

COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE  
(M.A. English Sem. III)



Contact us:



8252299990



8404884433



AISECT University, Hazaribag

Matwari Chowk, in front of Gandhi Maidan, Hazaribag (JHARKHAND)-825301



[www.aisectuniversityjharkhand.ac.in](http://www.aisectuniversityjharkhand.ac.in)



[info@aisectuniversityjharkhand.ac.in](mailto:info@aisectuniversityjharkhand.ac.in)

## UNIT-1 This is a Photograph of Me

"This is a photograph of Me" belongs to Margaret Atwood's second collection of poems, **The Circle Game [1966]**. The poem begins with the description of a photograph of the speaker 'taken some time ago'. Until the middle of the poem, it seems that the speaker is talking fondly about an old photograph of her that had appeared in a newspaper. The poem has a rather unusual structure of verses. The lines are short and each line wraps over to the next one. The diction is simple and befitting the tone of the poem.

The speaker is passively exposed to the photograph in Atwood's poem This Is a Photograph of Me. Thematically, the title is in passive, the first sentence is in passive voice. This is a photo others have taken of me. This is a history of me which others have created. The others are males who are active to make history of females.

When other makes history of female then there comes the problem of precision and accuracy. In patriarchy, males are creating women's stories. The photograph was taken some time ago. She has not specified the time. The photograph is not clear, lines are blurred, and the light of the photograph has become dim. Photograph stands for her history which is not clear; light stands for the creativity of the woman. If a woman does some important work in the society, that is shadowed. Patriarchy ignores the contribution of female. In the left hand corner, there are branches of tree.

These branches of tree have emerged to right hand side. On the right hand side there is a frame house. This can be seen if you see the photograph minutely. Here the right hand side (frame House) stands for male and left hand side (branches) stands for female. In the patriarchy, a woman is treated as left hand and man is treated as right hand. Woman is placed on the left hand with simply associated with branches which have no roots and man is placed on the right hand side. Left hand is normally weaker than right hand. Females are supposed to be weaker than male. By giving her left position she has been shown as passive.

Lake stands for the society of the photograph. Beyond the society, there are low hills. Hills and lakes keep the woman in shadow. Hills and lakes are the causes that distort her history. Margaret is trying to show the small frame houses are not responsible for the exploitations of women. As a whole background society or the lake/ hills are responsible behind what happens to women. The speaker is not taken out of the lake. She is dipped and left in the lake. She could not get her identity. As per Christian culture one is dipped and taken out to name but here in her case it does not happen. Here she is showing identity crisis. She is left in the lake she can't come out of lake that society is to revolt.

She is center for domestic work and she is marginal for social, political and economic work. In patriarchy, women are taken forward in domestic roles but in the social roles male come ahead. In the final stanza there is a shift in tone. If you look carefully, you will be able to see me. Photograph is dim, its true but I am there. They have dimmed my photograph, undermined my

work but my presence is there. Patriarchy cannot negate me completely. The last line is revolutionary. Despite all the discrimination I am there. They can destroy my photograph but cannot destroy my existence. Time is not clear it means that when the domination started it was not clear. Woman has been exploited since time immemorial. Therefore the speaker does not like to historicize the time.

## **UNIT-2 The Stone Angel**

### **Character List**

#### **Hagar Currie Shipley**

Hagar is the narrator of *The Stone Angel* and the events of the story unfold through her eyes. Hagar is from a small Canadian prairie town called Manawaka; she is the daughter of a wealthy shop owner, Jason Currie. In her old age, Hagar has outlived her husband and her son John. When she discovers that her son Marvin and her daughter-in-law plan to put her into a nursing home, she runs away into the woods.

The titular angel can be seen as a representation of Hagar, her stony rigidity, and her tendency to suppress her emotions as a way to have power over others. Hagar's tragic flaw is pride: she believes herself to be superior to everyone she encounters and isn't afraid to show it. She is often impatient and judgmental with even those trying to help her, such as the nurses or minister, and she often assumes the worst in other people, continually casting herself as the victim. It is only through old age and losing control of her physical abilities that Hagar begins to show an inkling of humility, softening her lifelong coldness and recognizing that life without love is not worth anything.

#### **Bram Shipley**

Bram Shipley is the local farmer Hagar marries at the expense of her relationship with her father and brothers, who disown her. Bram is rough, lazy, and ill-mannered, not caring about the upper-class sensibilities that Hagar takes so seriously. Over time, Bram develops a drinking problem, which is aggravated by Hagar's constant biting criticism of him. Bram rarely shows affection to Hagar except in their nightly sexual encounters. He is also a distant and apathetic father, valuing his sons more for how they can help out on the farm than who they are as people. Bram and Hagar eventually part ways and only see each other again when Bram develops some sort of dementia, which develops rapidly and leads to his death. Despite his flaws, the reader can infer Hagar still has a soft spot in her heart for her husband, sometimes talking to him as if he were still alive.

#### **Marvin Shipley**

Marvin is the eldest of Hagar's two sons. He is by far the more loyal and patient of the two, even though Hagar inexplicably favors his younger brother John. Marvin becomes a paint salesman and marries a woman named Doris, who is Hagar's sole caregiver. As Marvin and Doris also age, they begin to find it more and more exhausting to care for Hagar. Accordingly, Marvin makes the very difficult decision to move his mother to a nursing home, despite her

protests. Marvin is portrayed to be a calm man who sometimes struggles to express his feelings, leading to sudden frustrated outbursts towards his mother or wife.

## **John Shipley**

John is the younger of Hagar's sons. John is Hagar's favorite child and one of the few people in her life whom she holds in high esteem. This is perhaps because she sees in John a resemblance to her father, and puts hope in John that he will take after the intelligence and hardworking ethic of Jason Currie. Hagar brings John with her when she separates from Bram and tries to encourage him to continue with school. However, as a young man, John moves back with his father and soon shows to take after him in his drunken and slovenly habits. John falls in love with a young woman named Arlene, but they both die in a drunken car accident. John rejects the path set before him by Hagar, a reality which Hagar has a hard time accepting in the present day.

## **Jason Currie**

Jason Currie is Hagar's father. A wealthy, self-made man, he has high standards for his children. Jason tries to imprint in his daughter and two sons the same shrewd business ethic that has made him so successful. He prides himself in being an upper-class member of the town and frequently talks down to those whom he deems lower-class. As a single father, he has Auntie Doll do most of the mothering and household work that he is unable to provide—not only because he is busy, but also because he lacks any nurturing sensibility. He disowns his daughter when she insists on going through with what he believes to be a bad marriage. Hagar comes to have the same domineering, controlling attitude that her father displayed. It becomes clear throughout the story that she has partly derived her self-destructive pride from her father.

## **Lottie Dreiser**

Lottie is a former friend and schoolmate of Hagar. For most of her life, Hagar has seen Lottie in a condescending way, judging her for being born out of wedlock. She particularly remembers one time that Lottie brazenly killed mutilated chicks to end their suffering; it is an image that remains with Hagar. Lottie and Hagar's paths cross again in middle-age when their children, Arlene and John, become a couple. After Arlene's death, however, their relationship is broken.

## **Doris Shipley**

Doris is Hagar's daughter-in-law. She is responsible for caring for Hagar, cooking, helping her change her clothes, and taking her to doctor appointments. Yet Hagar regards her as inferior, constantly thinking about how Doris wants her to die so that she can inherit her house. In reality, Doris is a rather kind woman whose patience is tested by Hagar's combined neediness and thanklessness.

## **Murray Lees**

Murray is a stranger who comes to the cannery to sit alone and drink quietly. He and Hagar have a deep conversation in which they both share their life stories and find that they have something in common: they have both lost a son. Murray comforts Hagar when she has a bad dream; in the morning, he fetches Marvin and Doris to save Hagar.



## Matt and Dan

Hagar's brothers, Matt and Dan, are described somewhat briefly, both having died at a rather young age from disease. We learn that Dan is a more sickly boy who has a hard time following in his father's footsteps, while Matt is more miserly and reserved. Even Hagar acknowledges that she barely knew her brothers.

## Elva Jardine

Elva is a woman Hagar encounters in the public ward of the hospital. At first, Hagar judges her for being scrawny and weak. Yet in the hospital, as Hagar begins to realize her fragility and imminent death, she becomes more humble and opens up to Elva. They discover things they have in common, and Hagar is touched by the old woman's kindness. Their brief connection is perhaps one of the few genuine relationships Hagar has in her whole life.

## Summary

*The Stone Angel* is a first-person narrative that at times almost breaks into stream-of-consciousness writing as Hagar, the main character, gradually loses lucidity due to old age and illness. The narrative is divided into ten chapters, each of which shifts back and forth between the present time (the 1960s) and an earlier point in Hagar's life.

The novel is set in the fictional town of Manawaka (inspired by Neepawa), a rural part of Canada where conservative values reign and where archaic notions of gender and social class are taken seriously even in the modern era. The central character, Hagar, is a protagonist only by convention. Given her antagonistic behavior toward everyone else around her, which is rooted in her overwhelming pride, the reader would not be wrong to consider her an anti-heroine.

The book consists of two narrative arcs. The present-day story shows us the life of Hagar as an elderly woman of at least 90. Hagar lives in an upstairs bedroom in what used to be her house but which now belongs to her son Marvin. When she discovers that Marvin and his wife Doris are planning to put her into a nursing home, Hagar runs away to a rural spot called Shadow Point. She stays overnight in an abandoned house and is eventually found by her son and daughter-in-law, who immediately take her to the hospital where she is literally belted to the bed at night so that she cannot wander. From time to time, she lapses into the memories that define the second narrative arc. These memories are related to the reader in the present tense, as though they were actually happening simultaneously with the present-day narrative.

Hagar spends most of her life being defined by the men to whom she is connected. She is the third child of Jason Currie, a successful self-made businessman who has built a thriving shop up from nothing. Her mother died in Hagar's birth, and thus Hagar is raised by a housekeeper whom she calls "Auntie Doll." From an early age, it is clear Hagar takes after her stern, calculating, emotionless father; this is evidenced in the way Hagar does not even cry when her father gives her a beating. Hagar's two older brothers, on the other hand, show less aptitude for business, although their father takes pains to teach each of them the basics of the trade. Although Hagar superficially takes after her father, she is also aware of how his loveless nature has shaped her own icy demeanor.

Hagar is neither particularly maternal nor nurturing. When one of her brothers is injured by falling into a frozen pond, she refuses to nurse him through his subsequent illness on his

deathbed. Later, Hagar is also a distant mother toward her two sons, unable to show emotion when Marvin, for instance, goes off to fight in World War I.

The reader can infer that Jason Currie is grooming Hagar to run and possibly inherit his family business. She—not her surviving elder brother—is sent to a finishing school in the East. Upon her return, her father wants her to keep the account books in the store. This job is vital to the success of the company. But instead of interpreting the gesture as an expression of trust and respect, Hagar regards it as her father's effort to control her. Hagar exclaims that she wants to be a schoolteacher instead, displeasing her father. And then, in a fit of rebellion, Hagar chooses to marry the crude and lower-class Brampton "Bram" Shipley. Jason Currie retaliates by cutting Hagar out of his life. Hagar, who was previously positioned to run the store, ends up not receiving any inheritance from him whatsoever.

Hagar's marriage with Bram turns out to be very unhappy. Bram speaks poorly, blows his nose with his fingers, and has the tendency to go out drinking with his lower-class friends. He is not particularly hardworking, doing only enough work to survive. Whether Hagar or their two sons are well provided for is not a factor in his decision-making. However, Hagar is physically attracted to Bram, at least initially, because of his handsome appearance, his skill as a dancer, and the fact he seems somewhat forbidden from Jason Currie's perspective. Bram also occasionally shows himself to have a warmth of character, demonstrated when he is heartbroken after his horse disappears. Bram's character creates a difficult predicament for Hagar, who feels it nearly impossible to relate to someone so unrefined. She often feels embarrassed by Bram and realizes her marriage has made it so she is no longer regarded as the highly-esteemed "Jason Currie's daughter." The couple mostly spends their time apart, except at night when Bram frequently comes to Hagar for somewhat forceful sexual encounters. The two eventually separate, and Hagar leaves town to live on the coast as a housekeeper, taking her younger son, John, with her.

As John grows to adulthood, Hagar starts to turn into her father. She resents that she cannot control her son, who eventually abandons her and returns to Manawaka, where he pairs up with a woman named Arlene, who is the daughter of Hagar's childhood friend, Lottie Dreiser. Hagar visits her hometown after hearing news of Bram's poor health. After Hagar has stayed with him for a few weeks, Bram passes away; Hagar decides to stay a few weeks more to provide company for John. But the tragedies continue as John and Arlene are killed in a car accident. Upon hearing news of her son's death, Hagar is unable to show any emotion. Later, when she is alone, she cannot weep at all. She believes she has turned to stone metaphorically, like the large, blind stone angel in the church cemetery.

In the present day, Hagar runs away when she overhears Marvin discussing the possibility of placing her in a nursing home. She associates the nursing home not only with death but also with being controlled. Having spent a lifetime controlling others and getting her own way, Hagar does not wish to become a patient. But Marvin and Doris are no longer capable of caring for her in their home.

Hagar wanders around for a while at Shadow Point, reminiscing, and she meets a stranger named Murray Lees who also spends the night in the abandoned cannery. They speak for a while, and Hagar shares some of her experiences. Later in the morning, the stranger sneaks away to bring help. After a night outdoors, Hagar is sick and suffering from the cold and damp. Marvin and Doris immediately bring Hagar to the hospital—a worse destination than even the dreaded nursing home.

Marvin, Hagar's surviving son, visits her in the hospital. Aware that she is dying, she finally apologizes to him and starts to express her feelings, even forming relationships with the other patients in the hospital. She drinks a glass of water and her train of thought cuts out, leaving the reader to imagine what is next.

## **UNIT-3 The Grass is Singing**

### **Character List**

#### **Mary Turner**

Raised in poverty with a drunkard father who would spend any savings on alcohol, Mary manages to make a life for herself based on her intelligence and diligence; she lives in a boardinghouse for girls and works ably as a secretary in town. She falls for Dick Turner and leaves with him to his farm. On the farm, she is oppressed both by the isolation and by her husband's lack of success. This frustration channels into her latent feelings of racism, which leads to a strange inverted attraction when the African man she beat begins to take care of her. She eventually loses her mind and is murdered by him.

#### **Dick Turner**

Brought up in an impoverished family in a suburb of Johannesburg in South Africa, Dick Turner worked several jobs before giving up plans to study to become a veterinarian and traveling to Southern Rhodesia to live independently on a farm of his own. He incurs debts that he never manages to pay off while managing to stave off bankruptcy. He feels intensely lonely and takes Mary as a wife to assuage these feelings. After Mary gets into an illicit relationship with Moses and Charlie Slatter practically forces Dick to leave his farm, Dick goes insane at the prospect of being anywhere else.

#### **Charlie Slatter**

A farmer neighboring Dick Turner's farm, Charlie Slatter represents the cruelly extractive kind of colonialist farmer. He treats his workers poorly and exhausts his soil to make money quickly. He becomes rich after the First World War and hopes to become even richer by buying up Turner's farm and expanding to other businesses.

#### **Tony Marston**

An idealistic young British man who has come to Southern Rhodesia to make money. Charlie Slatter assigns him to work under Dick Turner for a time so that he can then take care of Turner's farm for a time. He is disturbed by seeing Mary allowing Moses to dress her. After Mary's murder, he gives up on farming and goes to Northern Rhodesia to mine.

#### **Moses**

An extraordinarily intelligent and strong African laborer in the employ of the Turners, first in the fields and then in their house. When trying to supervise the field workers, Mary becomes infuriated at him for his speaking English and looking at her with a vaguely mocking look; she whips him in the face, but he does not retaliate. Later as a houseboy, he takes care of an

increasingly deranged Mary. He is fired by Mary under the compulsion of Tony Martson and then kills Mary.

## **Sergeant Denham**

The police sergeant who arrives on the scene of Mary Turner's murder only to find that Charlie Slatter has gotten there first. He shares Charlie's feeling of horror and disgust at the thought that Mary could have had relations with Moses.

## **Mrs. Slatter**

Charlie Slatter's wife. She tries to be neighborly to the Turners, but her offers to entertain or help them are rebuffed again and again by Mary.

## **Unnamed farmer**

An unnamed farmer taunts Dick for losing his crops to drought, calling him "Jonah."

## **Samson**

The first native houseboy whom Mary encounters.

## **Native policemen**

Native policemen arrive at the scene of Mary's murder but defer to Charlie Slatter because he is white.

## **Summary**

### **Chapter 1**

A newspaper announces the murder of Mary Turner at her farm. Charlie Slatter, a neighboring farmer, arrives at the Turner farm shortly after the murder with the police sergeant; they find that Moses, the native houseboy, has given himself up as the murderer. Dick Turner, Mary's husband, has lost his sanity; and Tony Marston, a young man hired to take over Dick's farm for a few months, senses some unspoken terror among the Southern Rhodesian white men.

### **Chapter 2**

Mary Turner grows up in an impoverished family in Southern Rhodesia. She moves to the town and works well but is not able to associate well with other people, nor to marry. She decides to marry Dick Turner, a farmer, and leave the town to move to his farm.

### **Chapter 3**

Mary tries to acclimate herself to the rough life on the farm. She and Dick try making love, but Mary is put off by the experience. Dick feels guilty about this.



## Chapter 4

Mary notices that Dick speaks Kitchen Kaffir with the native house-servants and field workers. She tries to study the language herself so that she too may command the natives.

## Chapter 5

With too much time on her hands at home while Dick is working in the fields, Mary embroiders and tries to do the most she can with the house. However, she finds herself in constant tension with the native houseboys, whom she berates and treats so poorly that they keep quitting.

## Chapter 6

Dick gets the idea to try beekeeping to make more money, but this fails. More ideas similarly fail, much to Mary's exasperation. She escapes from the farm back to the town but is unable to take back her old job. Dick arrives and takes her back to the farm.

## Chapter 7

Dick contracts malaria and becomes bedridden for a time, during which Mary has to take over supervision of the fieldwork. She is harsh to the workers and even goes so far as to whip one in the face.

## Chapter 8

Mary convinces Dick to grow a larger tobacco crop to try to make a lot of money in one go, but a drought ruins their hopes. Dick brings in Moses, the worker whom Mary whipped, to work as the houseboy, much to Mary's distress.

## Chapter 9

Having lost faith in the farm, Mary becomes lethargic and finds herself falling under the power of Moses, who looks after her when she is in a weakened state.

## Chapter 10

Charlie Slatter, a neighboring farmer, pays the Turners a visit to try to convince Dick to see him his farm. Though his original motivation was to make more money, upon noticing the strange relationship Mary has with Moses, he practically compels Dick to leave his farm for a time. Charlie sets up Tony Marston, a young man fresh from Britain, to watch over the farm.

## Chapter 11

Knowing little about life outside of farming, Dick loses his will to live as the time for departure nears. Tony, who has started living on the farm, stumbles upon Moses dressing Mary and demands that Moses leave. Moses leaves but then returns and kills Mary, who has, in a dream-like state, wandered out of the house at night to meet him.

## UNIT- 4      IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN

*In the Castle of My Skin* is a semiautobiographical novel by Caribbean author George Lamming, first published in 1970. The novel follows in the footsteps of other Caribbean narratives, a **style** of literature that initially grew out of the disconnect between an old world (Africa) and a new world (the Americas). Many Caribbean authors attempted to explain, disrupt, query, fuse, or simply explore dual consciousnesses brought about by traditions coming into contact with new ways of viewing the world and the self. Lamming's **narrative** is considered mostly autobiographical because Lamming himself made the passage from Barbados to America, like some of his novel's characters. Moreover, the struggles and lessons of his childhood parallel those of G.'s, one of the novel's characters. The story is told from both G.'s first-person **perspective** and that of an **omniscient** third-person narrator. *In the Castle of My Skin* riffs off of Lamming's childhood by sometimes fictionalizing his memories and recollections. Themes of collective consciousness versus individual will, language, racism, colonialism, education, and **tragedy** are explored, with historical events like World War II, the Middle Passage, and cataclysmic floods in Barbados grounding the text.

*In the Castle of My Skin* begins during a flood on G.'s ninth birthday. Though **G.** is crestfallen, the villagers consider the rain an auspicious event and a blessing from God. G.'s sullen stance underscores not only his anger at another lackluster birthday but also an early narrative theme: the villagers' dreams and wishes are often vulnerable to larger forces at work. The beginning chapters also set up another major theme, which is the supremacy of collective consciousness over individual will.

From the very beginning, G.'s village, known as Creighton's Village, is described in collective terms. When G.'s mother sings, for instance, the entire neighborhood joins in. Village scenes depict people mulling about in groups, and everyone knows what their neighbors are doing. Despite this collectivism, G. and his friends engage in many activities that force them to grow up individually and collectively. For example, they spend an entire day at the beach and talk about marriage, death, and mental illness, and later talk about America and religion on another outing. Though the boys don't have the proper language to express themselves fully, these instances highlight how the boys are maturing and educating themselves, especially in the face of a colonial education that leaves much to be desired.

It is significant that *In the Castle of My Skin* doesn't utilize a traditional plot structure. This fact has rendered the novel confusing, or hard to assess, for many critics. Lamming himself acknowledges that his novel doesn't fit the traditional British or American style of writing. There isn't a main character, per se, which means there isn't an individual consciousness to tap into. Moreover, there isn't a definable plot to follow to a concrete end. Lamming's narrative is the Caribbean narrative, which itself is a product of fractured consciousness. This style of writing attempts to shed light on the lives of the poor, including those often omitted by canonic literature. Additionally, this style of writing underscores that the poor it often portrays are the black poor, who are a group of people with a rich, diverse background, but a background that has been systematically whitewashed by the dominating culture. As such, *In the Castle of My Skin* upholds this tradition by eschewing easy, formulaic writing and critiquing.

Despite the collective consciousness at the center of the narrative, characters like G. and **Trumper** shine through in their attempts at exploring identity. Interestingly, these

attempts lead them to an identity that is once again part of a collective consciousness: the Negro race. When Trumper returns from America at the end of the novel, he now realizes that he's a part of a greater cause: the Negro race. He then implores G. to educate himself on the political ramifications of this. Their home of Creighton's Village has been decimated by war and greed, and Trumper sees the wolves who parade in sheep's clothing only because of his knowledge of discrimination and racism, and how the world works. The narrative's suggestion, then, is that people who know who they are in the grand scheme of things, and who have a group to help them fight injustice, might have a say in who they become and in how they're treated by others. Though trite, *In the Castle of My Skin* hits home the proverbial saying that "knowledge is power."

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