

Psychic Journey towards Inner Freedom: Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*

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Abstract

*The paper takes up the Canadian woman writer Margaret Laurence, especially her *A Bird in the House*, to analyse how self-reflexivity works to explore identity and culture ethos. Being a writer who comes from a varied background spatio-temporality becomes a discursive, dialogic enterprise to be interrogated and appropriated in order to bring the needed stability that is both validating and valorizing. How Laurence overcomes and sustains the undercurrents of pressures is the thrust of the paper.*

Keywords: Colonialism. racial intolerance, clash of generations, self-reflexivity. Inner conflict. Inherited past, collective/cultural memory

I kept riding into the future forever, practicing a defiant loneliness that cousin of revolt-blindly groping for the beginning of the lifelong voyage toward myself... Even early on I noted with my blood, so to speak, that when Moses climbed up the mountain to receive the Law from God, he went alone.

(Miller, *Timebends: A Life* 1988 63)

No other statement can be as appropriate as this to describe Margaret Laurence and her protagonists. A number of accomplished women writers have emerged since the 1950s, but Margaret Laurence still remains one of the most celebrated and widely read authors in the world. Laurence has been a founding mother of Canadian literature. Her greatest gift has been the way in which she showed the depths and passion of the native land. A good number of English- Canadian novelists, like W. O. Mitchell, Susana Moodie, John Newlove, Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Laurence grappled with the problem and strived to answer the questions: "Who are we?" or "Where is here?" (Frye 1972 220) as Northrop Frye put it. B. S. Powe states in this concern: "Canadians felt insecure and isolated particularly because of their proximity to the American literary machine, and so felt the need to express a difference." (Powe 1984 73) The question of roots remained vexed over half a century before a Canadian writer like Margaret Laurence could claim that her "true roots were here" –in Canada. She declared:

If our upsurge of so called nationalism seems odd or irrelevant to outsiders, and even to some of our people, they might try and understand that for many years we valued ourselves insufficiently, living as we did under the huge shadows of two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia. We have only just begun to recognize ourselves, our land, and our abilities. We have only just begun to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths.

(Laurence *HS* 1976 217)

Laurence's African writings made her perception of respecting the *Otherness of other cultures* sharper; and this in turn provided her Canadian fiction much desired thematic depth and stylistic range. Her exposition to different people and cultures during her sojourn in Africa provided her with an entirely new perspective to understand herself and her own culture. Africa offered the major themes- issues of tribalism. Colonialism, racial intolerance, betrayal, independence, the clash of generation, self-sacrifice and survival in a harsh land- which recur, appropriately modified in her Canadian novels.

In twentieth-century literature where characterization is often secondary to symbolism and myth or to the technical matters of storytelling, whether stream-of-consciousness or the self-reflexive process of storytelling itself, Laurence's fictions stand out for their unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with personal demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful pattern in their lives.

Each of her heroines is sensual, maternal and creative. Each of them is fighter who suffers, weeps, errs, wounds, despairs, sometimes seems close to go under, but who, by learning to know herself a little better and by acknowledging an instinctive though far from orthodox faith, survives. Laurence's characters remain indelibly fixed in the mind of the reader as she creates them with a force and clarity almost unparalleled in Canadian literature.

Laurence also emphasizes the centrality of what she terms the character's *dilemma* or inner conflict. She explains *dilemma* as "the individual's effort to define himself, his need to come to terms with his ancestors and his Gods, his uncertainties in relation to others, his conflicts in the face of his own opposed loyalties, the dichotomy of his longing for peace and war, his perpetual battle to free himself from the fetters of the past and compulsions of the present." (LDC181, 2001)

Laurence regarded the novel as an artifact that holds, balances, and resolves opposing impulses. More simply, the novel is dramatic. It is a 'vessel' not only in the sense that it is a containing form, but also in that it is a vehicle, a "vessel capable of risking that peculiar voyage of exploration which constitutes a novel". (Laurence *JCF* 1980 62) For her subjects of freedom, survival, colonialism, and the plight of women, Laurence turned to the tradition of the modern psychological novel. She has adapted, polished and made her own, conventions established by early modern novelists like Henry James. Like the novel of Henry James, Laurence's novels portray "quality of inward life" (James 1962 129) of characters by dramatizing the operation of their minds. Incidents, dialogue, setting-all the outward interest of the novel- become secondary to its subjective intent. Laurence calls this form the "method novel." She says: "I write... what could be called a Method novel. Like a method actor, you get right inside the role. I take on, for the time I'm writing, the *persona* of the character..." (Cameron 1973 102) She contrasts her method with broader social realism of Hugh MacLennan, Marley Callaghan, Ernest Buckler, and Sinclair Ross, an earlier generation of novelists who analyzed 'the whole social pattern'.

Laurence would have agreed with Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that the novel exists above all to express characters because only these can, the drama of life, and reality itself, be seized. Because life is consciousness, fiction can dramatize the intimate, vital, contradictory workings of the human mind. Laurence argues that writers are natives to a specific place because they root themselves in its soil. They must deal, not with political or social abstractions, but with local, sensuous particulars "the feel of place, the tone of speech, how people say things, the concepts you grew up with." (Gibson 1973 194)

In Laurence's work the frontier is chiefly internal one. Consequently, the difficulties faced by the pioneer woman are not external objects and physical hazards but internal, personal problems, often created by the pioneer herself.

(Thompson 1983 234)

Laurence, in her fiction has portrayed women who are often in search of a Utopia inhabited by some ideal beings' Caught in the dichotomy between reality and idealism; they fail to derive innocent pleasures of living with bewildering variety of human beings. There is a mask that is kept perpetually in place when they move in the world which is a place where beings masked by prejudice and fear confront each other.

Though less dense and passionate with a less compelling character, *A Bird in the House* presents more modestly all of Laurence's concerns: stern grandparents and their Celtic heritage, family-loyalties and rebellion, death, the house clan, or tribe as a sustaining but intimidating force, love and its complications, the paradoxes of guilt, freedom and justice, the Canadian West, the dispossessed.

The eight stories that compose *A Bird in the House* reveal a society through its precocious product and critic. The collection forms an unconventional novel, linked by character, setting, narrative voice, and structure. Taken together, and in order, the stories trace Vanessa MacLeod's growth to maturity, depicted as an understanding of herself and her heritage. Vanessa is ten in the first three stories, and eleven or twelve in many others. In briefer incidents she is a small child, an older adolescent or young adult. The stories are unified by a steady progression in the type of suffering depicted and thus chronologically, record the issues that force the protagonist in inner struggle to get freedom and harmony. "The Sound of the Singing" deals with social exclusion and loneliness; and "To Set our House in Order", with a past death and painfully aborted dreams. "Mask of the Bear" concerns Grandmother Connor's death, the family's grief, and Aunt Edna's lost love. The death of Dr. MacLeod in *A Bird in the House* precipitates Vanessa's loss of religious faith. "The Loons", "Horses of the Night," and "The half-Husky" relate individual suffering to massive social failures: economic breakdown, world war, poverty, class friction and racial discrimination.

Inner struggle for Vanessa, like other protagonists in Laurence's fiction is not only related to present but in a deeper way to past as well. The memories to which Vanessa gives voice are all present; they are part of her mental baggage. The story has a double perspective that combines the freshness of a girl's perception with the maturity of a woman's judgment. Vanessa struggles because she is not able to understand the necessity of historical meaning. She does not realize that people cannot understand themselves or their plight in isolation; that they need the context of larger cultural forces. Her complaints, "I wanted only to be by myself, with no one else around." (BH 35) She does not realize that even her most solitary concern with personal identity requires that she see her own life as part of something larger and older. She struggles to ignore that historical perspective.

Vanessa struggles against her order that is found in immutability of traditions, in the cliché-ridden immobility of the Scottish clans to which one belongs, in family mottos to be followed, almost impersonated. For Grandmother MacLeod each person must correspond to the everlasting fixity of her own heraldic motto "Be then a wall of brass. Learn to suffer. Consider the end. Go carefully" (BH 46). Though reassuring to her grandmother none of these slogans reassures Vanessa.

Vanessa wants to rebel against the order which actually is negated freedom. She says, after having experienced many emotions and sensed many contrasts that "I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order". (BH 59)

Another struggle of Vanessa is with her Grandfather, struggle that is more inside her than with the old man directly. "In Laurence's imaginative world, he is the archetypal parental figure who inspires fear, guilt, and rebellion in her heroines." (Stouck 1988 252) To the young Vanessa the old man's angry refusal to help his ne'er-do-well brother Dan and his rude, peremptory treatment of his youngest daughter's 'gentlemen callers' seems outrageous. Vanessa's struggle is to get out of the shadow of her grandfather who is proud, tough, self-disciplined, and demands obedience.

Christian Riegel feels that Vanessa is able to give an outlet to her innermost thoughts and restlessness in her writing. She writes, "Vanessa's creative activities in *A Bird in the House* are borne out of a need to come to terms with serious losses in her life." (Riegel 1997 67)

In any work of fiction, the span of time present in the story is not only as long as the time-span of every character's life and memory; it also represents everything acquired and passed on in a kind of memory-heritage from one generation to another.

(Laurence *PSO 1983155*)

In *A Bird in the House*, Laurence has portrayed a protagonist who has a sense of fear and guilt regarding the inherited past. George Woodcock writes "While others mostly remember through the screen of an intensely lived present, Vanessa recollects, in almost total and unimpeded clarity, how the child's eye saw and the child's mind interpreted that vanished past." (Woodcock 1978 53) Vanessa is seen both as a child and an adult remembering her past. Laurence shows us what the child sees and what she does not see her inexperience, as is clear by the sentence Vanessa uses frequently as an adult "I did not know then". (BH 9) Colin Nicholson writes, "The child Vanessa is a sensitive observer of the individual lives and relationships around her: the range and power of the stories is enhanced by the fact that her field of vision is shaken by disturbances she could not have explained at the time." (Nicholson 1990 121)

A Bird in the House opens with Vanessa's contemplation, in "The Sound of the Singing", of the significance of her Grandfather Connor's house to her own life and of the tyrannical influence he had on his family. Through Vanessa's retrospection, we come to know of her views about her authoritarian Grandfather and her past in her Grandfather's house, Grandfather whom she introduces as "some great wakeful bear waiting for the enforced hibernation of Sunday to be over" (BH 8). Bear suggests his impatience, temper, strength and ability to survive. When reminded that Grandfather Connor was a pioneer; Vanessa at once abandons her juvenile attempt at writing a romance of pioneer life: the prospect of romance is spoiled by this confrontation with the known reality. As she recalls 'Unfortunately he had not met up with any slit-eyed and treacherous Indians or any mad trappers, but only with ordinary farmers who had given him work shoeing their horses, for he was a blacksmith' (BH 10). Vanessa's contact with the Metis girl Piquette Tonnerre further undermines her confidence in her own background and outlook without providing the new friendship for which she naively hoped.

“To Set our House in Order” records Vanessa’s recollection of the time when her mother was in hospital and she was left with her stern, aristocratic paternal Grandmother and her practical Aunt Edna. When she is afraid of losing her mother, Grandmother MacLeod tells her, “What happens is God’s will. The Lord giveth, and the Lord Taketh away” (BH 45). These harsh pragmatic words appall Vanessa.

Though “Both death and love seemed regrettably far from Manawaka and the snow, and my grandfather stamping his feet in the front porch of the Brick House” (BH 65), it is in this Brick House that Vanessa for the first time encounters experience of love and death. When she sees her Aunt Edna crying as Grandfather had been unkind and rough towards her boyfriend, Vanessa is struck by the absurdity of what she thought was love, She sees that every human image, that of human love and suffering is made up of contrasts “I could not reconcile this image with the known face, nor could I disconnect it, I thought of my aunt, her sturdy laughter, the way she tore into the housework, her hands and feet which she always despairingly joked about, believing them to be clumsy” (BH 78).

Another life experience is of death-Grandmother Connor’s death. At the death of her beloved Grandmother Connor, Vanessa, Who calls herself a ‘professional listener’ (BH 11), is caught eavesdropping as has been her practice, but the season of spying is almost at an end as she now realizes how complex the reality of pain can be. Vanessa as a child questions the conception of order and the sources of authority which dictate it. She says of Grandfather’s dwelling “I felt, as so often in the Brick House, that my lungs were in danger of exploding, that the pressure of silence would become too great to be borne” (BH 66). She speaks of MacLeod house as house-museum “Without my mother, our house seemed like a museum, full of dead and meaningless objects, vases and gilt-framed pictures and looming furniture, all of which had to be dusted and catered to, for reasons which everyone had forgotten” (BH 79).

Through her stories we come to know that the established order within Vanessa’s maternal and paternal grandparents’ house is rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal, governed as it is by the severe figures of the grandparents, the young parents being frail, almost inexistent, figures, crushed by life and too soon dead, weaker than the patriarchs and their true victims. Giovanna Capone writes “As for the grandparents, Grandmother MacLeod and Grandfather Connor, order is something they simply expect, each one in his or her own image.” (Capone 1988 163) In the house order is always elusive. Her retrospection shows that no one in these houses is in the place where he or she would like to be, everyone would have preferred to be someone else and to live somewhere else. Grandmother MacLeod wished she could have been an aristocrat, Father a traveler and a sailor, Roderick, Grandmother’s MacLeod dead son, a doctor, Grandfather MacLeod a Greek scholar; Aunt Edna would have liked to marry young and work in town, Mother to take a degree and continue her education and Cousin Chris to go to the university and to pursue life. Each one is out of place and each finds it difficult to perceive the uneasiness of the other.

The title story *A Bird in the House* opens with Manawaka’s Remembrance Day parade where Vanessa is not able to bear the sight of the elderly veterans, who resemble imposters, “caricatures of past warriors” (BH 91). It is at this time that her father tells the horrifying tale of her uncle’s death in the mud at the front. At this time, the country-girl, hired at last by the MacLeod household to ‘make order’, announces a death when she sees a sparrow trapped indoors “A bird in the house is a death in the house” (BH 102). Dr. MacLeod succumbs to pneumonia. Vanessa like a prisoner attempting to denies the existence of heaven and of the spirit of the dead “*Rest beyond the river*. I knew now what that meant. It meant nothing. It meant only silence forever... It mattered, but there was no help for it” (BH 110). Rejecting what she understands as Christianity, Vanessa is isolated from her society: her ancestors and gods.

By the time she narrates “Houses of the Night”, her father has died and her world is disrupted. “After my father died, the whole order of life was torn. Nothing was known or predictable any longer” (BH 144). Grandmother Connor is no longer there. He has been debunked and there is now a Michael in Vanessa’s life. There is one incident when during the war, she comes late one night with the young man from the air force. The grandfather not only reprimands them for being out late but surmises that the young man is already married. Eventually the old man’s guess proves correct. It is infuriating to the girl that he is right. When he dies, the member of the family seem to be more amazed than grieved over the truth he is gone. As Vanessa recollects, “I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal. Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend” (BH 205).

Vanessa seems laboriously to emerge “from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood.” She makes effort to get some insight through her revisiting of the past. She wishes to perceive things in a different light than in the one she did in her childhood.

In a poem entitled *Roblin Mills, Circa 1842*, Al Purdy said:

They had their being once
And left a place to stand on
(Laurence 1983 *PSO* 155)

This is what Laurence’s protagonists have to realize in their course of retrospection, that they did indeed, and this is the place they are standing on, for better and for worse. In Laurence’s next novel *A Bird in the House*, the narrator protagonist, Vanessa’s act of recording her past memories as stories helps her to accept the truth that is different from her own perception as a child. Grandfather Connor, for example, may be seen in one story as a domineering bully, but may be, and in fact is revaluated in the final story in the book. Vanessa realizes the truth by the very process of re-valuating her own judgments.

As we read the stories, we notice that Vanessa wishes to end the confusion created by the multiplicity of religion. There was Grandmother MacLeod’s full of arbitrary rules of convention which were accepted and propounded with certainty of the Ten Commandments. And there was even Grandfather Connor’s –the Judaic, patriarchal, and angry God-the-father self-righteous anger which he invoked whenever he was annoyed. But she later comes to realize that these religions reflected an unsettling reality. Kent Thompson writes in this context, “The narrator learns that even though we reject faith, and with that rejection, all the patterns of religion, nonetheless the patterns of religion often remain uncomfortably true. It is a hard unfair fact to accept; but Margaret Laurence is not a soft moralist”. (Thompson 1983 234)

Past is reflected in the present ideas, clichés and mottoes used by the narrator herself as a mother, as these were spoken by previous generations also and this brings the realization that escape from the past and from the people who lived in the past is not possible. Vanessa tries to reconcile with the past and exorcise the sense of fear and guilt regarding her inherited past. She uses stories both as a means of understanding and a ritual of expiation. Her stories help her to make peace with her past, in particular, help her to come to terms with her Grandfather, Timothy Connor. About “domineering old bully”, Grandfather Connor she realizes that “his stubbornness and willfulness were, in the pioneer days, the virtues of endurance and strong-willed courage.” (Thompson 1991 113) Vanessa’s final understanding and acceptance of her ancestry is expressed in the final story “*Jericho’s Brick Battlement*”, when she admits that “I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins.” (*BH* 207)

In the final story, it is from him and the family past he embodies that she receives a kind of blessing. Thus through the stories, Vanessa recalls past incidents and events, and confirms the intensity and the intricacy of her feeling for her family, her past, and especially her Grandfather, who she had feared and rejected, but whom she finally acknowledges as her ancestor.

Laurence’s confessional statement to Clara Thomas is reflective of Vanessa’s sentiments in the novel “I realized that all of us in our family had inherited a great many of his characteristics, both good and bad... And only after I had finished writing these stories did I begin to realize that, although I had detested the old man at one time, I no longer detested him.” (Gibbs 1974 xi)

All the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy’s images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, however, strange and admirable.
William Shakespeare

A Midsummer’s Night Dream (Act V Scene I)

Vanessa’s journey into her past imparts her with a new insight and she begins to accept everything in its true color without imagining it in her own way. In her course of retrospection, she realizes that she never tried to go beyond her own perception whether right or wrong.

She realizes that people were not as bad as she portrayed them through her imagination. Her self-realization is not only about her past but present also. She begins to see everything in its right perspective and also realizes that truth can be different from her own version yet acceptable.

Clara Thomas writes “The community assigned roles to its people too; in the eyes of the town, individuals were often seen only in relation to their assigned roles.” (Thomas 1975 176) This expectation creates problem for all of Laurence’s heroines but ultimately they are able to achieve balance between their outward and inward life. They try to shed the mask which they always put on to hide either their weaker or rebellious selves. They learn to stop fighting against the facts that are very part of their lives. They also realize that whatever happened in the past can not be changed but they can certainly learn a lesson from that to make their present and future better and not only theirs but others’ around them also.

In *A Bird in the House*, as members of Vanessa’s family fall victim to the depression, disease, and war, the young girl surmises that God has entirely withdrawn himself from human vision. In her concentrated attempts to come to terms with the past, Vanessa manages to grope towards the possibility of constructing a new religion: the disassembled materials of the old faith become the potentially rich raw materials for a new religion based on her heritage.

Vanessa MacLeod, who has always been so critical of her grandparents, realizes that they were actually pioneers who survived against negative conditions. She can, then, appreciate that in a country as young as hers history is family and family memories. The narrative voice of, that is of older Vanessa, voices the understanding which she got now of the same things which she could not see in right perspective before, in her childhood.

A Bird in the House was a process of self-discovery for her; we do not share the process, only the achievement. Adult Vanessa gives form to her childhood perceptions. All the hurt felt by Vanessa as a child have been healed by the passage of time, and her insight into her father’s and grandfather’s true natures has been achieved by mature Vanessa.

Vanessa’s effort to communicate her life story displays how her life is conditioned and complicated by the flow of time. Her personality is not static; it evolves, accumulates, and alerts with age. The notions of inheritance and survival, which Laurence says are central to her novels, implicate a character in time, binding her to past and future. The book records Vanessa’s triumphant tour of her life. J. M. Kertzer writes “Through it she confirms that intensity and the intricacy of her feeling for her family, her past, and especially for her grandfather, who she had feared and rejected, but whom she finally acknowledges as her ancestor.” (Kertzer 1987 293)

In “Jericho’s Brick Battlements”, she accepts that her grandfather is “immortal in ways which it would take [her] half a lifetime to comprehend.” (BH 205) In times of spiritual stress she has fallen back on him, recalling his sayings and asking herself, what he would have done in similar crisis, just as a Christian falls on the words and deeds of Christ. Vanessa finds that in a new way Timothy Connor has regained the stature he held for her when she was a child, the stature of old fashioned ‘God’. J. M. Kertzer writes about her talent of writing and its sources “Vanessa explores her family, her surroundings, and her own talents and gradually discovers her vocation as a writer.” (Kertzer 1987 289)

In *A Bird in the House*, time constantly stretches both ways, and the future is mirrored in the past while dwelling in it. This special sense of ‘memory’ is underlined in the words spoken in silence by the narrator near the end of the last story “The memory of a memory returned to me now. I remember myself remembering...” (BH 206). It shows that she is getting mature by taking lesson from her past memories.

Vanessa’s imaginations drawn to the stories of death and love, but she finds a disturbing difference between exotic versions and home truths. “Mask of the Bear” depicts love and death through relationships in the Connor household. Before Grandmother’s death Vanessa is unable to understand that her grandfather loves his wife; before Vanessa overhears Edna crying. She is ignorant of her loneliness. She is appalled by the she glimpses. These experiences give her an opportunity to see behind the mask of the people who look so different from outside. It is the older narrative voice not the young one that alerts us to the suffering concealed behind the masks.

Vanessa is a juvenile storyteller by vocation; and side by side with the life she is living, she lives the story she is currently making up and through these stories we get the glimpse of Vanessa’s changing views, attitudes and thoughts. Observing all the activities around her, she, progressively learns perceptiveness.

Giovanna Capone writes in this concern “The acquisitive, accumulative process of these lessons constitutes the profound motivation beneath these stories, loose like all the apprenticeships of life, fragmentary like all the dictates of experience, and like the natural and vital disorder of things, hard to set in order.” (Capone 1988, 165)

During the funeral oration for her grandfather she hears the story of a pioneer by the name of Connor as if it were an entirely new person, a ‘stranger’, a persona, a fictional character:

He had come from Ontario to Manitoba by the Red River steamer, and he had walked from Winnipeg to Manawaka, earning his way by shoeing horses. After some years as a blacksmith, he had enough money to go into the hardware business. Then he had built his house. It had been the first brick house in Manawaka. Suddenly the minister’s recounting of these familiar facts struck me as though I have never heard any of it before. (BH 204)

Vanessa learns a lot from Piquette Tonnerre as well. She is the victim of a diseased world order: her mistake is to be born, to grow up, and to be human; and her most striking assertion of this humanity is her capacity to endure loss, without feebleness and self-pity. She does not stop to consider or debate the issues of victimized condition: she is bent on survival against all odds. Vanessa takes the lesson of endurance and survival from Piquette. She remains a reproach and a mystery for her. The adult Vanessa remembers “a terrifying hope” (BH 124) in Piquette’s eyes when she spoke of her Fiance. Piquette’s love and enthusiasm for life surprises Vanessa and she takes that lesson from her.

At the end, the middle aged narrator returns to Manawaka to visit the cemetery and the Brick House. She realizes that her grandfather’s monument’s his living dynasty. Vanessa remembers riding with her grandfather when she was very young; “A-hoo-gah! I was gazing with love and glory at my giant grandfather as he drove his valiant chariot through all the streets of this world” (BH 179). Seven years later Vanessa returns for his funeral and remembers herself remembering driving with him, “in the ancient days when he seemed as large and admirable as god” (BH 206). This incident and Vanessa’s recalling, it at this point of time “evokes the dominant metaphor of Laurence’s work, of journeying in search of freedom and joy. It reminds us, too, of her inheritance, that our local roots, our direct ancestors, provide our myths.” (Morley 1981 113)

Patricia Morley comments, “Laurence shows a development in Vanessa’s ability to comprehend both human suffering and the limitations of her understanding in this regard.” (Morley 1981 110)

In “My Final Hour”, an address given to the Trent university Philosophy Society in 1983, Margaret Laurence repeated one of Catherine Parr Traill’s Maxims “So the basic message of My Final Hour would have to be –do not despair. Act. Speak out. In our words of one of my heroines, Catherine Parr Traill, “In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one’s hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror. It is better to be up and doing.” (Laurence CL 1984 118) And this is what all of Laurence’s protagonists do to achieve their inner freedom.

In *A Bird in the House*, after twenty four years Vanessa again comes back, but she does not go to visit her grandfather’s tomb “There was no need. It was not his monument.” She will instead go to his true monument, the Brick House, symbol of the man’s immortality, which Vanessa feels proclaiming itself in her veins, while the immortality of the mother will be found in the imperishable “clichés of affection” (BH 207).

The theme of inner freedom is represented by bird imagery that recurs in the novel. Grandmother MacLeod’s hair is “bound grotesquely like white- feathered wings in the snare of her coarse night-time hairnet” (BH 40). Vanessa’s dream of captive bird mingles with the sound of her mother crying and the voices of dead children. The reference is to an earlier baby born dead; metaphorically, it evokes the failed dreams and still born hopes of the fictional characters and of people everywhere. Vanessa struggles against all these and the idea of death represented.

Vanessa always wanted to escape but this knowledge comes to her as she matures that no escape is possible, and if it is possible, it is not complete. In the last story Vanessa sets out for college and city feeling *less free* than she had expected: higher education is no panacea. The real feeling is still in process where the book leaves off.

Vanessa’s newly gained understanding of her past thoughts and opinions helps her to free herself from the negative effect of her past memories. She discovers that the old man’s severity is merely a mask for more human emotions concealed inside him. For he too is fallible human being who finds that it helps to wear a mask of severity and unbending firmness all his life in order to sustain him in his struggle against disorder.

She realizes that his firm severity is both strength and a weakness, since it sustains him in his fight against disorder while it alienates him from his family. Vanessa never wanted to be like her grandfather, but now she realizes that she has inherited the essence of fallible humanity from him which will pass through her to her descendants, as it was passed on to her through his forebears. She accepts his influence on her life with complete ease now.

Giovanna Capone writes, “Time is Vanessa, a developing creature; time is with her, in her advancement towards her own life. Time is movement, everything changes incessantly; and through the theory of things glimpses of meaning, truth and divinity will be perceived.” (Capone, 1988 202)

Dr. Johnson commented in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) that to works of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. This can definitely be applied to the fiction of Margaret Laurence.

For Laurence, past is something that goes with everybody forever. So she seeks to establish a give and take relationship between her protagonists and their pasts. The inspiration for this she got from African writers, as she writes that they have found it necessary, in other words, to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being stifled or threatened by the past. And this is what, she has always been so concerned about in her fiction. Earlier constantly denying and ignoring the role, past is to play in their lives, these protagonists ultimately learn to live with what past has gifted them. For Laurence, the past is something that is inseparable and its influence on present and future, inevitable. She gives due importance to the past that include not only the totality of characters’ lives but also the inherited time of perhaps two or even three past generations, in terms of parents’ and grandparents’ recollections, the much longer past which has become legend, the past of a collective cultural memory.

The very first impression of Laurence’s novels seems to be the one of feministic outlook. From the very beginning all her protagonists seem to be indulged in the struggle for freedom in its most obvious sense. But as we go through the novels and with that the lives of the heroines and the life of Laurence also to some extent, we find that Laurence’s definition of freedom is entirely different from the accepted one. For her, freedom does not mean the severing of all the bonds and leading life in one’s desired way but the severing of one’s self-made chains instead, the chains that restrict one’s thought to one’s own life only. It means freedom from selfishness and wrong notions. It means freedom from the yearning for ideal life because if one begins to desire for Utopia then one tends to degrade everything that life has gifted, and this rejection of the people and things that should, actually, be valued, takes one away from true freedom.

To achieve the inner freedom, they first needed to understand the reason of their restlessness. Once they are able to trace the reasons, they make all possible efforts to break free from all chains. To know the reasons they need to travel backward and forward in time. Their journey from bondage to freedom comprises various steps- their course of retrospection in which they find that some of the reasons of their present troubles lie in their wrong notions about their past. They always tried to ignore everything that was undesirable but now they come to realize that whatever they disliked as undesirable is actually the truth of their life. They regret their rash attitude towards the people who really loved and cared for them.

Vanessa, in *A Bird in the House*, keeps observing everything and every person as a child; forms her own opinions and contradicts inwardly with the beliefs that others nurture. But, we find her gaining understanding and maturity as an adult. Through her course of retrospection in the form of different stories, she is, finally, able to realize how wrong she sometimes was in having a biased image of people in her mind and how, to some extent, it kept her away from the people who really loved her and whom she also loved unknowingly. This realization leads her to the inner freedom she always carved for. She triumphs, but not through defeat of Grandfather Connor. She triumphs over herself, and, by granting him his victory. Lyall Powers writes that Vanessa’s triumph comes from her reconciliation with [her grandfather], or with her with his spirit; that gives her self-knowledge and consequent freedom.

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