

Exploring Woman's Quest for Freedom in Margaret Laurence's Novel *A Jest of God*

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ABSTRACT

A Jest of God (1966) is second novel of the Manawaka series of novels written by Margaret Laurence, an illustrious Canadian novelist. This research paper explores the elements of feminism in *A Jest of God*. The protagonist, Rachel Cameron, is a thirty four year old sinister school teacher teaching in a primary school. After the demise of her father she comes home discontinuing her university education to take care her senile and ailing mother. The novel delineates the plight of women in the androcentric set up. The protagonist is reared to be stereotype woman. Her mother believes virginity is a precious possession of woman and considers unmarried mother as fallen woman. Due to her bond with mother Rachel lives in the spaces –her house, school and inner self. She becomes victim of inferiority complex, feelings of insecurity and alienation. She struggles to achieve freedom and identity. Her affair and sexual relation with Nick, a teacher from different community during summer holiday is a step towards liberation. She changes her attitude towards Calla, her fellow teacher and approves Calla's independence and her critical opinion of stereotype women's fashion. She decides to move to Vancouver with her mother where her sister Stacey lives. Finally, the protagonist achieves freedom and asserts her identity.

Keywords : Alienation, Freedom, Fractured self, Identity, Inferiority, Passivity.

Margaret Laurence is one of the greatest Canadian novelists. Born in 1926 as Jean Margaret Wynys in the town of Neepawa, Manitoba, she had wide experience of living in Africa, England and Canada. She has left lasting imprint to literature through her novels especially Manawaka cycle of novels: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). These books have deep impact on the younger generation of writers in Canada, particularly, the voice they give to women. In these novels, she portrays strong women striving for self- realisation living in a male dominated world. She focuses on the fixes of women and their efforts to achieve individuality. Her protagonists in these novels struggle to achieve inner freedom and all undergo rites of passage. Hagar wrestles with pride, Rachel with fear and Stacey with frustration.

A Jest of God, the Governor General Award winning novel, is the second among the five Manawaka novels, set in the small prairie town of Manawaka in Manitoba, Canada. The protagonist of the novel, Rachel is a thirty four year old unmarried woman teaching in a primary school for fourteen years in Manawaka. She got her early education in the same school. She was admitted in the university for higher education. But after the

demise of her father she has to discontinue her university education and return home to look after her senile and ailing mother. She reveals, "I could not finish university after Dad's death. The money wasn't there.(18) Rachel Cameron was brought up in the androcentric set up. She lives in the limited spaces: the school room, the apartment she lives with her mother and her own inside self. Naill Cameron, her father was the undertaker of a mortuary which is in the basement of the apartment where they live. As a child she was not allowed to enter the mortuary. So fear and mystery haunted her mind. She discloses it, "It was in those rooms on the ground floor there, where I was told never to go, that my father lived away his life." (20) She says again, "The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed... The silent people are there, lipsticked and rouged, powdered whitely like clowns." (25) Her father passed most of time in the mortuary as if he were the king among dead bodies "lying there among, lying in state, king over them." (25) He spent less time with his wife and daughters. The relation between her parents is not compatible as the mother feels embarrassed at the profession Mr Cameron upholds.

Rachel grew up within limitations and her home was most imprisoning place. She was prohibited from mixing and playing with children from different communities. Her mother used to say, "Don't play with those Galician youngsters" (69). To Mrs Cameron Ukrainians are Galicians or Bohunks. When she joins her school as a teacher her social life is almost non-existent. She is afraid of her principal. She has her colleague Calla with whom she has complicated friendship. She has casual interactions with some people who used to attend the bridge party organised by her mother. Her only older sister Stacey moves into conventional societal marriage and motherhood, and lives with her husband and four children in the city, and rarely comes to Manawaka. Thus Rachel lives almost a lone life.

Sexual taboos prevail in the town of Manawaka. May Cameron narrates how Mrs Stewart's daughter, Cassie Stewart who works in a hardware store, brought shame to her family by delivering twins as an unwed girl. She reacts, "What a heartbreak for her mother. Imagine. *Twins*." "I can't fathom the thoughtlessness of some girls. She might consider her mother, and how it'll be for her." (64) May Cameron expresses satisfaction that her daughters are not like Mrs. Stewart's daughter. She observes, "I thank my lucky stars I never had a moment's worry with either of my daughters." (64) She has a sermon for girls that virginity is, "*A woman's most precious possession*". (96) The protagonist has preserved it for thirty four years.

May Cameron represents conservative attitude of Canadian society towards virginity. The traditional view assumes that sex belongs to marriage and sexual relations outside marriage are considered socially unacceptable. (Dong-.271) Rachel as an unmarried woman finds it difficult to admit her own sexuality because the society where she lives has placed sexual freedom inside the boundaries of marriage. Rachel has internalised the conventional rules of the society.

Rachel leads a life of alienation as she feels difficulty in meeting the demands of society and the demands her psyche. She has to play the role of a daughter, sister and teacher as per the societal norms of the small town. The incompatible home atmosphere and lack of filial interactions have negative impact on Rachel's personality and

her psyche. She has almost lost her positive feelings and self-appraisal and power of self-image. Sandra Djwa aptly observes, “There is a sense in which *A Jest of God* is a case study of pathological fear.” (Djwa 48)

Rachel is left with a fractured self since she has to play stereotype ascribed to women in a phallogocentric world. Socialization of her femininity results in sense of inferiority. Due to her bond with her mother, she apes the role which women have to perform in the male dominated contemporary society. She expects support from others and it is feminine quality. Being marginalised as second sex in sexist culture she suffers from inferiority psychological frame of mind. She seeks happiness from the support of male. She is not afraid when she is with Nick (male). As she discloses it, “Right now, I’m fantastically happy. He did want me. And I wasn’t afraid. I think that when he is with me, I don’t feel any fear. Or hardly any. Soon I won’t any at all.” (100)

Rachel certainly possesses female dilemma. Howells comments that *A Jest of God* reveals a “woman’s dilemma caught within inherited codes” (Howells, 95). Kenneth James Hughes observes about her femininity: “Her basic insecurity and passivity, her financial anxiety, her sexual vulnerability in the event of pregnancy, her responsibility for her mother are all traditional dilemmas.” (Hughes-48)

Rachel’s femininity is conditioned by the phallogocentric society. She adopts her mother’s voice and is critical of the Tabernacle décor gaudy as Calla follows Tabernacle church. She is also critical of the Calla’s unconventional dress, her religious fervour and approach to sexual issues. She observes, “Well poor Calla, it is her fault that she had no dress sense. I look quite smart in comparison.” (10) Her observation on Calla is conditioned by the society which emphasises sex demarcation. However, her attitude towards Calla changes after her affair with Nick and his desertion of Rachel without informing her. She appreciates Calla’s independence and individuality. She moves to Calla’s home and seeks her suggestion to overcome her dilemma that she experiences after the affair with Nick. True to her nature Calla gives her valuable suggestion. She also offers Rachel help in case of her pregnancy and birth of a child. She shares her anxiety regarding her expected pregnancy as she has missed her period for a month and hesitation in consulting her family Doctor Raven. However, after examination it is discovered to be a benign tumour in the uterus.

Rachel is handicapped of fulfilling the demands of her life because of the ties of her mother on her. Her mother is overbearing and demanding, and always questions her every move and loads with a sense of guilt. Having lived under her mother’s thumb for long time, she feels insecure, and feels that there is no opportunity to change it. The novelist writes about Rachel, “Rachel’s prison is so hard for her to get out of because it is made mostly from virtues gone sour: filial devotion, self-sacrifice, the concern for appearance advocated by St Paul, a sense of duty, the desire to avoid hurting others, and the wish to be loved.” (213-14) Thus, Rachel is trapped in her claustrophobic life of taking care of her aging mother in a small prairie town which is full of prejudice and patriarchal value system. Simultaneously, the conservative society of Manawaka has taught her to repress her feelings. That is why she wants to escape society in her dreams. In her dreams she dreams her lover either in forest or in a beach. Thus the locale is a peaceful place, “it has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen.” (18) She is conscious of double perception inherent in her self.

Rachel has affair with her childhood school mate Nick Kazlick in one summer holiday. Nick is the son of milkman Hestor Kazlick and is one year older than Racael. He is a high school teacher in another town who comes to Manawaka during holidays to meet his parents. Both meet by chance and decide to visit a movie, share a kiss and relations strengthen. Rachel loses her virginity to him in a field. Her encounter with Nick strengthens her attractions towards Nick. Sex with Nick inculcates inner peace and confidence in her. She gradually breaks previous inhibitions. She becomes more passionate towards this relation than Nick is. As Rachel grows in sexually confident she becomes more reliant on Nick. This affair creates a space for Rachel to rebel against mother's rule and to experience her sexuality. By entering love affairs with Nick, an Ukrainian Canadian Rachel is able to escape the traditional ethics of society of small town. She breaks her mother's inhibition. Mathew Martine argues that "through her encounter with Nick, Rachel herself begins to restructure her desire away from phallus" (61). This life altering affair with Nick is a step towards freedom. Nick, no doubt, betrays her. He tells her that he is married, but his parents reveal that he is never married, and he leaves Manawaka without informing her. One reality of this affair is secret kept uninformed to her mother. This short affair propels to change and transforms her self. In one early in the morning at four she moves down stairs and knocks the doors of Japonica Funeral Chapel, the prohibited place when her father was the undertaker of the mortuary. Rachel recollects her father's words, "This place is no place for you." (126) Her unexpected visit astonishes Hector Jonas, the new owner of the mortuary.

Rachel is an awakened individual through sexual act with independence and freedom. She gains vision of her self, discovers her sexuality and gains strength to rebel the strong norms of her mother. It is also true that she experiences fear, pain and dilemma and threat of possible pregnancy caused by this affair. She undergoes emotional stress due to her supposed pregnancy as she has missed her period for a month, and strict social stigma. She is afraid of bringing her mother shame and becoming a social outcast. She ponders: "What will become of me? It [the baby] can't be borne. Not by me. What am I going to do?" (166) She thinks over the possible after effect of this progress in her life. When the truth is revealed to her mother she will be deeply shocked. In this state she debates of committing suicide, even empties a bottle of pills in her hand but ultimately throws them out of the window. But her internal defiance of her mother's view also revealed when she thinks of pregnancy as "most wanted" (165), despite her mother's stereotyping of an unmarried mother as fallen woman (64).

Margaret Laurence writes about Rachel's achievement of gradual freedom from fear and limitations. She "tries to break the handcuffs of her own past, but she is self-perspective enough to recognise that for her freedom from the shakledom of the ancestors can be total. Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial victory or, looked at in another way, is a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival." (Laurence 21)

In the beginning of the novel Rachel is afraid of her school principal Willard Siddey and does not question his abilities as the head and authority figure, But in the closing part of the novel she sees him as her equal. The protagonist reveals this, "Sometimes I was happy here, and sometimes not, and often I was afraid of him, and still am, although I see now this was unnecessary as my mothers' fear of fate." (204) Similarly, she constructs her

new identity. She differentiate herself and her parents by taking responsibility of her own life, "Whatever, it was that happened with either of them, their mysteries remains theirs... I have my own" (206)"

Conclusion : Being confident and awakened Rachel realises her position as the head of the family, capable of taking her decisions. She decides to leave Manawaka without taking her mother's suggestion and moves for Vancouver where her sister lives. She has got a new job there. Despite her mother's reluctance to leave Manawaka, Rachel prevails upon her mother to accept her decision. While persuading her mother she is not offensive or hard rather she is sympathetic and patronising. Rachel assures her mother that it will be all right there and she can see also her grandchildren there. She tells her mother, "I am a mother now" (203). It reveals that Rachel realises the responsibility of her mother's care as a mother or guardian has. She gains confidence and knowledge. The acquisition of this knowledge prepares her to combat imperialistic and colonising forces symbolised by her mother and society. She has her individuality and will play the role of a mother, "Beside me sleeps my elderly child...." (208). Rachel finds her voice. She declares, "I will be different, I will remain the same" (209). At the end she escapes conservativeness of her mother, the debris of broken love affairs and emptiness of life. The novel ends with boarding of both Rachel and her mother a bus bound for Vancouver. Thus at the end Rachel makes her identity and achieves freedom.

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