



20 - 1 Jan - Mar 2026

Published on 14, Jan - Mar 2026

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Anxiety of Loneliness in Margaret Laurence's The Fire-Dwellers

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, particularly during the Post World War-II period, the experience of 'alienation' has been very intense and widespread at all levels of human activity both in the West and in the East. Canadian writer Margaret Laurence is conceived major questions on alienation, identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism, immigration, globalization and affirmation. Confrontation in the Canadian literary world and the Canadian ethos is marked by the 'multicultural mosaic'. Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* explores the aloneness and the identity crisis in a excruciating manner.

Keywords: Alienation, multiculturalism, immigration, socio-political Issues

In the twentieth century, particularly during the Post-Second World War period, the experience of 'alienation' has been very intense and widespread at all levels of human activity both in the West and in the East. In fact, now, when we have entered a new millennium, the term 'alienation' or some of its near-synonyms such as 'estrangement,' 'isolation,' 'exile,' 'distance,' etc. are being very meaningfully and extensively used in a number of academic, literary and philosophical disciplines. These disciplines include 'literature, psychology, sociology, theology, philosophy, anthropology, education, economics, political science and management studies.

As a result the term 'alienation' has been invested with a variety of meanings, stances and subjected to several interpretations some of which may even seem to denote somewhat dissimilar and heterogeneous trends. In spite of its semiotic ambiguities and variations coupled with apparent incongruities, frequent use of the term 'alienation,' in the context of the modern literary discourse and theoretical and philosophical paradigms, has made it more or less a fetish word conveying more feeling than denotation. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of and a close attention to this multi-faceted and wide-ranging concept of alienation is both necessary and desirable.

Two other words are currently being used as synonyms of alienation and these are 'anomie' and 'anomia,' both of Greek origin. Whereas 'anomia' refers to self-alienation, 'anomie' is used in the context of alienation from society. But these two types of alienation are not exclusive and they certainly influence and impinge upon each other as the personal and the societal contexts often overlap. In this connection, an American sociologist G.A. Netter has pointed out: "Anomia is a personal disorganization; alienation is a psychological state of an individual . . . and alienated person is one who has been estranged from, made unfriendly towards his society and the cub true it carries."(670-77)

Social philosopher, J. Horton points out the difference between 'alienation' and 'anomie' by comparing the views of Karl Marx and Durkheim. He says:

Whatever the particular meanings, 'anomie' is a social state of normlessness or anarchy, the concept always focuses on the relationship between individuals and the constraining forces of social control. It is a problem of power defined as domination, a concept conspicuously absent from the anomie perspective. Anomie concentrates on culture or culture transmitted in social organization; alienation (focuses) on the hierarchy of control in the organization itself. The critical focus of alienation is on whatever social conditions separate the individual from society as an extension of self through self-activity, rather than as an abstract entity independent of individual selves (285).

However, the use of these terms are considered interchangeable; and even some other words in English such as isolation, loneliness, estrangement, separation, difference, etc. are used almost in similar contexts. Canadian writer Margaret Laurence is conceived significant questions relating to alienation, identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism, immigration, globalization, and affirmation that confront the Canadian literary world and the Canadian ethos is marked by the 'multicultural mosaic'.

Remarkable unanimity of critical opinion among the perceptive critics, and genuinely-felt and well articulated literary responses from her contemporary and later day creative writers, about the basic nature of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels and by the testimony of her own confessions, it has now become an established fact of the literary history of Canadian literature that Laurence's first hand encounter, in Somaliland and Ghana, at the physical and metaphorical levels, with strangers, colonialism, imperialism, new myths and legends, contemporary situation of the status of women, nonfictional phenomenon of tradition and modernity, continuity and change, rootlessness, gender-discrimination, generation gap, rapidly coming changes at the social, moral and psychological levels, acted as a 'Catalyst and Crucible', for much of her later Canadian fictional and non-fictional writings.

Robert Kroetsch calls it "the doppelganger thing. You meet yourself in another form. Canadians now are undergoing this exciting and painful expe-

rience of meeting themselves."(51) The African predicament with regard to its colonial encounter mirrored, more or less, an analogous situation in Canada for Laurence. In fact, it provided her the outsider's view of the "cultural cringe" and crisis of identity engendered by the colonial outlook in Africa that she could relate to the similar patterns emerging in Canada. Describing the significance of 'stranger-syndrome' or 'outsider syndrome' or what T.S. Eliot called 'objectivity' in the life of a Creative writer, she observes thus in the context of her seven years' sojourn of Africa explained in her *Heart of Stanger* :

The process of trying to understand people of another culture-their concepts, their customs, their life-views is a fascinating and complex one, sometimes frustrating, never easy, but in the long run enormously rewarding. One thing, I learned, however, was that my experience of other countries (read African countries) probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else. Living away from home gives a new perspective on home. I began to write out of my own background only after I had lived some years away, and when finally came back to Canada to stay, nearly ten years after I had returned in my fiction, I knew for certain where I belonged, and I knew why? (11).

Thus the themes that inform her African writings such as rootlessness, dispossession and loss, the need and desirability to come to terms with the past with the help of one's ancestors and gods, gender-bias, etc., become integral, in a very natural manner, to her fiction about Canada. Consequently, Laurence's journey to and her stay in Africa, that provided her sensitive mind an excellent opportunity to interact with a large variety of groups of people, proved a voyage of self-discovery for herself and by implication for her country Canada.

This present research paper concentrates on Anxiety of Loneliness in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*, it exposed the difficulties of alienation and the socio-political and sociocultural issues by interrogating in a significant manner, social and moral way. Thus her preoccupation, in this novel, with analyzing the crippling effects of the imperialistic and conformist values of the system and the dilemma of coping with these forces

are linked to her wider and visionary stance of anti-authoritarianism and anti-colonialism.

The question of the Canadian Identity vis-a-vis a peculiar kind of rootlessness keeps on impinging upon the Canadians' sensibility all the time. The novels of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence deal very effectively with the alienation and affirmation of women of white Anglo-Saxon-Protestant origin, now part and parcel of the Canadian ethos. The tensions and paradoxes of their lives are very well articulated in their writings. Identity-crisis, if one may postulate, is the leit motif of these writings. But happily enough, they have also incorporated in their writings, the other half of the story, i.e. the alienation experienced by those persons belonging to the natives (Red Indians), ethnic groups, religious and linguistic minority groups, other racial groups, etc.

This has certainly widened the horizon of their writings and has invested them with meaningful elements of universality, salvaging them from any fierce kind of ghettoization. For example, the Metis like the Tonnerres (who are half-French and half-Indian in biological terms) have a significant presence in several of Laurence's novels such as *The Stone Angel*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*. Similarly, there is an important Ukrainian Canadian character in *A Jest of God*; and the Italian Canadian one in *The Fire-Dwellers*. These writings, while reflecting very meaningfully the tensions caused by the cultural-mix in Canada, also bring out the sense of alienation experienced by these groups.

In Canada, the question of racial and religious minorities is also a vital one. Those belonging to these minority groups such as the Jews, Black East Indians, Ukrainians, the Japanese and the Chinese feel and find themselves outside the wall of "the garrison" and live, in a state which Northrop Frye calls 'Amiable Apartheid.'

Margaret Laurence views the Native Indians, the Metis and the Crees as victims of the so-called white society immigrants who regard the former as nothing better than 'commodities' to be sold and bought for financial gains.

In *The Fire Dwellers*, Margaret Laurence draws a picture of patriarchal power structure where women have always been at the marginalized and they are really terrible, neglected and alienated. Lau-

rence through the character of Stacey MacAindra, delineates woman's contribution in the development of society and her sacrifices in the welfare of her family. Sadly, though, her inarticulate husband and conceited kids mainly disregard all of her efforts and contributions, treating her more like a tool and an agent. She feels alienated and lonely against the cruel system of society. Novel opens with nursery rhyme, which Laurence called "Crazy rhyme", and through out the novel it runs deep into Stacey's conscious thus:

Ladybird, ladybird,

Fly away home;

Your house is on fire,

Your children are gone.(7)

Through Stacey MacAindra, Laurence makes clear her life drama of an alienated house wife and her despondency about her present, past and future. Turmoil, fear and anxiety cast an everlasting effect on her interpersonal bonds of matrimonial alliance. Temperamental incompatibilities of the spouses demarcate them into two different entities and even it leads them to develop extramarital relations. Mac, her husband turns to Miss Appleton and Stacey, an alienated woman, is torn in her inner self. She tries to make comforts from the outside world and establishes a short term affair with Luke Venturie, a budding writer. The death-in-life existence of the natives is very poignantly mirrored through the character of the Italian youth named Luke in *The Fire-Dwellers*. He tells Stacey of his visit to the Indian village Katwanga, along the Western coast of Canada. He said as:

Up the Skeena river-Kispiox, Kitwanga, crazy names like that. In some parts, nearer the coast, you drive along the edge of a mountain and the trees are like a jungle, only it's mostly evergreen, but all this fantastic growth, bushes and ferns and moss and jackpine, all crowding each other, dark and light greens, northern jungle, rain forest, and the damn road, is so narrow you swear any minute you're going to plummet over into some canyon or the other. (226)

She tries her best to sustain an emotional bond in her familial relationships but all the time she feels herself neglected, lonely and exploited. Anxiety of loneliness is a widespread phenomenon and it becomes an acute problem in her life because she has lost her rightful place in her world. She feels her-

self a stranger, an alien and cuts herself off from the vital experiences of society. In the feelings of estrangement she loses comradeship with her family members and even in such circumstances for a time being she disconnects her sense of relatedness and to avoid her loneliness she starts a relation with Luke Venturie.

Thus, the alienation discourse in Canadian fiction also has been a discourse of gender-discrimination leading to well-articulated by feminist movements from the decade of 1960s and onwards. Though much has happened, a lot more remains to be achieved. The situations and problems are too complex and too complicated to be handled in simple ways. Radical positions and postures have been adopted by all the concerned players in the game. All these dilemmas, predicaments, contradictions, paradoxes, perplexities, with ever-increasing pace of scientific and technological advancements impinging upon the sensibilities and often contributing in widening the gaps, cleavages and chasms, have been portrayed aesthetically by the Canadian women novelists in general and Margaret Laurence in particular.

I conclude my paper that *The Fire-Dwellers* ends with positive hope. Laurence intentionally partakes the priorities of a mother. Stacey, at the end, prefers to come back to her children and neglects Luke's world of love and pleasure. As compromise is the best way to harmonize all the indignities of spouses, eventually Stacey changes all her views about Mac. Mother of four Stacey MacAindra, 39, feels cut off from her husband and kids since they don't communicate with one other. She first feels suffocated by the authoritarian, imperialist. She is therefore surrounded by an environment of solitude as a result of her family's ongoing neglect and society's rejection of her wants. Laurence effectively addresses the themes of alienation, struggle and survival via Stacey. As a progressive feminist, she charts the course of women's liberation and survival and reveals the actual, estranged state of women's lives prior to society.

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