on her inner life. She perceives herself dwelling in a world which is slowly being consumed by the flames of violence and insanity" (Pell 68).

What are the pressures and the perils of the external society working against Stacey in the novel? There is depicted violence, insanity, selfishness, loneliness, demands of the family, jealousy, hatred, consumerism, capitalist aggression, and so on. These pressures take a toll on the lives of individuals and affect their relationships. As a result, as we can interpret from Pell's perspective, Stacey perceives the world around her as increasingly terrifying, disturbingly inconstant, a world heading for disaster and doom; a world where there is no peace and comfort but only satanic impulses of violence, greed, aberration, cruelty, fragmentariness, depression and desperation. Such a world is not fit to live in, that is spiritually dead. The couple's relationship is adversely affected by the conditions of their living. Mac is no more the same Mac for Stacey because he works under stress to perform better and better in the capitalist economy, comes home extremely tired and wants only sleep at night, no sex please! Stacey is no more the same cool and calm Stacey because she finds herself surrounded by hypocrites, like Tess Fogler, Buckle Fennick, and Thor Thorlakson; because she feels she has lost communication with Mac and with her growing up children. When she stares at herself reflected in a full-length mirror, she is mentally disturbed at her image as it appears to her less real but more focused and isolated. She is reduced to be a housewife caught up in a meaningless existence. Sexually stifled in her marriage and deeply hurt as Mac makes the distance from her, she takes pleasure in recalling her very first scintillating love-making experience as a teenager with the airman from Montreal on the shores of Diamond Lake, "with the lapping of the lake in their heads" (p. 72). In her present state, Stacey humorously thinks of St Paul's admonition, "it is better to marry than burn," musing that St Paul didn't say what action one is to take if one is married and burned.

The meaninglessness that fills Stacey's life is not an existentialist dilemma as it may appear to be since we have talked about her inner struggles and the grotesqueness surrounding her. Stacey's concern is not the lack of purpose of life in general and the human attempt to fill that void with activities that have no purpose in themselves but to provide respite from the utter emptiness that would ensue otherwise. Stacey worries that she as a person is losing meaning in her own life. She feels she is becoming unattractive with aging, and the sign of it is that Mac is losing physical interest in her; that her motherhood has stressed her out as Mac finds faults with her rearing of the children

since Duncan doesn't show the manliness expected of a boy, at least in Mac's terms; and that she is gradually losing, or at least becoming chaotic with, her communication with her husband as well as her children. So, it is not the philosophical aspect of meaninglessness and the associated dread that is gnawing at her heart, but the everyday, practical aspect of becoming a meaningless creature who is of use for everyone but who has no meaningful, satisfying life of her own. The paramount question in her mind is 'what is the meaning in going on living if I live only as an object, not as a creature with a life full of joys and happiness.' The style of narration Margaret Laurence has adopted, i.e., interior monologue, suits very well to depict Stacey's mental state, focusing on the practical, rather than philosophical, aspects in her everyday living. Stacey goes on musing, "Everything would be all right if I only was better educated," and she constantly argues with herself, "Listen, Stacey, at thirty-nine, after four kids, you can't expect to look like a sylph." She consoles herself that time will change for her after her kids are grown up: "Everything will be all right when the kids are older. I'll be freer." But she is not satisfied with this thought either, "Free for what? What in hell is the matter with you, anyway?" And losing the argument with her inner self, she chides herself: "Come on, fat slob on downtown, get up off your ass and get going. . . . All the thing I hate. Hate, but perpetuate" (2-3).

She feels her elder daughter demands more freedom than she can allow her for the fear of her possible sexual escapades as a youngster. In addition to these pressures, to fulfill her role as a woman, there are so many roles demanded of Stacey – of a wife, mother, daughter, mistress, business partner, friend, and a good neighbour. The roles are associated with equally conflicting expectations for their fulfillment. She needs to be soft but resilient and tough, physically strong and efficient but submissive in the family environment, and in all the roles she must be beautifully glowing, glamorous, and cheerfully smiling all the time.

The bitter contradiction and irony of her life are that Stacey is recognized as a happy woman, happily married ever after. Her sister Rachel thinks so. Rachel is rather envious of her happiness since Rachel is a spinster (and longing to have some sexual experience at the age of thirty-four) while Stacey is married to a handsome guy; Rachel longs to be a mother, whereas Stacey is a mother of four healthy kids; Rachel slogs at a school teaching kids, not so great to her liking, while Stacey holds a respectable place in her middle-class society. On the other hand, privately Stacey is very unhappy and longs for something she can't name. All the time she is worried that she has lost her worth both as a wife and a mother, whereas her own desires and wishes in life go unfulfilled. Stacey yearns for conversation, and she looks for a befitting medium. But that quest ironically leads her to an alter-ego in a God whose very existence she doubts. The situation at times becomes so unbearable to her that she revolts against everything – she is ready to cheat on her husband, she seeks pleasure for herself getting rid of her responsibilities at home, and she tries to draw some satisfaction from joining a course, daydreaming and drinking. She proves to be a lone fighter.

Thus, the narrative turns out to be a grim dystopia, especially from the point of view of a woman, as a note by Thomas and Jacob (2016), where the woman tries to escape from the inescapable and then tries to find a solution to survive the destruction. Her desperation to find love outside the four walls of her home is one such sign, and the success at it rejuvenates her energies to a large extent, but to critics such as Pell (1972), this displays her escapism, which does not solve her real-life problems. In fact, a few other critics also find, like Pell (1972), that the issues that are insuperable to Stacey are indecorous, irresponsible, and obstreperous. They condemn her for her actions in response to her inner struggle. But the same attempts, in the eyes of Thomas and Jacob (2016), are a means to cope with the grim dystopia, especially the counterculture of the 1960s. Thomas and Jacob (2016)

laud Margaret Laurence for capturing and recreating in her novel, through the experiences of her fictional character Stacey, the unrelievedly depressing panoramic view of the 60s, which they call 'a world of duplicity' that had taken the form of a conglomeration of housewives and breadwinners, of plastic kitchenware sold off as party-ware (Superware!) and vitamin pills as immortality (Richalife), of governments threatened by the fires of nuclear holocaust and morals caught up in the flames of illicit sex.

2.5 Grotesque Contradictions in Life

Contradictions in Stacey's life, such as that she has to make a show of happiness for the sake of her family, but the family neglects her; she sacrifices her own pleasures for the sake of family integrity, but her husband neglects her sexuality and shows interest in his office colleague, and so on, make the environment Stacey lives in as grotesque. There are other signs of grotesqueness and apocalyptic doom too in the novel, such as the death of the child run over at the street corner; Buckle Fennick's death on the road while performing a dare-devil stunt with his diesel truck, and the condition of Buckle's blind mother who drinks port from a battered tea-pot, etc. Stifled in her present conditions, Stacey even contemplates suicide once, as a means of escape (Pell rightly calls her as 'escapist'), shooting herself with the revolver she had brought along from her parental home since she was tormented by the unlivable condition of her contemporary culture, added to her own chaotic, demanding and stifling family life. But she couldn't bring herself to perform the act; rather, from her break-up with Luke Venturi, she learns that life has to be lived as it comes, and one has to survive in the struggle. In other words, this catalytic character Luke Venturi's entry into her life prompts Stacey to approach life from a different angle, to assess her situation in the world surrounding her from a new, countercultural perspective. It is through Luke's help that Stacey succeeds in passing through her existentialist dilemma as he, in a simple manner, questions her about what exactly she wants in her life.

2.6 Emancipatory Attempts

However, Stacey MacAindra does need an opportunity for self-expression and an outlet, not only for her pent-up emotions but also for her suppressed sexual desires that are almost choking the life out of her. Stacey yearns to recover some of the passion of her early romance. In this extraordinary novel, Margaret Laurence has given us yet another unforgettable heroine – smart, witty, but overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising four children and trying to love her overworked husband. However, she had to make attempts for her own emancipation. She gets the opportunity to reignite romance on her aimless drifting adventure to the ocean side. There she accidentally meets a young man named Luke Venturi. She opens her heart to him because she could easily share her mind with him. On their second meeting, they make love. The sexual encounter was so fulfilling to Stacey that she felt rejuvenated. But the feeling was short-lived as the stifling conditions in her life were waiting for her at home. Reaching back home she finds that she had put her trust in yet another psychopath. Her beautiful and stylish neighbour, Tess, in whose care she left her daughter Jen, mistreated Jen that day. Stacey blames herself for the fiasco, chastising herself that she shouldn't have run after pleasure with a young man since her primary responsibility was towards her family, towards Jen who needed her constant attention, and she is angry too thinking that Tess, an issueless woman, must have been mistreating Jen every time she left Jen in her care. The second blow to her comes from the fact that the man with whom she was enjoying sex was much younger to her, only a little older than her own daughter. Once again she feels remorse and indulges in self-chastisement. But still, she goes to meet Luke, for the third time and they had sex. This time they decided to part ways as

Luke had plans to travel to the North. She is left heartbroken and feels Luke wanted to get rid of her because of their age difference. Her doubts are confirmed when after a few days she sees Luke in an anti-war demonstration she had also gone to take part in, with a young, beautiful girl. It is after these frustrating adventures that Stacey decides to mend her own family life.

3. Conclusion: The Road Not Taken

It seems, at the time of writing *The Fire-Dwellers* Margaret Laurence was not prepared for a family break-up (we have to wait for this to happen in the last novel of the Manawaka series *The Diviners* [1974]), and therefore, despite her disillusionment with family life, Stacey returns to her family to set things right for everyone in the family, even for her extended family – her father-in-law comes to live with them. Laurence takes the stand of a liberal feminist because she does not encourage her protagonists to rebel against the patriarchal society, but to reconcile to the system by living to the expectations desired by society, in playing their role to handle, while simultaneously reeducating their men by arousing their empathy for the pain of women.

We can also read Stacey's situation as a woman passing through a mid-life crisis. In fact, Mac and Stacey both are passing through what in psychological theories is termed as 'mid-life crisis.' Stacey is thirty-nine, while Mac is in his early forties. Contemporary theories in psychology (see, Elliott Jacques 1965) maintain that as people approach the forties in their lives, they tend to revisit their shortcomings and failings, memories of human mortality, and the youth slipping by, which may induce in their feelings of depression, anxiety, the desire to rejuvenate youth or to bring drastic changes in their lives. In most cases, the first drastic change people wish for in their lives is a change of life-partner. It's not clear whether Mac and Delores had physical relations, but Stacey experienced a sexual relationship outside wedlock, with Luke Venturi, and that rejuvenated her interest in life and helped her return back to her own family life, and even to reconnect with Mac.

To sum up, the narrative in *The Fire-Dwellers* ends with the protagonist not taking the road that appears worth taking, despite obvious risks. The novel opens with Stacey living a disheveled life, with her four Children, unhappy with her husband and the turn her life has taken now, at the age of thirty-nine. Her own reflection in a mirror reminds her of the unreal character she is, and the instances and events around the world bring to focus the waste human life has become with rampant violence, anxiety, and stress. The people she feels she is connected with turn out to be not really connected with her but lost in their own quagmires, conundrums, and private worlds. Her own children need their own spaces and are, therefore, moving away from her. Despite all these misgivings, Stacey convinces herself that everything is okay with her life, that her home is not on fire. There appears a forked road before her. Her frustration provokes her to take the road that seems less thorny and more pleasing. First, she wanted to shoot herself to end all her agonies, but she desists herself from taking the action. Second, she was lured into an extra-marital affair with her husband's friend, but that abruptly ended in a fiasco. The second such chance she takes is with a very young guy, fifteen years younger than her, which also ends in her disappointment. When she finds that man, Luke, "beside a girl about twenty, with long fine brown hair, wearing white jeans and sweater, and carrying a sign. PEACE" (p. 251) all her hopes with him dashed to the ground. But the short affair was long enough to make her realize that this was not all she wanted with her life, that her life with Mac was better than with anyone else, that what she was looking for was a reconnection with the life she had lost for a while. She gets back to her normal life with Mac and her children, and when her semi-blind father-in-law comes to stay with them, she makes space for him in her house, sacrificing some of her own private space.

Margaret Laurence has succeeded in raising two prominent issues through the narrative. One, the image of happy housewives, promoted by patriarchal social structure at the time, was a myth that needed busting since, among women, there was a simmering discontent against patriarchy. Second, countercultural practices, including romantic flick outside wedlock, need social acceptance as the stigmatization of alternative lifestyles restricts individual freedom, implying the freedom of women as individuals. In other words, women essentially need emancipation.

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