



Coping With Grim Dystopia: A Re-Reading of *The Fire-Dwellers*

Rose Thomas^[1,*]; Asha Susan Jacob^[2]

^[1]Associate Professor, Department of English, BAM College, Thuruthicad, Kerala, India.

^[2]Associate Professor, Department of English, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala, India.

*Corresponding author.

Received 16 February 2016; accepted 19 April 2016

Published online 26 May 2016

Abstract

Canadian writer Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Fire-Dwellers* has long been critically dismissed as too paltry and insignificant to warrant in-depth treatment. This paper attempts to identify the novel as a significant one in theme and technique incorporating traits of postmodernism and expresses the need for a deeper critical evaluation of the work. Through the novel, Laurence records the terrors of the 1960s counterculture, one of the most turbulent times in recent history. She portrays the struggle of the individual to cope with the fires of an increasingly violent and insane dystopic world which fragments the self. Laurence, in the novel, develops an innovative narrative technique to recreate the protagonist’s fractured consciousness in the fragmented cultural context.

Key words: Dystopia; Soap-Opera; Counterculture; Fractured consciousness; Coping; Fantasy; Typography; Postmodern aesthetics

Rose, T., & Asha, S. J. (2016). Coping With Grim Dystopia: A Re-Reading of *The Fire-Dwellers*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(5), 28-34. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8504>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8504>

INTRODUCTION

“*The Fire-Dwellers* has not yet received either the critical attention it deserves or attention comparable to that paid

to Laurence’s other Manawaka works”, comments Nora Stovel (*Stacey’s Choice*, p.16).

Margaret Laurence’s acutely intelligent and persistently playful novel *The Fire-Dwellers* has long been critically denounced as deplorable in both content and technique and dismissed as a bedroom farce on the borderline between art and soap-opera. On the contrary, as the paper attempts to establish, the novel is a significant one which deserves deeper critical evaluation.

Stacey MacAindra, the serio-comic housewife heroine of the novel with her insuperable problems has been condemned by critics as indecorous, irresponsible and as obstreperous as her children. However, in the novel, it is through the experiences of Stacey that Laurence recaptures and recreates the unrelievedly depressing panoramic view of the 60s—a world of duplicity—a conglomeration of housewives and bread winners, of plastic kitchenware sold off as party-ware and vitamin pills as immortality, of governments threatened by the fires of nuclear holocaust and morals caught up in the flames of illicit sex. It is a world where new symbols of authority like pseudo business concerns, television, radio and newspaper terrifying in their power, exploit human fear and vanity.

The schizoid, fragmented narrative incorporates fantasy, memory and interior monologue through the imaginative use of typography. Stacey weaves a fantasy utopia, at times, conjuring up the halcyon days of her youth, in the midst of grim dystopia as she swings back and forth from euphoria to disphoria in her struggle to survive in a fragmented world and to cope with her sexual frustration. The novel ends with Stacey’s transition from a rational deductive to sensory inductive examination as she reflects: “will the fires go on, inside and out?” (p.280). *The Fire-Dwellers*, with its experimentation in mimetic techniques, so called unnecessary and boring repetitions and exchanges, blatant symbolism, fantasies, irony and parody, exemplifies a postmodern aesthetics.

This paper attempts a re-reading of the text in order to convey its significance as a pioneering postmodernist endeavour in content and technique and to establish its importance as a faithful chronicle of the counterculture of the 1960s, thus making it a worthwhile contribution to Canadian literature.

DISCUSSION

Stacey MacAindra, thirty nine year old bemused, anxious, self-doubting contemporary housewife finds herself in a dystopic world of innumerable horrors, both real and imagined, driving her desperately to the extent of attempting suicide. However, the flesh-and-blood, realistically depicted heroine with extraordinary vitality who has exploded the post Second World War North American myth of the happy housewife heroine and upset many critics, finds means to cope with her world of total anarchy. Finally, she comes to terms with herself, accepting life for what it is. The discussion that follows scrutinizes the contents in detail and examines some of the narrative techniques employed by Laurence in working out her themes, focusing on the postmodernist trends in the novel.

The novel opens with the deadly depressing ditties:

Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone. (p.7).

And “Here is a candle to light you to bed, and here comes a chopper to chop off your head” (p.7); thus preparing the reader for the gruesome realities of a dystopic world unfolding through the ever-open eyes of Stacey MacAindra.

Stacey perceives the external world she is living in as increasingly terrifying, a universe of disaster and doom; a world filled with devilish manifestations of aberration, cruelty, fragmentation and desperation, a world spiritually dead and lit with hellish flames. She is the ladybird, ridden with a sense of anguish and fire in bringing up her children in a world on fire. As Patricia Morley observes: “Her world is the frighteningly familiar one of a postwar North American city. This is a manipulative society characterized by brutality and deception: masked violence...” (Morley, 1981, p.99). Behind the contemporary radicalism is the revolutionary fervour sparked off by American military involvement in Viet Nam. The media, every day present ghastly scenes of violence making the news more disturbing than any Western serial because, “This time the bodies that fall stay fallen” (p.57). In the United States, cities are burning with race riots; closer to home it is more terrifying as the television always reminds the people in capitals: “EVER-OPEN EYE STREETS IN CITIES NOT FAR AWAY

ARE BURNING IN RAGE AND SORROW” (p.278). For Stacey, it is “Doom everywhere” (p.58), recalling “the fall of Rome” when Nero fiddled. Stacey observes that all she knows is what she reads in the papers—a universe that seems on the verge of final conflagration.

Stacey’s environment is a grotesque one, an apocalyptic world of sudden, senseless death like the child run over at the street corner and her husband Mac’s friend, Buckle, dare devilish with his diesel truck confronting death on the road. In Stacey’s world death comes in many ways: suicide, automobile accidents, police bullets, bombing, maiming. Newspaper headlines, radio blares and television broadcasts (The Ever Open Eye) reel through Stacey’s mind as backdrop to household chores: “Homeless population growing says survey” (p.11).

EVER OPEN EYE... MAN BURNING. HIS FACE CANNOT BE SEEN. HE LIES STILL, PERHAPS ALREADY DEAD. FLAMES LEAP AND QUIVER FROM HIS BLACKENED ROBE LIKE EXCITED CHILDREN OF HELL. VOICE: TODAY ANOTHER BUDDHIST MONK SET FIRE TO HIMSELF IN PROTEST AGAINST THE WA. . . (p.116).

Headlines like “Seventeen-Year-Old on Drug Charge” lead her to imagine “Kids gaming with LSD—look at me, Polly I’m Batman—zoom from sixth floor window into the warm red embrace of a cement death.... Granite-eyed youngsters looking for a fix, trying to hold their desperation down” (p.11). Terror strikes Stacey when Katie, her fourteen year old daughter wants to see an experimental film called *Psychedelic Sidewalk*, and announces a date with a boy whose parent reported him to the police for attending a port party. Stacey fears that her children will be “conditioned into monsterdom” (p.117), like the Viet Nam veteran who almost karate-chopped his little sister. She fears violence will invade her home, her world.

Vancouver, the jewel of the Pacific Northwest seems a kind of wasteland. A bleak world with the distressing sight of old men sitting in the lobby of the Prince Regal Hotel waiting for the beer parlour to open while an old yellow-toothed woman sweeps the lobby clean. Walking down the streets, Stacey sees the huge buildings which used to appear “brash, flashing with colours, solid and self-confident”, now, “charred and open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone like in that other city” (p.11). Her nights bring in nightmares of fire and her children. She is the ladybird whose house is on fire and she must live in the torture of that element.

Stacey’s outer world is burning and so is her inner world. Stacey’s youngest child, Jennifer refusing or unable to talk in the opening pages of the novel draws our attention to the problem of communication, one of the major themes of the novel. Stacey’s communication gap with her family torments her, she feels cut off from everyone: “Everything in front of her eyes is taking

place in silence as though she were observing it through some thick and isolating glass barrier or like TV with the voices turned off” (p.93). Laurence portrays Stacey’s frustration in trying vainly to communicate with her husband Mac. Stacey begs, “Oh Mac. Talk. Please” (p.26). She thinks,

Mac—let me explain. Let me tell you how its been with me. Can’t we ever say anything to one another to make up for the lies, the trivialities, the tiredness we never knew about until it had taken up permanent residence inside our arteries? (p.25)

Their conversations filled with mundane, prosaic words, hollow platitudes and ludicrous misunderstandings do not result in real communication and leads to Katie’s parodying them, “You and Dad yakking away at each other—*Whatsmatter? Nothing’s the matter. No need to talk to me in that tone of voice.*” (p.112) Stacey is helpless in toning and taming her teenage daughter, Katie and in dealing with her son, Ian’s aloof, withdrawn pride. Stacey’s plaintive plea to each of her family to talk to her is rebuffed and rejected with “Go away” (p.113), “shut up” (p.109), or “leave me alone” (p.154).

North American society in the clutches of consumerism has developed lies and deception into a fine art, masking its atrocities with attractive facades. Media and business have broken down the old symbols of order. Faith in God and forms of worship seem empty and inadequate. Pseudo-cults and isms catch on with the waning of genuine religious faith in society. Stacey falls prey to this pseudo culture despite her attempts to resist it and later reprimands herself for her degeneration. Thor Thorlakson’s Richalife programme proclaiming itself as the new religion, promising rejuvenation through vitamin pills and the Polyglam Party promoting Polyglam Superware products are pseudo business cults enticing naive crowds into the snares of duplicity and consumerism. A large number of people foolishly hope that the acquisition of things will alleviate their feelings of emptiness and desolation. In the novel, Laurence presents a consumerist material world with all its facades and pseudo promises filling the city dwellers with a spiritual void.

Tormented by the inferno of the contemporary culture and her chaotic and stifling family life, Stacey, even contemplates suicide as a means of escape. But Stacey being a survivor, finds ways to cope with her frenetic life. She indulges herself with addictive substances as a desperate attempt to tranquilize her mental agonies and anxieties. Internal dialogues, memories of her childhood strengths like swimming and dancing, together with fantasies contribute to an active mental life that sustains Stacey through her mundane existence helping her to cope with her dystopic life.

Stacey’s motivating word is “cope”. At each crisis, her therapeutic chant is “Everything is all right” (p.8) but when she cannot cope with her world of grim dystopia, she finds refuge in addictive substances, alcohol and

nicotine. Addicted to gin and tonic, she gulps the drink as if “she had just stumbled in from the Sahara” (p.47). She keeps gin and tonic for emergencies, but finds “every other minute is an emergency” (p.125). Stacey muses: “If I spent my life pouring myself full of vitamins and tomato juice, instead of gin, coffee and smoke, maybe, I would be a better person. I would be slim, calm, good-tempered, efficient, sexy and wise” (p.45), all the qualities she aspires to, but fails to achieve.

Stacey’s yearning for conversation, ironically leads her to find a confidant in a God whose very existence she doubts. Talking to God is also talking to the unmasked self and questions remain largely unanswered: “God knows why I chat to you, God—it’s not that I believe in you. Or I do and I don’t, like echoes in my head. It’s somebody to talk to...” (p.63). Stacey sends imaginary SOS messages to God, though with the rueful sense that even God is a victim, as she is.

Like Vancouver, with its snow covered mountains in summer where two seasons meet, Stacey operates between two worlds—the dystopian winter world of grim realities and the utopian summer world of fantasies. In the novel, there are two dozen fantasies and over forty of Stacey’s memories, ranging from her childhood, through her first love affair, her honeymoon, the conception and birth of her children to the present. Through these reminiscences and fantasies, Stacey tries to cope with the relentless fires that surround her, the fiery MacAindras indoors and “the external flames of the neon forests outdoors” (p.154). Through these memories and fantasies, Stacey comes to terms with the inevitable process of aging and finds fulfilment in her sexually deprived life.

Stacey’s stream of consciousness moves forward into the future and backward into the past like a river that flows both ways. The past is ever present for Stacey. The memories of her days of youthful swimming and dancing are a source of rejuvenation for her, helping her to reconcile with the process of middle-aging: “Stacey travelling light, unfearful in the sun, swimming outward as though the sea were shallow and known, drinking without indignity, making spendthrift love in the days when flesh and love were indestructible” (pp.70-71). Stacey dances to Tommy Dorsey Boogie, remnant of her Manawaka teens, when she used to dance in the Flamingo Dance Hall: “Stacey spinning light, whirling laughter across a polished floor.... Dance hope, girl, dance hurt” (p.125).

Hurt and forlorn at Mac’s distance, she recalls her first exhilarating love making the airman from Montreal on the shores of Diamond Lake, “with the lapping of lake in their heads” (p.72). Dejected with Mac’s rejection, Stacey’s memories take her back to her honeymoon days:

Timber Lake sixteen years ago had hardly any cottages... Spruce trees darkly still in the sun and the water so clear.... You know something, Mac? *What?* I like everything about you. *That’s good honey. I like everything about you, too.* (p.176)

Injured and anxious by Katie's rejection, Stacey recalls her idyllic moments of love making with Mac where Katie was conceived:

The pine and spruce harps in the black ground outside, in the dark wind from the lake that never penetrated the narrow windowed cabin. Their skin slippery with sweat together, slithering as though with some fine and pleasurable oil. Stacey knowing his moment and her own as both separate and unseparable.... (p.128)

Stacey lives in her fantasyland as truly as she lives on Bluejay Crescent, where nightmares of forest fires vie with dreams of distant lakes. She fantasizes about a suburb of the spirit

Out there in unknown houses are people who live without lies, and who touch each other. One day she will discover them, pierce through to them. Then everything will be alright, and she will live in the light of the morning. (p.85)

Stacey yearns for another place and time.

Stacey's fantasies are of a wide range including elements of science fiction. Laurence counterpoints contemporary culture with visions of the future through Stacey's science-fiction fantasies. Stacey imagines the galaxy as controlled by "*a scorpion-tailed flower-faced film buff... He switches off the pictures which humans always believed were themselves and the imaginary planet known as Earth vanishes*" (p.77). Sexually frustrated within marriage, Stacey creates her own fantasy of having an affair with a science-fiction character, Mac Nab. Science fiction is combined with erotic fantasy when she conjures up Zabyul, a planet with a very advanced technology, imagining herself to be transformed into a beautiful young woman who would make love to a handsome galactic pilot Jartek (p.94). Stacey even fantasizes swirling away on a magic carpet free of all earthly burdens. Yet another time, Stacey opts her own voice to select the music against the radio to fantasize: "*There's a gold mine in the sky... We will go there, you and I... When we find that long lost gold mine in the sky. Faraway, faraw-a-ay-*" (p.129).

Sexually stifled in her marriage, Stacey ponders over St Paul's admonition that it is better to marry than burn and scornfully muses that he didn't say what to do if you married and burned. The contemporaneous is so horrific that Stacey flees from it to past memory and future fantasy. From the abyss of darkest despair, alienated from Mac, Stacey escapes from home and heads for the sea. It is at the seashore that a sometime fisherman, Luke Venturi, materializes beside Stacey offering her sympathy and salvation or rather, "coffee and sex" (p.206). Every estranged, worn out, drudgery laden housewife's fantasy lover, Luke simply listens and loves, never demanding, assuring Stacey that she is not alone, that real mothers do cry, and that everything really is alright. The romantic encounter with Luke sparks off Stacey's fantasies of driving north into Cariboo country and running away with

Luke, by crossing the river of reality, leaving behind a world on fire. Miriam Packer's 1980 essay, "The Dance of Life: *The Fire-Dwellers*" posits that "Laurence's women are psychologically paralyzed until they release themselves from the prison of rigid control and surrender to the call of their own inner lives, to their fiery and repressed passionate selves" (p.124).

However, the catalytic character, Luke Venturi's counterculture approach leads Stacey to assess her situation from a new perspective. Luke's gentle enquiry of what she wants helps Stacey through her existentialist dilemma. She realizes that instead of escaping from her responsibilities she wants to go home. Thus fortified by the fantasy come to life in the form of Luke Venturi, Stacey can go home again to cope with her grim realities. Finally a series of calamities come as a breakthrough, reuniting the fragmented MacAindra family, leading Stacey to accept her responsibilities as wife and mother and to find the strength to accept the future. Stacey learns from experience, grows inwardly, comes to terms with her inadequacies and accepts the world in her own terms. When Stacey spies Katie dancing alone, in her own fashion, Stacey realizes that her dancing days are over. Perhaps it may be read as a metaphor for giving up her extramarital affairs: "... from now on, the dancing goes on only in the head...well, in the head isn't such a terrible place to dance" (p.276). She imagines dancing to "Zorba's dance", a celebration of life (p.275).

Ultimately, Stacey learns to live amid the fires of chaotic family life and the flames of contemporary culture. Falling asleep at the end of the narrative, she reflects: "Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world" (p.280). Though the novel ends in unresolved compromise, it reflects a movement from denial to acceptance and from negation to affirmation, from dystopia to a dance of life; a celebration of life. This welcoming, celebratory attitude towards the modern world of fragmentation according to Jeremy Hawthorn is a characteristic of postmodernism (Hawthorn, 2010, p.75).

A significant aspect of *The Fire-Dwellers* is its narrative form—a pushing of the conventions of writing into the foreground of the text, a disregard for a conventional form of writing, a wilful self-conscious mixing of literary levels, kinds of discourse and genres. Laurence, here, adopts a rather disrespectful and playful innovative style, often rejecting artistic aura or seriousness. The schizoid narrative method, counterpointing silent stream-of-consciousness monologue with spoken dialogue projects Stacey's personality caught in between her internal and external world. Laurence explains: "Narration, dreams, memories, inner running commentary—all had to be brief, even fragmented, to convey the jangled quality of Stacey's life ("Gadgetry or Growing", p.8). Clara Thomas describes the novel as a double experiment, both in channelling all of the facets of Stacey's consciousness into one voice, and

in achieving its primary, necessary illusion—the *sound* of Stacey’s voice in the words on the page” (Thomas, 1975, p.129).

Stacey copes with her disappointments and frustrations through fantasizing. These fantasies are delineated by italics to mark them off from actuality. Stacey has two dozen fantasies in all, the most profound and poignant one being:

Out there in unknown houses are people who live without lies, and who touch each other. One day she will discover them, pierce through to them. Then everything will be all right, and she will live in the light of the morning. (p.85)

The serio-comic narrative structure of the novel is buttressed by many techniques for humour, from puns to parody. Laurence’s wit and love of language runs throughout the novel. Patricia Morley, in her work, *Margaret Laurence*, aptly comments, “*The Fire-Dwellers* is perhaps her funniest novel, albeit the humour is black” (p.106). The interior conversations of Stacey are many-sided and playful; the voice of irony gaining prominence in the internal discussion:

Resolutions where have you gone? All night on Coke and I will be a raving lunatic. Two though. Only two. Then stop. Spirits of my dead forefathers strengthen me. They should strengthen you, you nitwit? They probably all died of whisky. (p.95)

While Stacey is saying nice things to Tess, her fashionable neighbour, her ironical internal voice reveals all the anger, envy and distress she feels towards Tess and the pseudo culture she represents.

Laurence believes that character determines the form (Laurence, 1980, p.89). In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Laurence develops the innovative narrative technique of alternating first and third-person narration in order to voice the internal subjective world of the character’s thoughts and emotions and the external world of contemporary culture, thus conveying context as well as character. Stacey’s schizophrenic state is revealed through her stream of consciousness first person embedded in an omniscient third person narrative alternating between internal and external dimension. What goes on inside is contradictory to what goes on outside. When Buckle drops in on the pretext of enquiring about Mac, Stacey invites him to dinner. On the outside, the polite request: “...do stay. There’s plenty. Let me get you a drink. Gin and tonic?” (p.49). On the inside marked by a dash: “–Will I, hell... you cheap bastard. Don’t you ever have a meal at home?” (Ibid.). The major themes of the novel are expressed through Stacey’s internal monologues, in Stacey’s own voice conveying her ability to laugh at herself and her strong survival instincts. The narrative bears Stacey’s special stamp as it unfurls through Stacey’s colourfully vibrant, graphic vernacular, with its colloquialisms, slangs and swear words.

Laurence’s ironic techniques include Stacey’s monologues which often turn out to be dialogues she

holds with God in whom she only half believes. At times God appears to be a manifestation of an aspect of Stacey’s consciousness that allows her to make fun of the idea that God is there to protect her and her children: “We’ve brought our own selves up and precious little help we’ve had from you. If you’re there. Which probably you aren’t, although I’m never convinced one way or another” (p.156). Stacey talks to herself frequently and considers her dilemma from many angles. The play between the internal positions is in itself her liberation from the torments of lack of communication in the familial circle.

Nascent endeavours promoting businesses like Richalife and Polyglam are objects of parody in the novel. Richalife, ensuring rejuvenation through vitamin pills, is a secular parody of the Biblical Promised Land: Both Spirit and Flesh Altered. The parody does not just end with the pun in the name “Richalife” but extends to evangelical testimonials by people like Appleton who believe that the pills have miraculously changed their lives for the better Thorlakson, the prophet of the pseudo religion, claiming to redeem the sick and the weak, preaches the good news that “the shackles have been lifted” (p.39). Richalife promises to cure depression and lethargy, the irony being that old addictions like caffeine, liquor and tranquilizers are being replaced with new. Laurence’s object of parody is not just religious evangelism, but also the language used. Various analyses of system analysis and psychological testing are parodied in the Richalife quiz program to identify health problems, energy level, family relationship and goals. The confessional element in the quiz becomes a parody of religious confession. Analogous to the Richalife program is the Polyglam party. Tess Fogler’s house, ideal for the Polyglam party is a parody of plastic pretentiousness and Stacey internally burlesques Tess’s kitschy taste of home décor. The plastic lady with her shimmering silver dress, “gay-gay-gay” (p.79) smile on her tan made up face looks like her gleaming synthetic products. She is oracle and trickster magician. Like the Polyglam material, the Polyglam booklet also offers the attractive lie of happy families.

An intensely dramatic novel, *The Fire-Dwellers* almost reads like the script of a play, involving actual speeches, stage directions and sound effects. Newscasts from the radio and The Ever-Open Eye forcing entrance into hectic breakfast mornings intermingled with telephone rings, and domestic conversations trailing off, are natural and realistic, conveying the sense of everything happening at once, the way it happens in any family:

THIS IS THE EIGHT-O’ CLOCK NEWS
BOMBING RAIDS LAST NIGHT
DESTROYED FOUR VILLAGES IN
Mum! Where’s my social studies scribbler?...
Well, *look*. Katie, have you seen Ian’s social studies scribbler?

No, and I'm not looking for it either. If he wasn't so
Stacey, the party starts at eight tonight. Be ready, eh?
Sure, yes yes of course. Duncan, eat your cereal.
ROAD DEATHS UP TEN PERCENT MAKING
THIS MONTH THE
WORST.... (pp.86-87)

Laurence is fascinated with rather than repelled by technology. Her concern to allow a lived experience of the world to determine the form in which that world is depicted can also be related to her own moments of history. Reading the novel is almost like watching a film or a television play in which the director and cameras are in full view. Postmodern techniques like the Ever-Open Eye of television broadcasting fictional violence with factual bombs and blasts, radio announcements blaring doom and destruction, newspaper headlines screaming death and desolation, together construct the contemporary world on fire. Stacey thinks: "Everything is happening on TV. Everything is equally unreal. Except that it isn't. Do the kids know? How to tell them? I can't" (p.57). Laurence uses all capitals to convey television broadcasts and radio newscasts which invade personal and domestic privacy with the insistent blare of contemporary news. As Nora Stovel notes in *Stacey's Choice*: "Laurence makes use of news via radio, television and newspaper to orient us in the quotidian actuality and in the historical view of contemporary culture making this novel one of the most valuable records of the late sixties" (p.97).

Allusion becomes an art in the hands of Margaret Laurence. Her intertextual techniques alluding to Greek and Christian mythologies, biblical and literary texts, extend the frame of reference from the contemporary to the archetypal.

The novel is filled with Biblical allusions, the Bible being a reservoir of a collective memory. For instance, Stacey's marital disharmony makes her think she should "wail like the widows of Ashur" (p.38). The Tower of Babel reinforces the theme of failure of communication in the novel. The noisy party of Richalife comes to her as a "babel of voices" (p.231) alluding to the parable of the Tower of Babel in *the Bible* (Genesis, 11, pp.1-9). Even the Ever-Open Eye of Stacey's television records cities "SET ABLAZE BY THE CHILDREN OF SAMSON AGONISTES" (p.278). When Stacey burns her hand on the stove, she envisages herself as a Christ figure branded by the stigmata of Christ's crucifixion: "I got stigmata on both palms" (p.101).

Parallel to Laurence's biblical allusions are her allusions to Greek mythology. In the opening part of the novel, the book found on the night table, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* signifies that it will be a poignant element in the novel. Stacey feels like the mythical figure Medusa, her worries "churning around like a covey of serpents".

The cosmetics that Tess shows Stacey are named after an Egyptian pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut. Stacey recalls her picture of Mac as "Agamemnon King of Men" (p.181), hero of Greek tragedy. The night courses which Stacey has been attending emphasize significant aspects of the novel. For instance, "Man and His Gods" draws attention to the religious themes; Ancient Greek Drama accentuates the mythological element; and "Aspects of Contemporary Thought" emphasizes the importance of contemporary culture for the fire-dwellers.

Hymns, songs and nursery rhymes assist in the building up of the narrative in *The Fire-Dwellers*. The two gruesome rhymes, "Ladybird, ladybird" and "Here is a candle to light you to bed" with which the novel opens portend the impending terrors of a world on fire. The ladybird ditty repeated at the most significant turn of the novel and at its conclusion helps in conveying Stacey's maternal anxieties and in bringing the novel full circle.

Stacey's survival and salvation are inspired through hymns: "*Ye holy angels bright Who wait at God's right hand Or through the realms of light Fly at your Lord's command, Assist our song, Or else the theme too high doth seem For mortal tongue.*" (p.69) At the same time the hymns make Stacey mourn her loss of faith. Laurence refers to war songs as well because, for her, war and its aftermath are major concerns. Stacey recalls how, preceded by pipers, the men of the Queens Own Cameron Highlanders, marched through the streets of Manawaka on their way overseas during World War II. She remembers how after Dieppe, the rough-fibered music forced mourning on her. In the streets, Stacey listens to peacemakers singing two of the sixties war-protests songs, "We Shall Overcome" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" (pp.251-252).

Laurence makes an innovative use of typography, the print on the page, in the novel. The technique provides a kind of visual variety on the page. Stacey's thoughts are introduced by a dash; her memories, fragments from the past flashing in and out, are indented on the page; her fantasies, for easy identification are in italics; the narrator's comments in ordinary type and conversations, without quotations. The drop of quotation marks, conventional sign posts of "he said" and "she said", punctuation marks at the end of sentences and unfinished sentences make the conversation realistic and dramatic, conveying the sense of everything happening at once. Laurence felt the need for simultaneity to recreate the Canadian experiences of the 60s counter culture.

In *Gadgetry or Growing* Laurence expresses her hope of creating a new narrative form for her novel: "I may discover what I'm looking for, which—as far as form in writing is concerned—is the kind of vehicle or vessel capable of risking that peculiar voyage of exploration which constitutes a novel" (p.89). Laurence has indeed

been successful in achieving her artistic ideal. The novel incorporates techniques like irony, parody, play, farce and black humour to deal with the themes of anarchy, fragmentation and counterculture, almost anticipating Ihab Hassan's observations on postmodernism (Hassan, 2002, pp.203-206). Laurence was far ahead of her times in experimenting with postmodern techniques.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* has been successful in capturing and projecting with verisimilitude the political world of the 1960s; a chronicle of the war in Viet Nam, political violence in the far east and racial violence in the USA. The novel is significant in its portrayal of a world of increasing fragmentation and human powerlessness in the face of a blind technology amidst the dominance of economic pressures. Laurence's rejection of conventional ideas of character and plot, of artistic aura and seriousness signify postmodern trends. To use Linda Hutcheon's words, "The co-existence of heterogeneous genres fantasy utopia and grim dystopia, absurd slapstick com tragedy", exemplifies postmodern concerns in the novel (Ibid., p.303). *The Fire-Dwellers*, with its innovations in theme and technique is also an accurate record of a historical era. A relevant and significant contribution to Canadian literature, *The Fire-*

Dwellers foreshadows later works by Margaret Atwood and Robert Kroetsch.

REFERENCES

- Hawthorn, J. (2010). *Studying the novel*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Hutcheon, L. (2002). From a poetics of postmodernism. *Postmodernism and the contemporary novel*. Bran Nicol: Edinburgh.
- Hassan, I. (2002). POSTmodernISM: A PARACRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY. *Postmodernism and the contemporary novel*. Bran Nicol: Edinburgh.
- Laurence, M. (1989). *Dance on the earth: A memoir*. Toronto: McClelland.
- Laurence, M. (1966). *The fire-dwellers*. Toronto: MacClelland and Stewart.
- Laurence, M. (1980). Gadgetry and growing: Form and voice in the novel. *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27, 54-62.
- Morley, P. (1981). *Margaret Laurence*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Packer, M. (1980). The dance of life: The fire-dwellers. *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27, 124-31.
- Stovel, N. (1980). *Stacey's choice: Margaret Laurence's the fire-dwellers*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Thomas, C. (1975). *The Manawaka world of Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.