

Refusing Beauty: Counter-Aesthetics, Gender, And Ideological Power in *The Stone Angel*

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Abstract:

This research article examines the politics of beauty and the construction of counter-aesthetics in *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence, focusing on the intersections of gender, ideology, and power within the framework of feminist literary criticism. The novel challenges traditional aesthetic ideals that associate beauty with virtue, femininity, and social acceptance. Through the characterization of Hagar Shipley, Laurence subverts dominant cultural expectations by presenting a protagonist who resists conventional standards of female beauty and submissiveness. Hagar's physical and emotional rigidity becomes a symbolic rejection of patriarchal definitions of femininity, revealing how aesthetic norms function as ideological tools that regulate women's identities and behaviors.

The study explores how the narrative destabilizes the ideological association between beauty and moral worth, highlighting the marginalization experienced by women who do not conform to socially constructed ideals of attractiveness and gentleness. By foregrounding Hagar's defiance, stubborn individuality, and refusal to perform conventional femininity, the novel articulates a form of counter-aesthetic resistance that challenges patriarchal power structures embedded within society and culture. The research also investigates how memory, aging, and bodily decline disrupt the cultural privileging of youthful beauty, exposing the ideological mechanisms that sustain gender hierarchies.

Drawing upon feminist theoretical perspectives and cultural studies approaches, the paper argues that *The Stone Angel* constructs a counter-aesthetic discourse that critiques the gendered politics of beauty. Laurence's narrative reveals how ideological power shapes perceptions of the female body while simultaneously offering a space for resistance through the protagonist's refusal to internalize normative expectations. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that the novel redefines beauty by foregrounding autonomy, resilience, and self-awareness rather than physical conformity, thereby questioning the cultural authority of patriarchal aesthetic standards.

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INTRODUCTION: AESTHETIC AS IDEOLOGY

Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* challenges the deep-seated notions of aesthetics, femininity, and power by showing the unwillingness to relate female worth with beauty, emotional harmony, or any kind of adjustment to respect any individual's needs. Over the centuries, the classical Greek structures were treated as a symbol of beauty and artistic achievements. However, the statues were not just for appreciation but also for establishing the ideal body types, skin tones and features. In a way there is no fixed yardstick to what we call 'aesthetic' rather it is an enforcement of beliefs and power of whoever gets to choose what is a good art, often functioning as an ideological system. Further, when it comes to women in particular, they are told that they need to be beautiful, graceful, emotionally supportive and should put others before themselves, only then they will be considered a 'good' woman or will be accepted by the society. The woman who chooses to deviate from these standards, she is seen as flawed or immoral even. Many feminist critics have brought up the issue of how these ideas of what women 'should' be actually are the ways of controlling them – shaping how they look, act or behave. Things like being submissive or doing emotional work is shown naturally as "feminine", when in reality these are just pressured expectations.

In the novel *The Stone Angel*, the main character Hagar Shipley, is an old woman who could be said to be a deviant, considering the threshold of being an ideal woman. She is stubborn, keeps her feelings to herself, refuses to depend on others and against any adjustment of her behaviour as per the other's needs. By making the Hagar Shipley the center focus of the novel, Laurence wanted to proliferate the idea that even a deviant of these woman's beauty and moral expectations deserves to be the main focus. Hagar won't play by the rules – she is not beautiful, she's not sweet or gentle, and she doesn't open up emotionally the way women are "supposed" to. This contrary behavior shows the standards which are used to judge women are not based on objectivity but are just the implementation of sexist ideas about how women should act or behave. Laurence, using her novel, tries to fight the power dynamics among men and women present in their notions about beauty and proper behaviour.

HAGAR SHIPLEY AS AN ANTI-AESTHETIC PROTAGONIST

Hagar Shipley is a ninety-year-old woman who is telling her life through fragmented memory. She is not the kind of character that one would normally expect as the main heroine. She is often rude, cold and arrogant. And neither Laurence was seen trying to fix the image of her in the end nor Hagar tries to become soft, loving and warm in order to become a better person. Hagar remains

persistent throughout the novel and this stubbornness plays a key role in the novel's counter-aesthetic project.

It is the cultural expectations that demand women – especially aging women – to be graceful, extremely generous, gentle and socially pleasing. These aging aestheticisations were also resisted by Hagar. She bluntly declared, “I can’t accept that I am old” (Laurence 11), she rejected the notion that she should quietly accept the aging and her fate “gracefully”. Even in her old age, instead of being peaceful or having a graceful decline, she was full of fighting spirit, resistance and hostility. By presenting aging this way instead of being shown as graceful, noble and full of serenity, Laurence exposed the notion of how a woman is expected to be patient, enduring and emotionally supportive even when they get old and struggling.

By placing an unattractive, stubborn, cold and aging woman as a center of focus, Laurence goes against the traditional conventions that marginalises and criticizes such characters. Hagar's authority as a narrator disrupts literary hierarchies that privilege youth, emotional warmth, and visual appeal. Just having her as the main character's presence nullifies the idea of women's worthiness being related to their pleasing looks and graceful presence.

BEAUTY AS A SYSTEM OF IDEOLOGICAL REGULATION

In *The Stone Angel*, ideas about beauty and what's "pleasing" aren't just about art or taste – they're actually tools used to control people, especially women. Naomi Wolf put emphasis on the concept of beauty standards as a “currency system”: they are a system that regulate women's behaviour and bodies under the guise of natural expectation, while enforcing obedience. Hagar's constant unwillingness to accept these standards – her anger, her pride, her unwillingness to be soft and emotionally open – becomes a form of resistance to this control system rather than being deficient. Conventionally, in most stories, female characters are rewarded for compliance while the not-so compliant or difficult ones are punished or met by a bad ending. Hagar remained socially abrasive and cold but Laurence didn't do the same with Hagar. She never tried to wipe out Hagar's presence or labelled her as a bad or immoral person. Instead, she makes her the main character, not accepting the idea that only “good” women deserve attention and a good ending. Hagar's constant refusal to be pleasing is a symbol of strength rather than a weakness.

This opposition to the ideal standards is clearly visible in Hagar's rejection of emotional labour – the work of comforting people, taking care of everyone's feelings, and putting herself last. She does not comfort or emotionally accommodate others as a woman is expected to. This resistance exposes the idea how society wants a woman to be an emotional caretaker as if it is naturally the duty of woman. This is what women should do and be, turning self-sacrifice into a virtue. By rejecting this role, Hagar exposes and challenges the sexist assumptions built into how we think women should behave.

PRIDE AS COUNTER-AESTHETIC RESISTANCE

Pride is regarded as one of the most significant ways to protest against the aesthetic control system or the societal expectations. When men are proud, they are usually considered to be ambitious or confident – seen in a positive light. However, when it comes to women, it is quite the opposite, their pride is seen as being stuck-up or cold. She recognises its central role in her life when she reflects, “Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear” (Laurence 292). Here the word “wilderness” represents a place beyond the normal society, where there are no rules for women as in how they should act or behave, they are free to do whatever they want to do, not bound by the aesthetic regulation or domestic containment.

Laurence does not represent pride simply as a character flaw. Though due to Hagar’s pride, her relationships were destroyed – especially with her husband Bram Shipley and her son Marvin – it also makes her competent enough to survive in a world where a woman is expected to be submissive. Bram is rough and domineering while her son Marvin was passively obedient –both represent two restrictive methods of male authority. Hagar's refusal to submit emotionally or to meet their expectations shows how few acceptable options women actually have.

Importantly, the novel does not romanticize humility or self-sacrifice as beautiful feminine virtues. Rather it exposes the reality of how women are denied from having traits associated with autonomy and authority. Hagar’s pride, even though it costs her a life, is her way to refuse being confined and controlled.

THE STONE ANGEL AS A SYMBOL OF ANTI-BEAUTY

The main symbol of the novel is the stone angel placed at Hagar’s mother’s grave. It is described as a tall white marble angel, blindfolded. This statue challenges what angels usually represent – divine beauty, grace and kindness. Instead, it is shown as cold, stiff and emotionally blind.

The stone angel acts as a medium to represent Hagar’s emotional condition as well as the values she inherited from her father, Jason Currie –values based on pride, moral judgment and giving importance to social status. Here, beauty has become lifeless, rigid and unable to see. Through this, Laurence criticizes the whole concept of idealization, giving emphasis on the fact that aesthetic perfection in general hides emotional emptiness.

Rather than representing something more uplifting or spiritual, the stone angel shows the dangers of idealization of beauty standards which prioritizes beauty over compassion. Beauty, when combined with strict moral values, it becomes a tool to judge and marginalise people. The angel’s blindfold symbolizes how these aesthetic ideals fail to recognize the human weakness, differences and the complexities of real life.

SILENCE, SPEECH AND THE REFUSAL OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Silence plays a major role in *The Stone Angel* both as a writing technique and a form of constant resistance. Hagar constantly tries to hold back her speech, neither does she show affection nor does she confess her feelings. While the silence of a woman is often seen as patience or virtue, in the case of Hagar, her silence was challenging and confrontational. She refuses to bend herself as per the expectations that women must express love, offer forgiveness and provide emotional comfort to others.

Late in life, Hagar admits, “I never spoke the words I needed to speak” (Laurence 305). But this admission does not lead to a moral closure. Laurence opposes transforming speech into a moment of redemption. The silence stays unresolved – though loaded with loss, also an act of resistance. As Adrienne Rich suggests, silence can function both as oppression and as a form of refusal, depending on context and agency (Rich 18).

In the situation of Hagar, silence was a way of rejecting the notion of how women should do the emotional labour of comforting others. She refuses to show her vulnerability or direct any pleasant confession to others in order to provide comfort. Though it led to regret but never seemed as a form of failure. Instead, it brought light on the fact that how a woman is expected to be emotionally expressive as a form of service to the society.

AGING, VISIBILITY AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

One of the most groundbreaking things about this novel is its unsentimental portrayal of the aging female body. Often the stories about the old woman render them invisible, grotesque or only valuable for teaching moral lessons. Laurence rejects all by making Hagar’s aging mind and experience the center of the story, without trying to make it look pleasing.

Hagar’s fear of being put in the nursing home – “I won’t be put away” (Laurence 17) – shows her resistance to erasure from society. Old age is not just related to getting weak physically but also a way for the society to control people. Once a woman is no longer considered attractive or economically productive, they are controlled through invisibility and confinement.

By allowing an old woman to narrate the story, Laurence challenges the conventional way where an aging woman’s voice is ignored or marginalised. Memory in *The Stone Angel* is not depicted as nostalgia or emotional healing rather it is fragmented, selective and confrontational. Hagar recognized the limitation of storytelling when she said, “Some things never get said” (Laurence 308). The fact that the narration didn't have an aesthetic closure reflects how the novel rejects the idea of being submissive towards the beauty.

CONCLUSION: COUNTER-AESTHETIC AND FEMINIST POWER

In a nutshell, *The Stone Angel* depicts aesthetics – ideas about beauty and what is appealing – is actually a terrain of ideological struggle. Through Hagar’s pride, stubbornness, silence, aging and

symbolic rejection of beauty standards, Margaret Laurence uncovers how these beauty standards are used to control women and regulate acceptable forms of femininity. Hagar's refusal to be pleasant and obedient turns aesthetic as a weapon of resistance.

The novel represents that the female power does not merge from harmony or being perfect but through endurance, refusing to comply and understanding themselves. By rejecting the notion that the woman's worth is associated with her beauty, *The Stone Angel* exposes the politics hidden behind the representation and to reconsider the role of aesthetics in sustaining—or challenging—gendered power.

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