

Portrayal of Modern Life: A Reading on Margaret Laurence's the Fire Dwellers

D. Ebinezer*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Panimalar Engineering College, Chennai, India

Abstract: Stacey the protagonist in *Fire Dwellers* longed to be a modern woman. Tradition did not appeal much to her. Beyond her sufferings she wanted to telecast herself as a modern lady. From her life, it was understood that her family life was not what she expected and future remained understandable. She felt solace by pretending herself to be a modern lady. The sufferings, conflicts, bitter experiences, are clearly pictured in the novel. The paper presents a general note on modern life and through the influence of modernity Stacey, the major character created by Margaret Laurence.

Keywords: Criticism, literature, literary theory, Margaret

1. Introduction

A great Canadian novelist and short story writer, Jean Margaret Laurence is one of the famous figures in Canadian Literature. After graduation, she was hired as a reporter for *The Winnipeg Citizen*, where she wrote for book reviews, covered labor issues and hosted a daily radio column. Her novels are: *The Fire Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House*, *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*. She has written short stories, *The Tomorrow Tamer* and a few other stories. Laurence was the founder *The Writer's Trust of Canada*. It was a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community. By the end of her literary career, Margaret Laurence was one among Canada's most esteemed and beloved authors.

The modern world grows with new scientific methods each day in every aspect. Man's life at present and his future continues with the growing uncertainty of violence and catastrophe in every sphere. Consequently, the traditional socio-cultural systems like marriage, family, religion, etc. are distorted. The city dwellers are completely unaware of the purpose of their creation. The only hope and ambition of their life was to make money.

The title of the novel *The Fire Dwellers* signifies the fire inside the central character Stacey MacAindra and the fire outside the big city, Vancouver. The city symbolizes hell and its inhabitants are damned human beings. A peaceful life in the city of fire is really a parody on human consciousness. The life of the city dwellers are filled with constant fear of themselves and about their family. Stacey MacAindra the central character shares her life with an overworked husband a salesman. She is

upset not only by her personal and family problems, but also the social unrest in the city. She is in the midst of disaster and violence.

The protagonist of *The Fire Dwellers*, Stacey MacAindra, has an abiding conviction that life has more to offer than the tedious routine of her days. The dilemmas of personal identity-knowledge and assurance of oneself and communication as the fragile, but precious means of confirming identity, form the background of Stacey's story. She struggles with four children and an uncommunicative over-worked husband. She is always fearful that she lives in the midst of a disastrous world that violently consumes itself in the extremes of war and of feverish prosperity. Stacey's confused awareness of social events, as she sees them on TV or newspapers, all contribute to her sense of catastrophe. She is a fire dweller trapped in the flames of modern society.

The city dwellers are concerned with comfort and luxurious life. They toil to earn a lot of money for their family to make them comfortable. In this prospect, they forget to remember about their family and friends. Lack of communication between the husband and wife in a family creates a kind of alienation. Even after sixteen years of married life, Mac and Stacey find it difficult to communicate with one another. Stacey resents Mac's Silence: "... can you image what it's like to live in the same house with somebody who doesn't talk or who can't or else won't and I know which reason it could be" (182). Mac usually responds to her questions either with an excuse of being tired or with a demand to be left alone. His answers become monosyllabic,

She: Mac?

He: Mm?

She: I want to tell

He: Christ am I ever beat. What?

She: Oh – nothing (142).

That puts an end to their conversation.

In modern society, a complete denial of moral values can be seen. Moral values are propagated by the religion from generation after generation and if a society lacks moral values it is due to the violation on religious principles. In modern society, God is interpreted in many forms and manner. Moral values are the standards of good and evil. Individual's moral

value may be derived from the society and the religion. The merits and demerits of the society are well judged by its moral values. According to Kertzer, the protagonist gets trapped in the flames of modern society. The suffering she experiences inside and outside the society is well revealed through television, newspaper and magazines.

Stacey utters, "What will happen when the horsemen of the Apocalypse ride through this town?" (55). The horsemen of the Apocalypse are the embodiments of sin, bloodshed, famine and death during the Great Tribulation revealed by the Holy Spirit to St. John in the Book of Revelation, the Bible. Stacey is unable to run away from this destruction outside her but she is powerless and left to live in the city of fire elements. The religion in the society is transformed by business and advertisement. Stacey attempts to resist the materialism prevailing in her society but often falls a prey to this materialistic world. The illusory business creates a hope among the modern society. In the novel Laurence thus focuses on a society, which lacks faith at its core and women who are the centre of the present generation who have also lost their faith. Ian inherits his Father's tight lipped control. Mac's repressed emotions thus prevail with his strange and dangerous silence is another form of violence.

The broken communication is caused by the lack of trust and understanding. These temperamental polarities create a sense of isolation and force them to cultivate extra marital relationships. Her experiences of broken conversation with her husband induce in her the fear of unwantedness and insecurity. She imagines that they are both parallel lines and on being parallel can't ever meet. She realizes the problem that everyone in her society, including herself, wears a social mask on the real inner self. Stacey often feels alienated and withdraws herself and speaks within her own self imagining that others have a better life than her and also hear voices within her skull. Stacey's inner confusion is expressed as an aspect of voice and time, the voice of past and present.

The moral value in modern society is in a great demand. Taking revenge in the sense of blood for blood is very common in our day today life. Feeling rejected by her husband, MacAindra and her children, Stacey finds Buckle Fennick and she is sexually attracted to him though she dislikes his mannerisms. She accepts a ride in his truck and at his place, in the presence of his blind mother, enjoys masturbation before Stacey's eyes, keeping her as an onlooker. He thus seeks revenge on Mac through Stacey because of Mac's refusal to acknowledge him in Thor's presence.

Stacey in the same sense understood the world around her. She tries to mask her relationship between Luke Venturi and tries to act as a clever wife to her husband, MacAindra. The mask is used to cover the true self of a person in the same way; the city dweller hides their Identity behind organizations like Richalife. The innocence of Stacey is lost, once she enters Vancouver from Manawaka. Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* outwardly deals with the life of a house wife, Stacey MacAindra and her four children. But inwardly it portrays the real suffering of city dwellers and the changing cult. Religion is replaced by popular modern organizations like Richalife. Lack of communication between the couple automatically gives rise to conflict and disagreement. The media especially Television, radio, and newspapers bring tremendous news regarding violence in the society. The human beings living in the city are mere dwellers rather than a wise being and they long for a utopian life.

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