Persona study of Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers*

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Margaret Laurence is one of the most influential writers of Western Canada. Through her four Manawaka novels she has created a multi-faceted Canadian experience of four generations. Laurence in "A Place to Stand On," explains the connections between her real, personal hometown and her fictional town of the mind:

Manawaka is not my hometown of Neepawa it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley ... In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much anyone prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, ... which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share (p.3-4).

The Manawaka novels center on female characters, each heroine tells her own story in her own voice. The women are in search of identity and through their search find out their real self. This paper is an attempt to study the character of Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers*.

Stacey MacAindra, thirty nine years old, is the wife of Clifford MacAindra, a salesman and the mother of four children. Katie, her elder daughter, and sons Ian and Duncan, and Jenifer Rachel, who is unable to speak. Her problem arises from the fact that she is physically away from Manawaka, but psychologically she is attached to her charming youthful past there. She is unable to adjust to the dull and boring humdrum routine life in Vancouver. The paper news,
Mac and Stacey live under the same roof as husband and wife, but there exists a communication gap between the two. Mac comes back home very late and enquires about the children and goes ahead with his work. She wants to share her joys and sorrows with Mac, who prefers to be silent—his silence is ‘icy’. Mac is not able to understand her feelings and says,

Stacey, everything is okay. How many times do I have to say it. Can’t you please for heaven’s sake quit yaking about my work?

I’m sorry. But you won’t talk, you won’t ever say.

There is nothing to say.

Yeh. Well, okay. I feel very strange sometimes.

What do you mean, strange?

Like as though everything is receding.

Receding?

As though I’m out of touch with everything. Everybody, I mean. And vice versa. If you see what I mean.(FD 79).

Deprived of emotions, the insensitive Mac replies: “May be you need to see the doctor. Do you feel sick?” (FD 79)

Stacey feels that, “I’m not a good mother. I’m not a good wife. I don’t want to be. I’m Stacey Cameron”(FD 124). She often wants to get rid of her identity as Mac’s wife or the kid’s mother. When Mac accuses her of infidelity she bursts into rage. He believes Buckle Fennick and suspects Stacey. Insulted by his accusation, Stacey gets out of the house and takes a long drive to escape from home. On the way she meets Luke Venturi, a young artist. The insecurity and angst, which she undergoes at the companionship of Mac disappear when Luke is with her. She enjoys having sex with him which she feels is rejuvenating.

I’d like to start again, everything, all of life, start again with someone like you [Luke] – With you – with everything simpler and clearer. No lies. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words. Just everything plain and good, like today, and making love and not worrying about unimportant things and not trying to change each other.(FD 176)
When Luke invites her to accompany him to the North the mother in her reminds her of her children and she flies back home. Stacey’s quest for self-discovery takes on a circular form. Clara Thomas in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* compares Stacey’s consciousness to an ‘eye’ whose pupil stretches to accept the world and shrinks in sudden fear. The movement is halting opening and shutting, a broadening and then a narrowing, and the final point of poise in the novel is not Stacey’s coming to a revelation or to any new point of departure, but her acceptance of her own kind of sensitivity, her own ways of seeing and understanding others – and herself. (p.122)

The important crisis in Stacey’s life in Vancouver occurs due to the dearth of balanced relationship between Stacey and Mac. In an interview with Michael Fibre, Laurence expresses her views: “I would say that the main theme is survival with the ability to give and receive love… survival as the ability to continue reaching out and giving and returning love.” In the life of Stacey, Mac and their children, instead of giving and receiving love, there is brutality, confusion, controversy, absence of communion, fear, mistrust and betrayal. Although Mac and Stacey are husband and wife, their temperaments separate them and they live different ways of life. The temperamental diversity with Mac ruins the peace and the sense of fulfillment which she felt in the initial stage of her married life. For she thought at that time, she was “fortunate to have her whole life settled once and for all, so ideally, at twenty-three.” (FD 54). Later she feels that she is trapped inside the four walls of her house.

Psychology says that the people with same values, interests and attitudes tend to maintain steady and permanent relationships. Homogeneity of attitudes is often helpful for a happy marriage. As Baron and Byrne in *Social Psychology. Understanding Human Interaction* says that, “The two people want to be together, to talk, to touch, and individuals who are deeply in love, actually do spend an unusual amount of time looking into each other’s eyes.” (p.207). According to the social scientists, the principle of homeostasis – an individual’s capability to modify to new situations or different individuals – is regarded as principal factor for maintaining permanent intimate relationships. In the case of Stacey, she fails to understand the importance of homeostasis.

Stacey finds it hard to obtain contentment in her role as a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter-in-law, a housewife in a male-dominated and male-oriented world. Stacey’s affair with
Luke Venturi is an act of extinguishing the ‘inner sexual fire’, which is only a temporary relief. Luke serves as her persona to empower her to re-emerge with new knowledge about herself. He sees her only as a woman and does not look into her roles as a mother, wife and daughter, which helps Stacey to regain a true perspective of herself. Nancekivell in “The Fire-Dwellers: Circles of Fire” comments: “in this affair she rediscovers her power to act positively for herself and makes the conscious decision not to escape with Luke from her family and her duties, which would negate the fundamental strengths of her nature.”(p.160)

The narrative technique employed by Laurence reflects the chaos and confusion in Stacey’s life. It also indicates the unsettled nature of the complex reality of the Canadian society. At the end of the novel, Stacey understands that expression of thoughts and feelings may be a solution to her lack of communication with Mac, though not a complete solution. She also realizes that silence is necessary in human relations. ‘Time’ serves both as a preserver and destroyer, and brings in a vigorous change in her attitude. 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 hell of a long time now.”(FD 303). Mac feels free to show the affection which his father had taught him to conceal. Stacey also feels that she can talk to Mac, as to Luke. She even resolves in her last soliloquy that one should count the blessings God has given, and not to worry about the curses. She prays to God, “Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch.”(FD 308). The novel ends with the affirmative words: “Temporarily, they are all more or less okay. She feels the city receding as she slides into sleep, will it return tomorrow?”(FD 308). If it returns, Stacey, Mac and the members of the family, possess the courage to face it. Patricia Morley in Margaret Laurence remarks about Stacey: “In a very real sense the protagonist in The Fire-Dwellers is post-war Western society. Stacey is a female version of the ‘little man’ in contemporary, antiheroic fiction. She is atypical only in her strongly ironical sense of humour.”(p.108)

Bibliography:


