

An Odyssey of Freedom in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence's novels are permeated with the theme of an odyssey for freedom. All the Manawaka heroines move off from their place to search for their identity in the bigger world. *A Jest of God* is the second novel in the Manawaka series by Margaret Laurence. Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God* requires tremendous sensitivity and cleverness to get sympathy and respect from others. Rachel is shown to be emotionally repressed, inhibited to an almost pathological degree, and averse to all displays of spontaneous feeling. This paper makes an attempt to study an odyssey for freedom. It explores the journey of Rachel as she navigates through her emotional barriers and strives to break free from her inhibitions. Throughout the novel, Rachel's journey towards freedom is portrayed as a challenging odyssey filled with emotional barriers and inhibitions. As she navigates through these obstacles, Rachel must rely on her own sensitivity and cleverness to gain sympathy and respect from others. This paper aims to analyze the complexities of Rachel's character and her relentless pursuit for personal liberation in a world that often stifles her true identity.

Keywords: Alienation; Freedom; Liberation; Predicament; Self-Discovery.

Feminism has long been a powerful movement, questioning traditional conventions and campaigning for equal rights. Its goal is to establish a society free from prejudice and constraints for women by tearing down the patriarchal structures that have long oppressed them. In order to guarantee gender equality for all, feminism aims to alter society as a whole, not merely empower individual women. Feminism seeks to establish a society in which women are free to make decisions about their bodies, jobs, and relationships without fear of discrimination or condemnation by questioning conventional gender norms and stereotypes. It acknowledges that the only ways for women to truly be free are by tearing down the

structural obstacles that support inequality and encouraging intersectionality and inclusiveness within feminist movements. Neetu Bala Bakshi in her research paper "A Quest for Identity and Freedom in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" defines contemporary feminism and freedom:

Identity implies granting the same rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Identity and freedom do not exclusively talk of equality and rights of women but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts in the society. Throughout the world women have been denied of their social and economic rights. Twentieth century has seen a growing awareness among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny. Women's endeavors to seek their freedom and self-identity began a revolution all over the world which was termed by analysts and critics as "Feminism". (254)

Margaret Laurence portrayed the mystifying environment of human relationships in the drama of life and the nature of the human characters. She relied on the emotional lives of a vast majority of people who were dejected because of the failure of verbal communication. Laurence handles the challenges of survival in the postmodern world, so she quickly impresses the modern readers. The challenges are encountering differences, comprehending incompleteness and adoring multiplicity. The demand for peaceful living encompasses the interactions with mutual respect and an understanding for one another. The handling of the cultural diversity demands politics with ethical values. All characters of Laurence travel towards freedom in their lives. The path of the journey to reach their liberty may vary from one another. But ultimately most of the protagonists of Laurence's direct themselves to reach their destination. The theme of freedom is critically extended in Laurence's novels. All the Manawaka heroines move off from their place to search for their identity in the bigger world. The separation and agreeable banishment are features that support to form the action and govern the leitmotifs of the novels of Laurence.

The novel *A Jest of God* tells the story of Rachel Cameron's hardships as a spinster in 1960. She is the daughter of Niall Cameron who is a funeral director otherwise called undertaker in Manawaka. She is a spinster who works in a school as a teacher. She lives with her mother who is a widow. The narrative follows her as a shy and insecure young woman who struggles with love, the outside world, and herself. Her character is further developed by her poor self-esteem and hollow self-perception, which

exacerbate her discomfort in relationships and her battle with darkness. This feminine culture, shaped by societal norms and pressure, influences the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and rebellion against the established social order. Through her interactions with society, she learns to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, ultimately finding her own path forward. However, it is important for her to navigate this path independently, as she cannot rely on being a saviour for her mother. In "Margaret Laurence and the Psychology of Re-Birth in *A Jest of God*", Nancy Bailey notices the style of Margaret Laurence in the formation of her strong female character in the novel:

In *A Jest of God*, Laurence has taken a character who has become stereotyped in modern literature since Freud, but has treated her so as to reveal mystery, rather than deterministic causation. Laurence has given her character the dignity of being responsible for her own weaknesses as well as her own incipient re-birth. Such is the strength of the Canadian fictional heroes and of the writers like Laurence, Atwood, Engel and Munro who create them. (69)

Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God* requires tremendous sensitivity and cleverness to get sympathy and respect from others. Rachel wavers on the brink of hysteria and her voice is struggling. The novel opens with the character of Rachel who stands to look out the window to see the children in the school yard. She is fenced by the glass from an illusion of freedom that their play presents and she is frantically afraid of her shadow-fears and caprices. It is essential to figure out Rachel's character, who is grieving, self-doubting, and in a condition of near-hysteria.

They are not actually chanting my name, of course, I only hear it that way from where I am watching at the classroom window, because I remember myself skipping rope to that song when I was about the age of the little girls out there now. Twenty-seven years ago, which seems impossible, and myself seven... (1)

Rachel holds the reader's sympathy and respect when she shares her imagination. Rachel dreams of being the queen of the golden city, symbolizing her desire for power and recognition in a society often overlooking her. Her aspirations reflect her determination to overcome societal expectations and assert her identity. The reader is engaged in sympathy for her as she struggles to reconcile her illusionary image with her reality. Her compelling voice holds the reader's interest and respect.

Rachel's mind is so totally and neurotically obsessed that she cannot accept reality around her. She lives as an introvert putting up appearances always and submitting herself to an interior journey. Rachel, a spinster, daughter, and schoolteacher, struggles with her timidity and anxieties, clinging to her identity and repressing her personality. She is hesitant to embrace her life and is deeply disturbed by the negative responsibility that binds her. She bonds with her mother through the uncomfortable bonds of obligation. Her mother never gives any attention to her daughter's intentions or feelings since she is conceited and excessively dependent on her. On the other hand, Nick frequently shows Rachel his actual nature since he is not yet ready to dedicate himself to her. However, she treats him as her soul mate and does not take his statements seriously. Her mind is not prepared to accept the character of her mother and her lover, Nick.

After Rachel's father's death, she could not meet out the financial crisis, so she has not finished her study at the university. She quits her study and comes back to Manawaka at the age of twenty to support her mother. She returns to Manawaka to take up a job in teaching and to care her mother. Thus, she accepts the responsibility to provide a comfortable life to her aged mother. Since she does not finish her university education, she accepts a job at a school. At this critical moment in Rachel's life, she cannot find any respect neither from what she has done nor from what she is doing. She fails to assess her activities. She gets trouble at school from the principal, Willard Siddley. She copes with to get through each day by teaching. Each night haunts her and it continues to the next. However, she manages to care, pamper and tolerate her mother. But all of these realities mean nothing to her mother.

Mrs. Cameron is Rachel's mother, a heart patient. She is highly a self-centred mother. She is entirely dependent on her daughter. Her inclinations in life are towards small vanities of fussy blue-rinse curls, high heels and bridge parties. She desperately needs the support of her daughter who has crossed thirty and is a spinster. She plays all tricks to cling her daughter with her. She exploits her dependency on her daughter. She tries to manipulate her daughter's concern for her. She plays cunningly with her daughter's emotion and indirectly compels her to stay with her until the end of her life. She is also affected by neurotic problems as Rachel. Both are tied up emotionally and they are unwilling to leave each other. They are not able to get matured to move further in their life. They trap themselves on the weakness of the other.

Rachel's mother, Mrs. Cameron is responsible for developing negative

feelings in the personal life of Rachel. Mrs. Cameron governs Rachel's mental state to a considerable extent. She conditions her daughter's emotions and captivates her daughter with the bond of duty. Rachel's duty conscious behavior isolates her from human contact. Mrs. Cameron does not create a warm atmosphere to her daughter. Instead, she creates a repressive and guilty feeling in her daughter's mind. She treats her daughter as a trapped animal and never allows her to live her life. She acts as a hurdle for her daughter and prevents her from moving to the next stage in her life. Helen M. Buss notices the domineering attitude of Mrs. Cameron towards her daughter in her book *Mother and daughter relationships in the Manawaka works of Margaret Laurence*:

The stifling effect of May Cameron is best seen in her relationship with Rachel, who lives in the constant agony of embarrassed self-consciousness, fearing that at any time the wrong word will set off the disagreement between them. A typical exchange begins with May needing to know some detail of Rachel's life that has not yet come into her possession... (33)

Mrs. Cameron always influences her daughter's mind. She never permits her to visualize Rachel's independency and her spirit. She deliberately overhears the phone call of her daughter, while she is talking about her plan of doing an extension course in English with her friend Calla Mackie. She expresses her bitterness towards her daughter for not revealing about her crash course. She makes her daughter regretful for not mentioning the course to her. She says,

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 is your life, isn't it? It's just that it seemed rather a peculiar thing to keep quiet about. I mean, it isn't as though there were any reason to conceal it. (84)

Rachel retains the secrets from her mother because of her mother's poking nature. She goes with her friend Calla to the Tabernacle church. She does not tell her mother about it. Her mother questions for her every action that dreads Rachel much. She begins to hide facts from her mother. She does not inform about her meeting with Nick. Instead, she tells her that she goes to meet Calla who is sick. Rachel is dropped and battered by every fear which she invokes up, but her range of fear is constricted. She treats her will and wishes as an unnecessary force. She does things and hardly makes decisions by choice. She faces through desperation or in the

hopeless rut of lethargy that abdicates action for routine. Sometimes, she pushes and batters herself into growth. She acts and takes decision lethargically but for her, it is a huge victory.

Rachel lives in a world full of fears and inhibitions. She is obsessed with these complex emotions. She is anxious about her life. She wants to reach out to create a fresh life of her own, yet she is tied up by negative ideas. She is neurotically obsessed and she cannot observe anything around her. Her consciousness is preoccupied. Since Rachel experiences every part of her life carefully, her voice is persistently involved in scrutinizing, evaluating and enquiring them. Rachel exaggerates all her inadequacies and shortcomings. She worries about being strange and she assumes herself to be the object of the children's songs. She frequently beats herself with contemptible remarks. She denotes herself as some ludicrous human being. She feels alienated because she thinks she is not attractive. It shows that she suffers so much because she is in a state of desperation. In her research article, J.M. Anusha Lahi investigates Rachel's sense of alienation:

Rachel leads a life of terrifying alienation because she is not able to meet the demands of the society in which she dwells, as well as the demands of her psyche. She practically makes a search for the meaning of her existence, so that she would be in a position to respond comprehensively to life. She feels alienated from her voice which often acts independently and seems to be beyond her control. She is horrified not because she understands the unreality, but because she fears public exposure of her inner self. Her concluding monologue states that she learns to survive, to love and to be loved. (30)

Incidents which take place in Rachel's life make her life more unfit. She gives room for all her exaggerations which infuriate her tormented mind further. She develops these kinds of thoughts about herself when she discontinues her university study after her father's death. Her father is a funeral undertaker, the profession is peculiar. The profession of her father makes her feel inferior to others. She admits that her father's profession as a funeral undertaker embarrasses her much. "All I could think of, then, was the embarrassment of being the daughter of someone with his stock in trade" (42). Rachel's feelings of embarrassment stem from societal judgements and expectations. She internalizes the idea that her father's profession is somehow lesser or unworthy, leading to a sense of shame and inadequacy. This perception hinders her ability to fully embrace herself and find her own path in life. Another notable fact is her spinsterhood

even at the age of thirty-four. She drives herself to think negatively about herself.

The isolation of Rachel is self-induced. There are some people in the form of friends who are ready to stretch their hands to help her to have a peaceful life but her reckless feelings push them away. She recollects about her friends who understand her situation in a better way. Her friends try to create a healthy atmosphere which surely helps her to come out from her devastated state. Rachel feels uncomfortable with Calla's friendship. She is embarrassed by Calla's uninhabited messiness. Rachel's rapport with Calla is based on lies and doubts. She is not able to accept her friend's caring and affection because she is seized with hysteria. She dislikes Calla's presents.

Rachel exists in a conservative society which oppresses her feelings so much and compels her to develop lack of confidence. She searches an outlet to escape from society through dreams. She does not meet a person equal to her dreams and expectations in Manawaka. She turned her back on men who have shown interest in her, either on account of their occupation or their position in Manawaka society. Her moral superiority feeling and her pride prevent her from choosing these men. Though she holds a position of the dominant culture group in Manawaka, she ignores the fact that she herself is the daughter of an undertaker. She responds quickly to the inclinations of Nick because she cannot identify a person like Nick who is also a teacher and well-educated, in the confined atmosphere of Manawaka. Manawaka never offers such a scope to Rachel to meet a person who is intellectually equal to her. Rachel lacks moral strength to meet life on its terms. She is accustomed to the town's expectations and its values.

The conventional notion of the society is that an unmarried woman would be treated as crippled. Because a spinster may not have anyone to depend upon for emotional, financial and sexual needs. Individuals with low self-morale rely on others for a sense of identity, comfort and contentment. Rachel meets Nick Kazlik, her schoolmate. He teaches in the city of Winnipeg. He comes to his father's house for the summer. Her affair with Nick brings a sea-change in her. The relationship with Nick brings a profound transformation in her behaviour. The notable transformation comes not out of emotional involvement with him. Rachel's affair with Nick is not a profound emotional connection. Preferably, it is a last attempt to protect herself from the shame of eternal spinsterhood. She expresses her willingness to submit herself for the sake of her love in the following state-

ment, "Nick doesn't know- he does not know how I've wanted to lose that reputation, to divert myself of it as though it were an oxen yoke, to bury it to ashes and scatter them to the winds" (120).

The relationship with Nick enables Rachel to acquire strength to express her inner feelings in solid words which is not possible for her before. She shares her transformation after enter into the relationship with Nick to him, "I used to fear and don't fear now" (41). She becomes a bold person to deceive her mother and realizes that she can be merciless to her mother. She bravely manages her mother whenever she wants to meet Nick. Thus, Rachel's releases herself from the clutches of her mother. The freedom promotes her affair with Nick and she needs such independence for herself. Rachel's attachment with Nick temporarily relieves her from all her anxieties and worries. She wants to develop the relationship with Nick further. Her physical need for love balances all her crowding fears and worries. She articulates her wishes to beget a child of Nick. The relationship with Nick enables her to liberate herself. Rachel feels that her personal relationship with him will lead to her having an infant, completing her purpose for being born. "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours." This seems so unforced that I feel he must see it the way I do. And so restrained, as well, when I might have torn at him - Give me my children" (181).

Nick isn't prepared to acknowledge Rachel's dependence. He gradually comes to know that Rachel is depending on him to provide for her basic needs. Thus, he breaks up their connection right away. He carefully handles the situation and states clearly to her: "Darling" he says, "I'm not God. I can't solve anything" (182). Nick understands Rachel better than she understands him. He deliberately deceives her by displaying a photograph of a boy. In fact, it is a photograph of Nick's own childhood, but Rachel identifies it to be a photograph of Nick's son. Nick's quick withdrawal is vital to the quest of Rachel's freedom. If not, Rachel would simply have shifted her dependence from her mother to him. Rachel is shocked by her pregnancy. But she has expected it and has disclosed her desires to Nick too. However, she does not understand the intrinsic meaning of Nick's words. The sudden breakup further intensifies Rachel's feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy. She now not only carries the weight of societal judgement but also the rejection and abandonment of someone she thought cared about her. A conflict angers her mind whether to accept or remove the child. Rachel does not hear from Nick again. As school begins after summer, she wants to inform it to Nick about her pregnancy.

Rachel is helpless and anxious and consumes sleeping pills along with whiskey which may induce abortion. She reconsiders her decision to have a child of her own. She assumes that the child growing inside is hers and decides to have it born. Rachel's real salvation is that she is not a tragic figure, not the character in a drama that she sometimes makes of herself, but just an ordinary human being. Rachel avoids Calla after meeting with Nick. She acts arrogantly with her. When she has the idea of terminating her pregnancy, she approaches Calla to get her advice. Calla knows Rachel better than Rachel knows herself. She advises not to abort the fetus. She provides her full support and helps her to make practical suggestions regarding Rachel's mother.

Rachel hears about the story of Cassie through her mother's gossip. Cassie is an unmarried Stewart girl who had twins Clare and Carol. She accepts her responsibility of her twins to raise them with her mother's help. Rachel's thinks about her situation when she faces her pregnancy. She knows clearly that her mother never supports her as Cassie's mother. Cassie's memory prevents her from consuming her mother's sleeping pill to abort her baby. Rachel apprehends her dilemma and accepts her responsibility for the child. Rachel's pregnancy is the final disgrace to endure. Her desperate struggle between acceptance and rejection of the child is brought to anti-climax. Instead of being life, the growth inside her is a benign tumour that resembles nothingness: "All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one" (188).

Rachel unfetters herself from all possible constrictions by accepting the so-called pregnancy and the tumor as jests of God to make fools of human beings. Rachel's false pregnancy also contributes in grasping the grim realities of both life and her own body, the female body. Rachel gradually accepts the fears and inhibitions of her past. The acceptance makes her to break the chains which have bound her for long. She accepts her past which permits her to prepare herself for the present in a better way as well as to plan her future. The affair with Nick Kazlik helps as an initiation to her realization. The specific moment takes place when she is in the hospital undergoing surgery for a benign tumor.

Through the agony of Rachel's struggle and the reality of her operation, she does learn to agree and to live with her boundaries. She says in her unconscious state that she is the mother of her mother. The words mumbled under sedation to become real to her. They are the key to a degree

of freedom and acceptance of herself. She is not a tragic heroine, but an ordinary foolish mortal like everyone. Nick could not be the redeemer for her, so she must not be God for her mother. Rachel's sense of shame and inadequacy deepens as she realizes that she cannot rely on Nick for support and must now face the harsh reality of her situation alone. This realization forces her to confront the idea that she cannot be the saviour for her mother and instead must find a way to navigate her own path forward.

The worry which Rachel holds, that of revealing her affair with Nick under anesthetic effect, is freed by Calla's care. It is, evidently, release of the unconscious and so liberates her emotions. By the time they bid farewell to each other, Rachel confesses that Calla loves her and overcomes her aversion to speak of that love with compassion. The greatest point of her recognition occurs when Rachel comprehends and accepts the limitations with Nick.

Rachel also begins to study how to act on her own life. Disturbed by uncertainty, nervousness and fear of pregnancy and liberation, Rachel goes to visit Hector Jonas. She awfully permits herself to move in the prohibited funeral parlor, her father's asylum, the one from which he told her to run. When Rachel visits the funeral chapel, she comes to know about the speculation of Hector about her father, Niall Cameron. The notion is important because of the setting in which it happens. Rachel has to go down to the place of death and faces its presence. She has traced the mortuary hygienic which is unlike a hospital- totally contrary to her fears. She has had a new idea. The idea about her father by a prophet is new to her. Her father really selected the life he lived if he had desired another, he would have chosen that and lived it. This plainness is surprising to her and Rachel agrees. Besides, she observes her own life and determines that it too may be upgraded. Rachel evaluates that she has a new vision of the past.

Rachel's choices are human and humanly restricted. She has many choices. She can implement one of the decisions. She looks inward to generate the confidence she has never had and pushes herself to face reality on her own by turning within.

I will walk by myself on the shore of the sea and look at the free gulls flying. I will grow too orderly, plumping up the chesterfield cushions just-so before I go to bed. I will rage in my insomnia like a prophetess. I will take care to remember a vitamin pill each morning with my breakfast. I will be afraid. Sometimes I will feel lighthearted, sometimes light-headed. I may sing aloud, even in

the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it. (202)

The choice that she makes is to leave Manawaka. She is no longer scared to leave Manawaka because she is no longer reliant on her fear of the town which gives a kind of tortured security of self. She is free of the geographical place, Manawaka. She knows and admits that the place Manawaka has the most profound sense. The town will be with her continually with its strengths and its constraints. She applies for a job in Vancouver and is accepted by a school. She decides all against her mother's sobs and pressures. She moves to Vancouver along with her elderly child, her mother. Rachel has her elderly child with her and she has stretched her mind with a positive approach towards life.

The character of Rachel makes a great affirmation of life and living, despite the terrible muddle, anxiety and confusion. It is a great victory on the part of Rachel who finds choices with spirit to assert her future. It is the saddest moment for Rachel to recognize herself as a mother to her mother. It is also the strangest moment she holds in her life. She does not go mad or disastrously die like those who would break life to their wills. She bends to the lives blows, as most mortals have done before her. Rachel's story carries the perseverance of her effort which comes out of her life's chaos and confusion.

Rachel's voice is nearly panic-stricken and yet pushing the reader instinctively. It is the remarkable achievement of *A Jest of God*. The voice is as stiff as elastic stretched to a snapping point, but within its narrow range, there is still significant difference and concreteness of effect. Rachel thinks of herself as dry and empty, yet her world is not. Rachel sees herself rising awkwardly like a trained goose trying to fly or an ostrich walking with extreme care in the garden. The images are used to reflect the different emotions of Rachel. Most of these images refer to Rachel herself, combining the pitiful and trivial effects, but they encompass the range of Rachel's voice and increase the variability of its effects.

Rachel undesirably frames her own boundaries in her life. She exhibits her impulses and notions of her life which results from having a putrid relationship with others. These traits progress in her solitude. The initial act of articulation is the Tabernacle incident. Calla and Nick play a less role in assisting Rachel's growth. Calla plays a conscious role in her life. Her timely help during Rachel's crisis facilitates Rachel to have a healthy friendship with her. Nick does it unknowingly. The affair with Nick

helps to find the wholeness through herself and acknowledges the birth of her character into a mature womanhood. Her travel is a journey into the wholeness of life to attain freedom, not to die. Rachel's acceptance of taking the responsibility as a mother suggests the expansion of her physical and psychic territories. Her changes in behavior recommend a maturing personality into materialism. The affair with Nick gives a new revelation to her life. She feels that she is reborn. She understands the colonizing force of her mother and society. She declares her individuality by leaving Manawaka. She chooses against the wish of her mother. She decides that she can make concord with her inherited past represented by her great father. She, therefore, obtains a whole sense of retrieving and respecting her inherited descent.

Rachel is a woman who confines herself in a prison relatively of her own. The prison she created is solidly locked. Rachel never travels outside except the hospital. In the end, she comprehends the stupidity of her mother and her failure to offer an emotional security. She confesses that all have indispensable boundaries in life. Rachel declares her independency by ignoring the suggestions of her mother. She always obeys the words of her mother who is not fit to be a perfect mother to her. Rachel hesitates much to take a decision in her life. When Rachel boldly takes decision, she eventually frees herself from the chain of worries and miseries. She reaches the state of maturity after facing so many hurdles in her life. So, she lets herself experience an obstacle and in doing so, she prepares her mind to face the future without any fear. She releases herself from a choking environment. Thus, her independency paves a way to quest and enjoy freedom in her life.

The situations she encounters gradually changes her perception. With Nick she is able to pamper in love or lust. Within her body life or death can develop. With her mother, she may be a normal spinster daughter or really a responsible caretaker. In these four cases, regardless of contemporary liberation, the choice between the two routes is not prepared by Rachel. *A Jest of God*, Laurence prepared a set of liberated audience to accept her final scene of the novel. Climbing on a bus to get of the town shows Rachel's liberation from chains. Eventually Rachel achieves her freedom from the shackles of Manawaka and from her mother.

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