

The Predicaments of the Old Woman in The Stone Angel

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the physical and mental predicaments of Hagar, the 90-year-old protagonist in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, through the intersecting lenses of literary gerontology. It argues that Western ageism, intensified by patriarchal and consumerist discourses, constructs the aging female body as abject, rendering elderly women socially invisible and personally ashamed. Hagar's bodily decline—arthritis, incontinence, and altered appearance—symbolizes her loss of autonomy and triggers fierce denial. Simultaneously, her domestic space becomes a site of surveillance and emotional abandonment; her family's insistence on institutional care deepens her fear of dependency and erasure. Drawing on theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and recent Chinese scholarship, the study shows how Hagar's self-othering language and animalized self-descriptions manifest internalized ageism. Ultimately, Laurence's empathetic first-person narrative challenges readers to replace stereotype with understanding and to recognize the elderly as subjects of enduring dignity and complexity.

KEYWORDS

Predicaments; Margaret Laurence; *The Stone Angel*; Literary gerontology

1 Introduction

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) was one of the most outstanding writers in Canada. Her works include novels, essays and children's stories, etc. She has received the Governor General's Award of Canada and many other honors, and is considered as a founding mother of Canadian literature and often is referred to as the godmother of contemporary Canadian women's writing. She is renowned in the Canadian literary circle for her witty and concise writing style and distinct themes. And her works can roughly be divided into two periods. One is based on her eight-year life experience in Africa, and another one is that she takes the prairie town Manawaka of western Canada as the writing background. In the second period, she created five novels of Canadian Manawaka cycle: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), and *The Diviners* (1974). These five novels are regarded as her greatest achievements. The first one *The Stone Angel* is usually regarded as her representative work. Shortly after its publication in 1964, this book became a bestseller and received high praise from critics, thereby establishing Margaret Lawrence's important position in the Canadian literary circle.

In *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Lawrence adopts a first-person narrative and a colloidal dual-time non-linear narrative. From the perspective of the 90-year-old female protagonist, Hagar, she tells the extraordinary experiences of the weeks before her death, interspersed with the ups and downs of her past memories.

2 Literary gerontology

Gerontology is a study of social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, and biological aspects of ageing. After World War II, there was a baby boom in the West represented by the United States. In the 1980s, the phenomenon of Empty Nest Syndrome in Western culture was given rise, and the concepts such as the young old and the old old emerged, echoing the the Third Age and the Fourth Age in the sense of gerontology. The former refers to elderly people who have reached the age of aging as determined by cultural or recognized standards but are fully capable of taking care of themselves in daily life. The latter refers to elderly people who are bedridden due to aging and need to rely on others for care, including those with dementia. It is merely a difference in the degree of dependence on aging. Against the backdrop of such revolutionary changes in the population structure, the academic circle began to respond accordingly. A strong momentum emerged in the combination of literary criticism and gerontology, so literary gerontology began to sprout (Deng 2017). Anne Marbury Wyatt-Brown (1990) was the first one to declare that literary gerontology has finally come of age in *Journal of Aging Studies*. And the concept of literary gerontology officially entered the academic field of vision. This combination of literature and gerontology is aimed at the deficiencies of gerontology research in traditional fields such as life sciences and sociology when considering the phenomenon of human aging. It hopes to explore the quality of life on the verge of aging by leveraging the rich imagination and fictional reality of literature and art, especially the long-standing humanistic care and protection tradition unique to literature (Deng 2017).

3 Hagar's physical predicament

Under any societal context, the elderly are compelled to endure the physiological and psychological challenges associated with aging. While it is an accepted fact that aging is an inevitable biological process, societal attitudes often hinder respectful and empathetic treatment of older adults. Common stereotypes associate the elderly with frailty, cognitive decline, chronic illness, forgetfulness, and dependency. Consequently, older individuals are often perceived as a societal burden. Aging depletes their physical vitality and functional capacity, and they are unable to reverse the health deficits accumulated over time. Many elderly individuals experience diminished autonomy due to declining health, which is a prevalent issue among senior populations. But compared with men, the situation of women is much worse. Simone de Beauvoir says: "Patriarchal society has made all feminine functions servile... from the day woman agrees to grow old, her situation changes... now she becomes a different being... complete: an elderly woman." and they "lose all productivity" when they become old (Beauvoir 641). With the development of history, the rise of capitalist sprouts has led elderly women to withdraw from the production process and become appendages of the family. Take Britain in the middle of the 14th century as an example. Elderly women reached a support agreement with their children, exchanging livestock and land for part of the living space in their children's homes. Elderly women who no longer participate in social production are beginning to be marginalized. The public's resentful attitude towards elderly women stems from the reluctance of capitalist society to continuously support them (Cui 2017).

The space that society provides for women to realize their value is very limited. It is difficult for them to gain a sense of achievement in their careers like men do. Therefore, good looks have become an important channel for them to gain confidence. But the passage of time inevitably leads to the aging of one's appearance, which seems to be the end of a woman's value (Long 2024). In this novel, there are many descriptions of Hagar's appearance. "My hair was gray and straight. I always cut it myself. The face — a brown and leathery face that wasn't mine (Laurence 140)." "I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil (84)." Consumer culture is constantly reminding elderly women of the variability of their bodies by promoting the fear of aging. Through technical means such as cosmetic surgery, cosmetics, and fashionable clothing, it aims to keep youth forever and imitate youth, while old age will be a myth that can never be reached. Driven by the wrong consumer culture, elderly women are unable to confront the process of aging in a dialectical way (Cui 2017). So Hagar uses words like "wasn't mine" and third-person perspective to describe her appearance. This expression reflects her inner rejection of aging. And the action of self-otherization also faintly reflects Hagar's aversion to an aging body.

As the body ages, diseases follow. In her later years, Hagar faces physical aging and illness. These physiological changes make her lose her ability to take care of herself and generate a strong sense of shame. In this novel, there are many words to describe her bad health condition. "The arthritis knots inside my legs as though I had pieces of binder-twine instead of muscles and veins. My ankles and feet (thick as stumps they are now, and just about as easily moved — one has to uproot them)... (35)." And when she goes down, her son wants to help her, but she refuses it and shoves aside his paw, then says "I can manage quite well, thank you. You go on down. I'll be there in a moment. Go on now, for pity's sake (38)." These detailed descriptions not only demonstrate Hagar's physical aging, but also reveal her fear and resistance to this kind of aging.

And as the story continues to develop, we can see the worse situation of the protagonist. "You've wet your sheets, nearly every night these past few months (79)" From these words, we can see that Hagar has lost her self-care ability and she couldn't even control her body to get up but wet the bed. And Hagar refutes "that's a lie. I never did any such thing. You're making it up. I know your ways. Just so you'll have some reason for putting me away (79)". The young Hagar is an autonomous individual; however, in old age, she experiences involuntary physiological functions. She is hesitant to acknowledge the physical decline and loss of bodily autonomy. The incident of nocturnal enuresis serves as a metaphor for her anxiety about losing control over her bodily functions. She fears becoming helpless and dependent, akin to an infant requiring care from others. This apprehension leads her to vehemently deny the reality of her aging process. The character in the novel undergoes a transformation from a healthy body to an aging one. She changes from a state of complete and normal body to a state of physical degeneration. In her youth, she was able to take the initiative to control and manage her own life and social life. At that time, she was in good health and full of vitality, and was full of confidence in external things. Entering old age, due to physical deterioration reactions and the occurrence of diseases, she even became unable to take care of herself, feeling dejected and ashamed of herself. Aging and diseases always cast a shadow over the elderly body like ghosts.

Hagar always refuses the fact that she is aging. Because the attitude of Western culture towards old age is pessimistic. The old are seen as Other in the youth-worshipping society. In their culture, old women are loss their attractiveness for they are only evaluated by their appearance. And the fear of aging have run through the entire history of the West (Long 2025). The depiction of senescence connotes unfamiliarity, uncanny, mortality, and danger, so the individual, confronting the progression of aging, refuses to identify with the socially stigmatized imagination of old people, perceiving it as the other rather than the self (Long 2024). The identity of the elderly is constructed. Physical beauty is only available to the

young, while old bodies, especially elderly female bodies are considered to be ugly, asexual and undesirable by western culture norms. In this situation, the beauty ideal makes them can not accept their own body.

Hagar son thinks nursing home is the best place where Hagar should stay, so he directly decide that "It's all arranged. The nursing home. I've booked you in. You're to go a week from today (140)." Nursing home can take care of the old ,but it also restricts freedom of person. Furthermore, nursing home have perfectly fulfilled the task of transferring deaths from the public domain to the private domain. Discussions about death are widespread in society, but the public shows a sense of rejection towards the death of the elderly around them. In the nursing home, an institution that controls the course of life, the body involved in disease and death is withdrawn from the public, and the body of the elderly is pushed into a hidden space.

4 Hagar's mental predicament

The absence of interpersonal relationships or dissatisfaction with current interpersonal relationships can cause an individual to feel lonely. And Interpersonal exclusion leads the elderly subjects into a mental predicament. Compared with the young group, the elderly group is already more prone to feelings of loneliness due to fewer social relationships and the loss of interpersonal relationships. This situation is even more severe when elderly individuals face aging and diseases.

Hagar has resided with her eldest son and daughter-in-law for seventeen years, yet she continues to experience feelings of isolation and insecurity. She vigilantly monitors their every gesture and interaction to continually validate their perceptions of her. Even in her own house, she exhibits heightened sensitivity to external sounds and movements. For example, when she stayed in her room, "I hear the footsteps on the carpeted stair. They sound muted and velvety, as though it were a smotherer. I don't trust them. Who is it? Who is it? I want to shout,...(72)" "Why is he so attentive? I watch their faces. Does a questioning look pass between them or do I only fancy it is so(34)?" Because of the functional degeneration or decay of her body and her mind, she is suspicious of everything even though she stay in her home. The family space is no longer a place where attachment, affection, excitement or pleasure can arise, but a place that makes people feel dangerous, tense and conflict-ridden, a place that evokes fear, anxiety, indifference, helplessness, sadness, emptiness and depression (Wen 2012). She has no one to talk and trust, which makes her so lonely and anxious. And when she see a mark on the advertisement about the nursing home, she feels that "the heavy larded flesh no shield against it, for it attacks craftily, from the inside" and is "unable to draw breath at all" (54). "They'd crate me up in the car and deliver me like a parcel of old clothes to that place. I'd never get out. The only escape from those places is feet first in a wooden box (188)." And when her son proposes that they want to hire a person to look her after, "I stiffens. 'You think I need a sitter, like a child (68)?' " We can see that in her view, needing a sitter is the symbol of weakness and being unable to take care of herself. Different from her young image that she is independent and strong, the old image will make her useless and become a burden to others. This fear stems from the worry of losing autonomy and dignity. And "nursing home" is an abandon place. When she goes there, she will never come back and stay with her families. But her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris never agree with Hagar's choice that she refuses to live in nursing home, and they only describes the beauty of the nursing home again and again. When Hagar says no, they choose to end the topic and start talking about the benefits of the nursing home next time. They even inform her directly that "It's all arranged. The nursing home. I've booked you in. You're to go a week from today(140)." For Hagar's choice, they never want to ask her reason and care for her feelings. For Hagar, the family is merely a spatial representation that deprives the subject of expression, and it has also bred her yearning for freedom, longing to find the feeling of being an independent self (Wen 2012). So Hagar is so helpless and choose to flee away from her home. The current situation of not being understood led to the spread and growth of Hagar's loneliness.

When Hagar is young, she describes her aunt Doll that "She wore a white lace boudoir cap in the mornings, and shrilled at me like a witch when I tweaked it off (6)". During the witch-hunting movement that lasted for nearly three hundred years, elderly women became the main targets of persecution, and old witches became a specific image projected onto elderly women. The witch-hunting movement in Europe has persecuted countless elderly women while also making the stigmatized image of elderly women a paradigm in the cultural representation system. The old witch, as a stigmatized image, has seemingly become a cultural symbol in a general sense. This ability is constantly sharpening the marginality of elderly women, creating a sense of fear and rejection towards aging. Meanwhile, this kind of signification is also involved in constructing an ideology of gerascophobia (Cui 2017) . So from the word "witch", we can see that Hagar is deeply influenced by age discrimination and doesn't like the old. And old Hagar describes herself as an animal or a cheap item for many times. For example, "an this torn voice be mine? A series of yelps, like an injured dog (31)", "like scared ducks from a swamp (142)", and "I'm limp as a dishrag (154)". The elderly are isomorphic with animals. They are the weak others and also the gazed others. Simone de Beauvoir believed that the process of female aging is to go through the stage of self otherization that causes shame. Because for men, women are the existence of desire, so when she is old and ugly, she is no longer the embodiment of desire and thus loses her position in society (138). Aging disproportionately

impacts women, with ageism fostering societal rejection and hostility toward their physical decline. These shame-inducing experiences lead elderly women to perceive themselves as defective and inferior, viewing aging bodies as masks hiding their youthful selves. This internalized stigma often results in distorted self-representations, such as animal or discarded object imagery, highlighting their aversion to their own aging bodies within an ageist context.

5 Conclusion

In Western society, ageism and discriminatory attitudes persist toward the elderly demographic. This phenomenon partly stems from societal misconceptions about gerontological experiences, primarily characterized by neglect and ignorance of their psychological and emotional states, as well as their accumulated life histories. Advanced age does not solely denote physical decline or aesthetic deterioration; it also encompasses a wealth of spiritual insights and accumulated wisdom. The first-person narrative in *The Stone Angel* exemplifies Lawrence's profoundly humanitarian perspective and empathetic approach. She immerses readers in the gerontological inner world, depicting their thoughts and emotions through fully developed characters rather than as mere objects of pity or neglect. It prompts readers to think about these eternal philosophical propositions, with the aim of changing the public's prejudice and discrimination against the elderly. It has a profound influence and significant enlightenment.

About the Author

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