



**Journey towards Emancipation : A Scrutiny of
Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God***



Dr. I. P. Remya

Assistant Professor of English,
GTN Arts College, Dindigul, India

Abstract

Margaret Laurence, a reputed Canadian novelist of the inner weather powerfully presents the mysterious working of the human mind. She explores the consciousness of her characters and reveals the problems faced by them authentically. Laurence is universally admired for her Manawaka fiction. The main impulse behind Laurence's fiction has been biographical if not autobiographical and she is centrally concerned with women as the subject of her own fiction. The Manawaka series consists of five novels. The growth of this invented world is very little like the organic growth of a real town. *A Jest of God* is the second novel of the Manawaka series. Here Laurence introduces a female protagonist who pours out her experience as a frightened and timid human being.

Keywords

Margaret Laurence, Manawaka fiction, women, dilemma, liberation

Research Paper

Margaret Laurence, a reputed Canadian novelist of the inner weather powerfully presents the mysterious working of the human mind. She explores the consciousness of her characters and reveals the problems faced by them authentically. The focus of her novels is 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 than social documentary voicing the causes of women. (Ramamurthi 183)

Laurence is universally admired for her Manawaka fiction. The main impulse behind Laurence's fiction has been biographical if not autobiographical and she is centrally concerned with women as the subject of her own fiction. The Manawaka series consists of five novels. The growth of this invented world is very little like the organic growth of a real town. *A Jest of God* is the second novel of the Manawaka series. Here Laurence introduces a female protagonist who pours out her experience as a frightened and timid human being. Rachel Cameron comes close to the reader because she unveils her fear complex psyche in first person narration. She is an oppressed woman who is obsessed by her haunting fears. She is a thirty four year old spinster working as a school teacher in the prairie town of Manawaka. Her life is out and out monotonous and has a narrow range because her world revolves round her school and the flat where she lives. She cherishes a kind of commitment to serve her mother which indeed isolates her from other human beings as she lives in a cosy flat decorated according to her widowed mother's tastes.

The character of Rachel had been in Laurence's mind for many years before she wrote the novel, *A Jest of God*. In an interview, Laurence has confessed, "I don't think I have ever written anything in which the main character hasn't been in my mind for at least several years" (Thomas 66).

Once Rachel tells Calla her desire to do an extension course in English. The mother overhears it and resents that she has not informed it to her. The mother exercises her power over Rachel that she apologizes to her for not mentioning her desire:

Of course, dear, I quite understand. It's perfectly all right. It isn't as though I expect you to tell me everything you do. I mean, after all, it's your life, isn't it? It is just that it seemed rather a peculiar thing to keep quite about. I mean, it isn't as though there were any reason to conceal it[...]. I am not annoyed, Rachel [...]. You have a perfect right to keep anything secret if you want to. (Jest 78)

Rachel is dogged with an inferiority complex due to her fear. At all stages in her life she suffers psychologically and she fails to function as a normal human being. The reason for her

fear is that she is haunted by a thought that here life is a failure. She does not find anything good or dignified in the life she is leading. At the outset of the novel, she is standing near the window of the grade two classrooms looking at the children playing in the yard. She feels isolated because she thinks that she is not a very attractive personality. She develops a feeling that she is a subject of ridicule and a misfit to lead a normal life. Various references that lie scattered throughout the novel vividly reveal Rachel's observation of her own body. She refers to herself as "a thin streak of a person, like the stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard" (Jest 29). Looking at her image on the window glass of the store at the River Street she imagines as follows:

The white coat standards out, but not as handsomely as I'd hoped. To my passing eyes it looks now like some ancient robe around me, and the hood, hiding my hair, makes my face narrow and staring. [...] than I am. (Jest 29).

The passage quoted from the text well delineates Rachel's poor opinion about her physical appearance. This feeling is an outcome of the fear of the protagonist. Woodcock in this connection remarks, "Rachel tended to exaggerate vastly her own inadequacies and shortcomings" (225). Rachel's fear and weakness give her a sense of resentment and envy towards her sister Stacey. She compares her pitiable existence to that of Stacey who lives in Vancouver with four beautiful children. At her father's death she becomes totally helpless as she has not enough money to complete her study. As the responsibility of looking after her mother falls on her she takes up the job of a teacher in a school. Though a teacher, she does not move freely with others but keeps only a few friends. Moreover, she is not at all satisfied either with her life or with her profession. Rachel longs to have children. Among her students she likes James Doherty very much. Due to her fear complex psyche she is hesitant to reveal her affection outwardly. She represses her feelings towards the boy because she fears that James may be put to trouble by his classmates if they notice her admiration and affection for James. The following passage from the novel brings out the fear of Rachel:

How unfair this is to James, to demean praise in this manner. But if I don't what might happen, if ever he or any of them discovered how I value him? They would torment me, certainly, but this is nothing to the way [...] that's what strings the most. (Jest 6)

Later when James Doherty commits a mistake she strikes him with a ruler but she regrets her action. She wants to apologize to him but she is much scared of the society. She utters, "I cannot say I'm sorry. Not in front of them all, twenty six beings, all eyes" (Jest 53). Thomas judges that "artistically, as a novel it slides out of balance. Because everything comes through

Rachel's consciousness and because her mind is so completely, believably, neurotically obsessed, she cannot really see the world around her or the people in it"(181).

Rachel's intimacy with Nick offers her a chance to read herself from the tangles of life. Nick is a teacher in Winnipeg who has come to her father's house near Manawaka. Rachel is badly in need of love so she overcomes all the inhibitions and enjoys physical relationship with Nick. Indeed Rachel's relationship with Nick enables her to free herself from the clutches of her mother. Towards the close of the novel Rachel emerges as an adult, free from dependence on her mother. Bowering comments 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 (225).

Despite her mother's protest, Rachel decides to leave Manawaka to take up a teaching position in Vancouver. Her decision to move away indicates that she is now an authentic individual, trying to carve an identity for herself. It is the bond of duty to her mother which isolates her from most human contacts. She does not seek social independence but a quiet and contented life. Her dominating mother becomes submissive like a child and follows Rachel. *A Jest of God* realistically presents the inner psyche of a spinster, oppressed and suppressed by the social codes and her own fear and inferiority complex. Laurence has presented a fine study of a woman's dilemma because of her fear-complex psyche and her liberation from the forces that tangled her.

Work Cited

Bowering, George. "" The Fool of a Fear : Notes on A Jest of God". In a Place to stand on:Essays by and About Margaret Laurence." Edmonton : Newest (1983): 220-228.

—. ""The Fool of a Fear : Notes on A Jest of God"." In a place to stand on: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence (1983): 220-28.

Laurence, Margaret. *A Jest of God*. Toronto: Mc Clelland, 1972.

—. *A Jest of God*. Toronto. Mc Clelland, 1972.

Ramamurthi, K.S. *Canadian Literature and Society*. . Delhi: Pencraft, 1996.

Thomas, Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: Mc Clelland, 1976.