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**Pronouncing and Denouncing Motherhood:
Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God***

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Abstract

Patriarchy institutionalizes 'Motherhood' and confers 'Power', especially, upon a 'married mother'. Many a time, the forces of patriarchy are unleashed through powerful mothers and result into tyrannizing, alienating and annihilating the female child. The result is also a daughter's confinement to a rigid patriarchal code of behaviour and of course, in some cases, there is an attempt to fight against this form of patriarchy and create one's own space. However, in each case the protest is unique as the female individual may perceive the power of motherhood in a unique manner. Some female individuals may subvert the same system to their advantage and search for their identity and assert their selves but there may be some who directly denounce this sort of 'motherhood' and celebrate their free selves.

Key Words: Motherhood, patriarchy, *Inside the Haveli*, *A Jest of God*

In ***A Jest of God*** by Margaret Laurence, Rachel, an unmarried 34 year old teacher, intimidated by powerful mothers around her, tries to subvert the system to her advantage and to assert her Self as a mother and thereby become her own person. But Lakshmi, in ***Inside the Haveli*** by Rama Mehta breaks free from the patriarchal confines of motherhood and creates her own space without the support of anybody, especially that of a man and she is successful in asserting her Self though she has to pay a very high price for it.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt at studying and analyzing the two novels in order to bring out how patriarchal motherhood functions as an institution, exercising control over individuals and how at times, it annihilates the female being and thwarts every attempt at assertion of the female Self. It is also proposed to bring out the confining power of motherhood. there is also an attempt at

showing the strategies adopted by Rachel and Lakshmi and there is an attempt also at comparing these two female rebels on the basis of their unique strategies in their search for identity. It will also be studied whether female movement in these novels is real or a fake one.

Daphne, in her article 'Women's space: Inside the Haveli: incarceration or insurrection' stated that 'space is a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, a power-geometry of difference'.

A feminist reading of *Inside the Haveli*, brings out the unreleased energy of Rama Mehta's female characters, namely, Geeta and Lakshmi. The researcher proposes to bring out Mehta's attitude to female space and a female rebellion with specific reference to Lakshmi, a maid in the haveli. It is aimed to bring out how patriarchal thought endorses on women the possibility of movement only to control it by

investing women's stability with moral values.

Lakshmi, a married maid, aged fifteen conforms to the patriarchal norms initially but tries to search for her independent identity in the latter part of the novel by 'moving away' from the traditionally specified confines and as a result of this, with a clear understanding of her Self and her belief in her capacity to take risk and master the situation, poses a threat to the 'patriarchal norms' represented by the haveli. Lakshmi's deviation from the path of femininity demythologizes as J. Usher would put it, 'the traditional solutions like self-sacrifice and romance'. It is even in the face of difficulty that Lakshmi disobeys the law of patriarchy and therefore, rejects the fairytale images of women and escapes the legacy of Cinderella and Snowwhite.

Inside the Haveli is not only a story of Geeta, who is a rebel and conformist, but it is also a story of Lakshmi who has to face internal as well as interpersonal problems. Though Lakshmi does not 'care what anyone said' she has to marry Gangaram, a servant in the haveli since it is decided by the mistress of the haveli. Lakshmi finds 'everything wrong with Gangaram' and complains 'about his temper and tattered clothes' and 'blames the mistress for marrying her to him'.

No explanation by the older servants like Pari or Dhapu 'convinces her that she was fortunate in having Gangaram as a husband' and therefore, 'she goes her own way, doing work when told to, otherwise sitting around day-dreaming'. Lakshmi is able to see through 'motherhood' and knows how it can be exploited to a woman's advantage', of course, as a way

of retaliation. So, she thinks of a strategy to subvert the system which confers upon woman some status when she becomes a mother and otherwise, oppresses her. Lakshmi says, 'I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and comfort ... if only women were considered unclean for longer what fun it would be'. Thus, she, in a way, mocks at motherhood and the so-called uncleanliness attached to it by patriarchy and therefore, she is even ready to be 'unclean' so as to get rest. One can understand the extent to which the burden of hard work for a girl of fifteen may lead.

According to another maid, Lakshmi is 'impossible to please'. Being aware of her rights, Lakshmi is annoyed when she does not get her massage on time even when she pays for it. A gift of an old sari from the haveli enrages her because she cannot be fooled easily as the sari 'won't stand even two washes'.

Being thus a restless soul, Lakshmi certainly has a potential for rebellion, movement and defiance. There comes a turning point in her life in the form of a present from Heeralal, a driver. She perceives it as an insult to her. Nevertheless, she is 'misunderstood and mistaken' which is the result of the patriarchal interpretation of women. The incident results into Lakshmi's husband losing his temper and calling her 'a rotten woman, a woman worse than a street woman'. He catches her by her neck as according to him, 'she is dirty'.

Lakshmi who is just like Eliza in Pygmalion, is led to react very defiantly and is not to bear any insult this time. At night, she 'hears her husband's accusing voice, 'you are a street woman. I never

want to see your face again. You are a street woman'. As a result of this, 'her lips tighten and her body burns with rage. She smiles defiantly and leaves the haveli', leaving her child there only and thereby denouncing patriarchal motherhood and defying the confinement and control accompanying motherhood.

In the latter part of the novel, one sees the recurrent attempts on the part of the patriarchal haveli to bring Lakshmi back, the major aim being saving the fame of the haveli and the pretext is that her child needs Lakshmi. But Lakshmi does not give in once she has broken away from her confined existence as a wife and mother. She is defamed, rumours regarding her stay with various men are heard. Yet Lakshmi boldly refuses to 'retreat'. She tells Pari, 'I will not come back. Never! I will starve but never return to the haveli... I will show my husband that I am not a street woman either... Heeralal is a thief, a rascal... I know you all. For the rest of my life you will poke your fingers at me and say, 'that bad charactered woman. She enticed Heeralal to give her gifts. She would do anything for a sari'. I know your sweet words now don't mean anything... I will never, never return to the haveli to be taunted and jeered at...'

Lakshmi's deserting the child in the haveli also can be interpreted as her strategy to denounce patriarchal motherhood and also to teach a lesson to her husband, the patriarch who according to her 'should control his long, poisonous tongue'.

Lakshmi is alienated and her annihilation continues even after a period of fifteen years. She is not invited for her daughter's wedding as according to the master of the haveli, her presence will spoil her

daughter's future and since her rejection of motherhood has made her a 'bad woman'. The double standards of patriarchy are exposed in the sense that the patriarchal Haveli is more bothered about fame than it is bothered about motherly love which the people in the Haveli once tried to exploit in order to impose retreat upon Lakshmi. So, Lakshmi becomes an agonizing mother who can only give a 'shagun to her daughter without revealing her identity'. The author shows Lakshmi in a pathetic light and thereby points at the risk involved in such a denouncement and defiance of motherhood as Lakshmi's.

It may be said that Lakshmi has courage to be different and her movement is not at all a fake one. She leads a self supporting life, she does not elope with a man and does not at all seek the support of any man. So, her movement is not from one patriarchal plane to another but she creates her own space indigenously as she knows very much that patriarchal ideology blames not man but a woman and as a wandering woman that she is, she is to be labeled as 'evil' and not an 'angel'. She is not at all bothered about any label as she has asserted her Self though by rejecting her role as a wife and a mother.

Thus, the author seems to inflict a sort of punishment upon Lakshmi, since she has flouted the rules of womanhood, wifhood and motherhood in a patriarchal frame of reference. Lakshmi's movement is not at all justified or there is no glorification at all of her search for identity which she completes indigenously. She is shown in a pathetic light only to warn against the consequences of such a loud rebellion as hers.

In *A Jest of God*, Laurence deals with a woman's search for identity against the backdrop of a rigid patriarchal world. The author also interrogates the traditional social institutions like marriage, family and motherhood. She also concentrates upon the power of the institution of motherhood as an imprisoning structure and also an annihilating as well as an empowering force. 'Rachel is infantilized and subjected to scrutiny'. Laurence seems to address the debasement of the institution of motherhood prevalent in any patriarchal society and tries to show how the female protagonist subverts the same to assert herself.

In this novel, the author has created a possibility that motherhood or being in the position of a mother can help a person to be in the position of power and to be able to assert oneself.

The protagonist, Rachel is thirty-four years old, unmarried woman who is 'locked in a pattern of avoidance'. She is a teacher and has a very low self-esteem. She has not gained any confidence through her education or through her profession as a teacher. She is always self-conscious and is a muted being. Rachel is completely silenced and is treated as a child or a non-person by people in her environment.

The novel is full of internal as well as interpersonal conflicts which lead to mental trauma for the protagonist. Rachel embodies the conflict between 'speech and silence' as observed by Karen Stein.

Rachel is surrounded by powerful mothers like James' mother, Mrs. Doherty and her own nagging, whiny and dominating mother who tyrannizes her, uses controlling tactics and before whom

Rachel infantilized and powerless, has to speak timidly, apologetically:

"I'm sorry, Mother. I just—"

"You know how glad I am, dear, when you go out. You might have mentioned to me, that's all. It's not too much to ask, surely..."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, it's quite all right, dear...I'll be just dandy. Don't you worry about me a speck. I'll be perfectly all right. If you'd just reach down my pills for me from the medicine cabinet. As long as...I can get them handily, in case anything happens. I'm sure I'll be fine. You go ahead and enjoy yourself."

.....

"Maybe I shouldn't go." (72-3)

Helen Buss argues that May Cameron gains power through manipulative devices since she has 'no real power over the world'.

In the initial stage, of her development, the societal influence and expectations are very important for Rachel. The observant eye of the society bothers the self-conscious Rachel. She has understood the patriarchal ideology of the society which institutionalizes motherhood and approves of a woman as a whole being only if she is a mother. So, for Rachel, to assert her individuality, there does not seem to be any other alternative than to become a mother, 'league of matriarchs. Mothers of the world, unite' (p.28), as if, to foster this idea in her mind.

Rachel's first attempt to be her own person is psychological motherhood. James is Rachel's student and can easily become the object of Rachel's motherly love. But

Rachel's subservience silences her desire for compassion as she acts as Willard's agent of discipline. However, there is a termination in the relationship as Rachel is torn between her two images, a teacher and a mother.

The school vacation creates a possibility of Rachel's biological motherhood because she meets Nick Kazlik, an old acquaintance and has an affair with him. This affair 'creates a space for Rachel to rebel against her mother's rules, and to experience her sexuality'. She wants to defy the fixed idea about herself as an angel and she also wants to break away from the feminine mystique. So, without any hesitation, she proceeds towards the confirmation of her biological motherhood. According to Laurence, 'Her reaching out is very important, not the sex at all' (p.14).

Rachel has to become reckless in order to 'demystify' herself and she is determined to do so: 'I'd like to let him know that I can want too. I'm thirty-four. That's not old. I haven't fossilized'. Now I really do want him. Now I would do anything'(pp. 89-90). Therefore, during their meeting, she is determined 'not to disclose her virginity or let him know about her' (p.111). She employs her knowledge of women, 'a woman's most precious possession is her body and her enigmatic self' (p.111). She intentionally wants to lose 'her reputation, to divest herself of it as though it were an oxen yoke, to burn it to ashes and scatter them to the wind'(p.114). Her suspicion about her pregnancy is shocking to her but her meeting with Hector, her father's acquaintance, exposes her to a new reality about her father and the way he lived the kind of life 'he wanted most' and since she

has taken after her father, Rachel at this phase in her life, becomes a courageous woman, her choice seems to be becoming clearer to her than it was before and therefore, she says to Nick, 'Nick, give it to me. Nick, if I had a child, I would like it to be yours .Give me my children' (p.181).

Pregnancy, for Rachel, becomes, on the one hand, necessary to define her sexuality but on the other, it is to bring stigma and shame upon mother, child and the entire family because it is 'as one thinks of disaster'(p.196) and therefore, Rachel finds it difficult 'to do anything against it that would kill her as well'(p.196). But as she is full of contradictions, she thinks: 'it can't be borne. Not by me. What am I going to do?...The only fact is that it cannot be allowed to be' (p.197).

As Rachel is tyrannized by her mother and has been locked into the rigid patriarchal code of proper behaviour, she is terrified and her dilemma or trauma intensifies. On the one hand, she wants to be the mother to assert her Self and on the other, as she is unmarried, she is worried and says, 'what will become of me?'(p. 201).

But this time, Rachel is being determined, courageous and decisive : 'I am not going to lose it. It is mine. I have a right to it. That is the only thing I know with any certainty.'(p.213) Having decided courageously to have the baby, Rachel creates a possibility of a situation of being an unmarried mother. Rachel's 'readiness to do anything' is not rewarded. Dr. Raven confirms the absence of her pregnancy and the presence of a tumour which will have to be operated. According to many critics, this tumour signifies death and Rachel survives this confrontation with death and though she is mortified because her

expected pregnancy turns out only to be a tumour, she is physically healed and spiritually reborn: 'she is alive and she will now be different'. Rachel's story, as K. Stein states, 'starts as a tale of avoidance and becomes one of redemptive possibility'.

Of course, the agony is felt 'oh my God! I didn't bargain for this. Not this,' says Rachel. In order to achieve the readiness to give birth to the child, Rachel has undergone agony, suffering, trauma and has metaphorically as well as literally broken away from all the patriarchal confines and therefore, she asserts, 'it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else but have it.' (p.210)

The removal of the tumour is the removal of fear and death from Rachel's life. She is, as if, reborn. 'I'm the mother now', says Rachel (P.225). Though she has not literally become a mother, her coming to terms with her Self is evident in her decision to have the baby and the acceptance of the reality about her. Her acute denouncement of the patriarchal norms as well as her renunciation of the male support point to her self-reliance.

Rachel's last expression of her role as mother is the direct result of her metamorphosis. It validates the status of motherhood as powerful and affirming. Rachel has gained finality about her tone, she is quite able to argue against her mother, retaliate and refute her and besides, she is able to take all the decisions regarding herself as well as her immediate environment which includes, especially, her own mother. In her speech, she recurrently uses the word 'hush' to mute

her mother: "'Hush, hush now. Sh, sh. I know... Try not to cry. Here-here's your handkerchief. Blow your nose. Then you'll feel better. I'll get your sleeping pill now. It'll calm you.'"

"I don't want to move, Rachel. Please."

"I know. But we have to."

"But why? Why?"

"Because it's time."(p.235)

Rachel's final assertion of her self through motherhood is evident in her use of precision, in her use of the imperative, her decision to consider herself the head of the family, to initiate changes and in leaving her town and also in the way she compels her mother to accompany her in spite of her mother's reluctance. Rachel's assertion of herself has led to the reversal of the traditional roles of mother and daughter and also the 'fixed' mother-daughter relationship, in which, in most of the cases, the forces of patriarchy are unleashed through the mother. Therefore, Rachel has found 'within herself and within a women's subculture life-affirming values to counteract the deadness of the patriarchy'. Resultantly, Rachel has pushed her mother on the periphery, making her the 'other' and she herself has become the 'subject' by rescripting her relationship with her mother and becoming more powerful in relation to her mother. Of course, she is sympathetic to her mother but she is also very assertive regarding her decision to leave the confining world of Manawaka:

"Now please don't be silly, Rachel..."

"No. It's what we're going to do."

"I realize you might like somewhere else for a change...I can see it—a strain..."

“Yes. That’s right. It is.”

“What?”

“A strain. It is sometimes a strain... You want me to say no... But I can’t. I can’t do that now.”

“Rachel, you’re not yourself...”

“I’m so—I mean try. Try to listen.”

(198-99)

Rachel has thus gained voice by discarding her old self and becoming a mother herself, a person who always symbolized power and control for Rachel since her childhood. Resultantly, at the end of the novel, Rachel is a member of the dominant class and an individual in the position of authority or control.

To conclude, it may be said that:

1.1. Patriarchal motherhood works as an institution imposing upon an individual a 'specific code of behaviour'. 2. This motherhood, many a time, results into annihilation and alienation of the female child. 3. This sort of motherhood poses resistance against any attempt at self-assertion by a female child. 4. It functions as a confining power. 5. Rachel subverts the system, pronounces motherhood and

becomes a mother herself and resultantly, becomes her own person through a real movement. Rachel asserts her Self by symbolically becoming a mother i.e. a person in the position of authority. From a self-conscious, self-pitying being, she changes to a self-confident individual. Her reaching far out is important in her journey towards self-assertion through motherhood. Her movement is from innocence to experience. She becomes aware of ‘the external threats and means to resist them’.⁶ Lakshmi, absolutely, denounces patriarchal motherhood and its resultant confinement of the female Self and marks real movement. Her rebellion seems to be a loud one as compared to Rachel’s and she is able to assert her Self by rejecting her role as a wife and mother. She is not bothered about being labeled as ‘a street woman’ or ‘a bad woman’ since she is determined to be her own person through her self-assertion. Lakshmi’s denouncement of motherhood is quite pronounced one but Rachel’s strategy seems to be quite calculated one as she pronounces motherhood in order to search for her identity.

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