

The Failures of Sisterhood in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka Novels

by Donna A. Bennett

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. (The Stone Angel) (1)

Beginning in 1964 with The Stone Angel and concluding with The Diviners ten years later, the Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence has created a series of fictional works depicting heroines who have all, like Hagar in that first book, shackled themselves in some way. Laurence's protagonists are revealed as individuals chiefly responsible for the loss of autonomy which they now struggle to regain. Repeatedly we witness the complex pattern of inhibitions and of self-constraint to which, in the name of propriety, these women surrender their freedom.

There are many tragic consequences that stem from such a loss of freedom but the one that most compels attention is the way in which all of these protagonists find themselves cut off from the other women around them, much more separated from those of their own sex than from the men they encounter. There is thus a lack, in Laurence's fictional worlds, of any possibility of a supporting "sisterhood," of any sense of that kind of community which we often think of today as a potential means of granting women greater autonomy. Instead, such potentially helpful support is itself virtually rendered non-existent by the very condition it might have the power to correct.

The failures, in Laurence's prairie fiction, of women to create genuine



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community among themselves is most poignantly seen in The Stone Angel, especially in its depiction of the relationship between Hagar and her life-long acquaintance (but never friend), Lottie Drieser. Lottie is shown to have been a child who was less inhibited and more able to deal with the harsh realities of life and death than those around her, although Hagar, as narrator, never seems to recognize or acknowledge this capability. Hagar is both drawn to Lottie and scornful of her. Though she rejects her companion's behaviour as "coarse," still her own actions and decisions are frequently unexamined responses to Lottie's accomplishments and opinions.

Moreover, as Laurence makes clear, Hagar's rejection of Lottie is more than just a response to a single personality: rather it is characteristic of Hagar's separation of herself from women in general: "She was a silly girl. Many girls were silly in those days. I was not. Foolish I may have been, but never silly." (p. 48) Hagar's general dislike of women shows up elsewhere in the novel: it causes her antipathy toward her daughter-in-law, Doris, and it is the source of her desire to separate Arlene, Lottie's daughter, from her younger son, John, who is in love with her. Hagar is jealous of these women: she wishes to keep her males solely to herself and safe from such "rivals," an urge which leads her to her single--and

incredibly disastrous--act of cooperation with Lottie: their conspiracy to stop the planned marriage of the two young people. "Lottie was the last person I'd have once thought of as ally, but neither of us had any choice in the matter," Hagar reflects. This joining of forces is, however, like a parody of real sisterhood and for Hagar it results in the catastrophic event that completes her total self-entrapment.

Comparing Hagar's alienation from women to the plight of Stacey, the central character of The Fire-Dwellers, is informative, for it shows that even as community failed for those pioneer women that grew up together, its breakdown cannot be compensated for in the modern world by an escape into suburbia. Suburban sisterhood turns out to be a pseudo-community most pointedly satirized in the novel by the description of the "Polyglam Superware party," a tedious gathering presided over by a "plastic lady" and attended by Stacey and her neighbours, each alone in her own private hell: "Stacey chain-smokes. Bertha knots her hands hopefully. Tess sits wide-eyed like a child about to behold marvels."(2)

Tess is the only woman in the neighbourhood who does seem able to help Stacey, easing her difficulties as mother by sharing with her the care of Jen, Stacey's youngest child. But this supportive relationship does not

remain a satisfactory one, for Tess turns out to be unstable: discovered trying to force Jen to watch one goldfish cannibalize another, shortly afterwards the woman has a breakdown and attempts suicide, leaving Stacey both resentful of her and at the same time guiltily feeling that perhaps she had failed to sense and respond to Tess's needs.

Not only does community in general fail but Laurence seems to hold out little hope of it being compensated for by that special and more intimate relationship of friends. Laurence's fullest investigation of female friendship may be seen in her depiction of Rachel and Calla in A Jest of God. More than the protagonist's only female friend, Calla is the only human being of either sex, friend or family, with whom Rachel has any genuine personal contact when the novel opens. Yet from the first we watch Rachel, despite herself, erecting psychic barriers--she is by turns condescending, intolerant and distancing. Though less fiercely proud and less sure of herself than Hagar, Rachel resembles her in being unable to accept deviations from some personal norm, so that she is continually uncomfortable about all the differences in her companion's dress, her manners, her beliefs.

We most clearly see the impossibility of such a friendship and of any last-

ing intimacy between the two women when, while trying to comfort Rachel after a quasi-religious experience that she conceives of as yielding to hysteria, Calla suddenly kisses her friend.

"Rachel, honey," she says, "it practically kills me to see you like this."

Then as though unpremeditated, she kisses my face and swiftly afterwards my mouth. (3)

Whether or not there is a sexual dimension to Calla's act remains unclear, intentionally so because Laurence wants to show us that Rachel can only construe the kiss as sexual and, perceiving it so, can only be horrified by it.

My drawing away is sharp, violent. I feel violated, unclean, as though I would strike her dead if I had the means. . . . My anger feels more than justified, and in some way this is a tremendous relief. (p. 38)

The mistrust already present in the relationship (suggested by the way Rachel doubtfully describes Calla's actions "as though unpremeditated"), the anxiety about having allowed anyone to get close enough to her to see her make a fool of herself, and the pain of caring, in consequence, about what that person thinks, all of these are the unstated sources of Rachel's feelings towards Calla at this moment of "drawing away." It is no wonder she finds justification of her anger " a tre-

mendous relief": it is an anger that pre-existed the present event.

A distrust of one's peers, a suppressed anger at the invasion of privacy that friendship entails--the interactions between women of the same age seem almost uniformly negative in Laurence's fiction. Moreover, this same alienation affects the relationships that stretch across the generations, for mothers and daughters seem equally unable to aid one another--instead each acts to limit the other's autonomy. Together the two novels about the Cameron sisters provide a fully developed portrait of such inter-generational failure. A Jest of God has for its main action Rachel's almost desperate attempts to free herself from the ties of parental authority and daughterly duty that bind her in the existence she shares with her mother. Stacey, in The Fire-Dwellers, provides an examination of the other side of the relationship. Her difficulties in coming to terms with her own role as mother are portrayed in her tendency to smother her young by her compulsive need to protect them from all potential ills and in the way that the role of motherhood is so nearly devouring her, becoming not only her only vocation but her sole source of self-identity. In many ways the problems of Rachel and Stacey have been adumbrated already in The Stone Angel, where Hagar not only fails as a mother but also in turn has only a

void where her mother should have been: "her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one." (p. 3)

The underlying and unacknowledged feelings that shape Hagar's responses to her mother's death--that it has been a kind of abandonment of her as a child and that it has somehow resulted from some weakness on her mother's part--inevitably have also helped shape her feelings about herself and about the women around her. Her mother's "weakness" in dying is connected in Hagar's mind with femaleness. Resenting the woman who deserted her in death (and about whose death she must feel some guilt) and fearful of death herself, Hagar comes to distrust and reject the very concept of womanhood, to deny her own gender and those human qualities--such as compassion--that she associates with being female.

Although one of the dominant themes of Laurence's fiction is the way women are cut off from one another and from themselves, there is also a point in all of her novels where the protagonists eventually succeed in achieving some degree of autonomy, regaining some of their lost freedom. Each time this achievement allows them, at last, to make positive contact with other women around them and each time this contact is achieved, it provides them with greater freedom. In The Stone Angel, for example, Hagar learns her

most important lessons about the ways life can be lived while sharing a hospital ward with several other women. Most important of these is Elva Jardine, a pixieish old woman who stands as an entire refutation of the code that Hagar has mistakenly embraced. Among other things, Elva teaches Hagar to acknowledge weaknesses, allowing her the possibility of reaching out to others--both, as it turns out, for their help and to offer to help them. Hagar achieves some participation, even if in her last days and in a somewhat diminished fashion, in true community--performing the comically heroic act of fetching a bedpan for a young roommate despite the fact that it involves personal risk for her.

In The Fire-Dwellers, Valentine Tonere plays a role somewhat similar to that of Elva. A figure out of Stacey's past, but an outsider to the Manawakan world of social restriction, Valentine appears at a crucial moment for Stacey and gives the woman an important piece of information, one that frees her from some of her most pressing external fears. On the other hand, in A Jest of God, there are no new female characters who appear late in the novel to affect the protagonist. Instead, Rachel is shown coming to terms at last with Calla, as well as resolving the relationship with her mother that has kept her so long a child. Believing herself pregnant and deserted by the lover she has finally taken, discovering that she must turn to someone,

Rachel finds that Calla is the only person in whom she can confide. Her friend's genuine care and concern, her refusal to condemn her despite Rachel's earlier anger and rejection, allow Rachel the strength to remain psychically whole and to begin to plan for a future, one in which she will take responsibility for her own actions, no longer playing the role of child.

Laurence's last novel, The Diviners, needs to be distinguished from those which precede it. Although here again there is a general pattern of failed female community, and although the young Morag growing up in Manawaka encounters many of the same problems and prejudices as did Hagar two generations before her, still this woman is always an outsider in Manawaka and is therefore less vulnerable to the social standards and attitudes that took such a heavy toll from the earlier woman.

Like Hagar, Morag has lost her mother. Though she at least finds in Prin a woman that lovingly tries to make up for that loss, Morag cannot fully accept her because of the way the woman is the object of the community's derision. Still Morag does do what no other character in Laurence's fiction manages: she forms--in late adolescence--a genuine bond with another woman. That friendship between Morag and Ella becomes the one stable factor in the life that follows; it is a relationship that outlasts husbands and lovers, though it is also made diffi-

cult by physical separation and by the way diverging life-styles and careers lead the two women in different directions.

There is another aspect of the relationships between women that is even more important to The Diviners than the friendship between the two women: the interaction of mothers and daughters. Here again the novel is cautiously optimistic in a way that sets it apart from Laurence's earlier fiction. Morag, for example, finds in Ella's mother a person who can serve as a positive and satisfactory model for a parent. Moreover, the whole of the novel traces the process, often extended and painful, by which Morag and her daughter Pique reconcile themselves to one another, establishing at last a true generational continuity that has been previously missing. Together the older woman and the younger one come to understand a notion of reciprocal support that Laurence summarizes in the concept of inheritance --an inheritance that, significantly

enough, not only allows Pique to draw on her mother's strength without either of them surrendering her own sense of self but also allows both Pique and Morag to draw on a larger source of inherited strength, one that even includes that lonely Scots-woman of two generations earlier, Hagar Shipley.

In this new sense of self-worth and of support between generations lies the hope that, in the future, true community, true sisterhood, may yet become something more than a momentary or belated occurrence: it may prove instead a consistent possibility for all women.

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto, 1964), p. 292.
2. Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto, 1969), p. 84.
3. Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God (Toronto, 1966), p. 38.