

Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*: An Exploration of Emancipation

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Abstract

Margret Laurence presents very minutely the plight of Rachel Cameron and her fight against male dominated society in *Just of God*. Rachel Cameron, a spinster, is the major female voice in the novel. The search of identity is brilliantly explored here.

Key Words: Dilemma, Identity, Fear, Liberation, Society

Margret Laurence explores very vividly the plight of Rachel Cameron and her fight against male dominated society in *Just of God*. Rachel Cameron, a spinster, is the major female voice in the novel. The search of identity is brilliantly explored here. The novel opens with Rachel Cameron's search for identity:

Rachel Cameron says:

She'll die.

For the want of the golden city,

She is handsome, she pretty,

She is the queen of the golden city.

(JD1)

The novel very clearly focuses on:

The inner world of feeling and sensibility that even the impact of feminist movements has generated more of poetic or lyrical articulation of the inner tensions of women that social documentary voicing the causes of women. (Rammamurthi 183)

Rachel Cameron spends her life with her widowed at Manawaka. Her mother has great control over her. As a child she is forbidden to play with any other child in Manawaka. At thirty-four, she defies her hypochondriac mother's ideological stronghold on her and decides to have an

affair with Nick Kazlik, of Norwegian roots. She is absolutely unable to establish a normal, friendly, relationship with other. The alter ego of her mother creates barrier in her attempt to develop relationship. Her mother displays both negative and positive attitude towards her. She says, "I don't mind dear-whatever you like." Obviously, her mother is not completely lenient regarding her wish. George Bowering observes that Rachel has been living in a strangely pendulum life (Bowering, 210) which oscillates between the world of social convention and her inner fantasy life. Her routine activities are quiet mundane and confined to her home, school and church. The story of Rachel's affair with Nick Kazlik focuses on male dominated patriarchal society. Rachel's dynamic relationship with others and the world is carved out of the suppression of her desire. It is the taboo of patriarchal society that the repressed sexual desires of a girl can only be satisfied under the cultural phallocratic construct. Rachel's visit to church not merely enables her to comprehend that it is not only women who suffer under oppression, but also males when it comes to

“desire”. The figure, which sees in the church:

A stained glass window shows a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain. (JD 47)

Moreover, the novelist examines the suffering and conflict of a woman. A Jest of God is framed almost entirely around children and the flow of time and emotion in and around them: and thus around mothers and mothering, fathers and fathering: and the relationships, often interchangeable, between those who mother are mothered, those who give and receive hurting and confront. (JD214)

Rachel’s elder sister, Stacey also contributes a significant role in Rachel’s causes to be a mother. In fact, it is Stacey who is a sort of an idea mother for Rachel. Stacey is married and has four healthy children and is completely enjoying her married life. Contrary to Rachel, she is bold. She does not shoulder any responsibility about her mother. But this is not the case with Rachel, so she utters: “My great mistake was in being born the younger. (JD 13)

Rachel’s first attempt at being a mother has been developed through James, one of her students. James Doherty is a sweet little boy and he enchants her. Rachel treats him as her object of motherly love. She is not neutral in her treatment of James and she bothers herself for that. To some extent she tries to be James’ mother but thinking that her liking for James might suffer him from his classmates and James’ mother Grace Doherty. She poses and rethinks over it and starts thinking in another way. Her second attempt to be a mother is executed through

Nick Kazlik, her former school friends. She thinks that it is her last ditch effort to save herself from the shame of eternal spinsterhood. When she meets Nick Kazlik, it’s clearly see that how strongly she deceives to be a mother when she enquires Nick:

“I can’t believe it could happen, though think like that-to grow a child inside one’s structure and have it born alive? Not within me. It couldn’t. I couldn’t really believe it could ever happen. Nick, give to me. (JD 117)

To become a mother she develops an intimate relationship with Nick but Nick is unable to fulfill her desire. There is a lack of mutual love relationship between Rachel Nick. Rachel’s affair with Nick is not a deep emotional attachment but a last resort to save herself from the “shame” of eternal spinsterhood. Rachel remarks: “Nick doesn’t know how – he doesn’t know how I’ve wanted to lose that reputation to divert myself of it as though it were an oxen yoke, to burn it to ashes and scatter them to the wind. (JD 98)

Rachel and Nick do not want to leave any chance to fulfill their carnal desires. But the crisis arises when she desires to have her own identity through motherhood of Nick’s child. At this stage, the ‘taboo of patriarchal power’ can be perceived when it becomes explicit that Nick only uses her. He considers her an object to be consumed, fit only to satisfy his desires. The relationship of Rachel and Nick is reflected when Nick goes away from Manawaka even without informing her. This incident takes Rachel to a world of uncertainties. His treatment of her is casual and somewhat brutal because he doesn’t seem to take his relationship

emotionally. Man is escapable while woman is fallible. This projects the double standard sexual morality in a patriarchal society that relegates women to state of invisibility. But Nick, ironically, acts as the agent of real change in her life.

Having a tumor in her uterus and taking it as her pregnancy causes much agony to Rachel. When the tumor is removed every concrete trace of Rachel's relationship with Nick is diminished, but the suffering the sorrow, the humiliation, she had to face is never recompensed. However, this enterprise is not so disadvantages. This is not recompensed in relation to her suffering in the process of her transformation or metamorphosis. In this psychological attempt she says, "I am the mother now." She attempts to rebel against the entire world, God, Fate, her mother, Nick, the society, etc. Actually at the end of her journey, Rachel achieves her quest for identity and becomes feminist. She is a victor and her victory is true in the real sense of the world because now she

possesses a child – her mother-psychological mother. Though Rachel had to undergo humiliation, depression and infliction, she comes out as a purified being. She has recovered her authentic self, identity and existence. Now Rachel is free, independent and self-supporting being.

Laurence in *Jest of God* presents the gentle image of a woman who as an independent human being resists being relegated to the margins. Towards the end of the novel Rachel emerges as an adult, free from dependence on her mother. Bowering remarks that Rachel is here "referring largely to the relationship between herself and old Mrs. Cameron. She will complete the age-old cycle becoming the mother of her ancestors, those people we all see children, socially or historically (Bowering 225).

Summary: The novel realistically explores the inner psyche of a spinster, oppressed and suppressed by social taboos. The dilemma of a woman has been exhibited very minutely here.

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