Panic and Anxiety in Women: A Study of Margaret Laurence’s

*A Jest of God*

D.Nalina Palin
Associate Professor of English
St. John’s College
Palayamkottai.
nalinaarulraj@gmail.com

Fear and evasion are the two little beasts
that chase each other’s tails in the revolving
wirecage of our nervous world.

- Tennessee Williams.

*A Jest of God* (1966) is the second novel in the Manawaka series of Margaret Laurence. Rachel Cameron, the protagonist of the novel is a middle-aged introverted, spinster school teacher who lives with her mother in the prairie town of Manawaka. She has returned home to Manawaka from the university in Winnipeg after the death her alcoholic father, Niall Cameron. She lives in a flat with her mother Mrs. May Cameron. Mrs. May Cameron is a hypochondriac mother, a good example of an elderly woman who controls others through her need of them.

In the novel, Rachel undertakes a journey of her own. The novel grapples with issues like pregnancy and mortality; confrontations with issues like motherhood, sufferance, fate, generational conflict, social withdrawal, themes of birth are all explored, examined and comprehended from women’s perspective. Rachel’s bond of duty to her mother isolates her from other human contacts. Rachel’s life is inscribed by her mother in a suffocating manner. Victimized by what Norman Jeffares calls the “crippling conventionalism of a small community” (287), Mrs. Cameron’s real self lies totally submerged under her persona with which she mindlessly identifies. Margaret Atwood sees Rachel as a victim of the Rapunzul Syndrome with her mother as “the wicked witch who has imprisoned her” (37) and the attitudes of the society as a tower in which she is imprisoned. True to Atwood’s remark, Mrs. Cameron exercises a ruthless hold on Rachel and seems to be the wicked witch. However, it is also possible to see her as the real Rapunzel of the story.

Her mother fusses a lot about Rachel’s being “too conscientious” (*JG* 20) about her teaching and about Rachel’s health. If Rachel plans to go out in the evening, Mrs. Cameron
reminds her to bring her pills from the medicine cabinet. Then, the very next moment, she assures Rachel that she’s sure she’ll be just fine, that Rachel should just go ahead and enjoy herself. The doctor has warned her that she should not lift things. Even then, Mrs. May suggests her daughter that when Rachel has gone out, she would wash the blankets. Rachel realizes that her mother’s “weapons are invisible, and she would never admit even to carrying them, much less putting them to use” (46).

The following two passages will reveal clearly the externalization of the inner conflict and vice versa. “I always brush my hair a hundred strokes. I can’t succeed in avoiding my eyes in the mirror. The narrow angular face stares at me, the grey eyes too wide for it. I don’t look old . . . Or do I see my face falsely?” (JG 16). And then,

I can’t. Tonight is hell on wheels again. Trite. Hell on wheels. But almost accurate. The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling. (18)

While the first passage, through the mirror image emits the protagonist Rachel’s identity crisis, the second passage externalizes her inner conflict generated by her fear, “this waking nightmare . . . weird . . . that has already grown inside me and spread its roots through my blood?”. (17)

_A Jest of God_ is the work of a novelist who owns an authentic and unlimited temperamental affinity with life. Laurence negotiates life through Rachel with a bleak painful intensity. Intelligent, sensitive and fiercely introspective, Rachel is ,in Laurence’s own words “a compulsive pulse –taker”(TNV127) who constantly magnifies her inadequacies and underestimates her strengths. Her judgments are neurotic and unreliable. Rachel is connected to segments of characters representing individually, a context. Rachel is aware of other people like her family members and the academic circle. They begin to envelop her psyche bringing about deliberation upon her interior chemistry and so naturally, there is something that reveals Rachel as a character of sorts.

The crisis in Rachel’s mind develops into a symptom of “This pain inside my skull” (18) uncovers the grappling images of death with which she has been associated. Her father’s Funeral Parlour, “A nasty word, smacking of mortality” (13), evidences the fear borne Rachel. It is this that constitutes the character of Rachel and Laurence develops the character primarily in her confrontation with her inner view. Contrary to her social image, Rachel is in fact “a potential
The day does end, of course. Am I walking home unusually slowly? I feel as though I were. Summer holidays will begin in another two weeks . . . I am trying to recall when I last hit a child. I cannot remember . . . In a year or two, will I have locked
today away in some junk box, never to be found among all the other scraps and trifles. (54)

Thus, she is portrayed as a woman who keeps more to herself.

Rachel feels suffocated on the environment at home and so she longs for personal independent identity and freedom. Isolated within her own mind and body, she is most of the time estranged from other people and, more disturbingly, she is sometimes estranged from herself. Rachel’s suppressed fears and desires leave her with a distorted vision of others and herself. She is often obsessed with a feeling of failure in life.

Rachel’s brief affair with Nick Kazlik, a high-school teacher from Winnipeg provides the catalyst for her development. He comes to Manawaka to visit his parents during one summer. This relationship is of utmost importance as it paves the way for comprehending herself. The character of Rachel can be approached and appreciated in a better way through this relationship. 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 comments

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 open yoke , to burn it to ashes and scatter them to the wind.(98)

In fact, it is Nick Kazlik who provides Rachel with a neutral space in her world of conscience and material world. She goes out with him in the evenings and considers it a great opportunity to free herself from the clutches of her mother. Rachel has a strong desire to have children. Once when they make love, Rachel says, “If I had a child, I would like it to be yours” (154). Nick responds, “I’m not God. I can’t solve anything” (154) and then he disappears.

Fragmentation is the result of what Rachel does to herself. She indulges in the duplicity of self. She is helplessly drawn towards fantasy. She formulates a self, obviously intent on misapprehension of facts or reality. She ends up a true subject to a sort of reality that is fictitious and hence complicating. This destroys her willpower as she spontaneously considers the outer and the inner world to be an undifferentiated anarchy. Out of this undifferentiated chaos, Rachel attempts in vain to chalk out some synthesis of morality or rather reasonableness. Hence, Rachel is dished out of her actual being.
She has separated herself from truth by adjusting and falsifying her psyche. Ultimately, she ends up the mistress over those manifold sensations, nothing of which is constructive. Thinking of her being pregnant, for instance, is one state of mind that profiles a conceived reality inherited from her own chaotic psyche. An inherited object of fantasy, Rachel reaches the status of non-entity. Thus, her idea of creating, rationalizing and adjusting prompts her to falsify reality. In short, Rachel fixes her own meaning of things. She has developed a will to exercise control over her fantastic imaginings and her throbbing uterus becomes the modus of her psyche. Although she thinks that she is fixed in truth, it is no truth whatsoever. Rachel is now clamped with a new issue of identity crisis.

Her visit to Dr. Raven and the subsequent surgery rivets Rachel to the real. In fact, her missing the month “Eleven days . . . Eleven days. Never before” (159) ends up in “The tumour [that] turned out to be benign” (184). Rachel becomes the conscious subject of the conscious reality. Much against the wishes of her sick mother, she sets out, of course, along with her mother, to a new horizon, Vancouver. With her psyche, still fragmented, she attempts to take on a new life as “The ironies go on” (200). According to Howells, “A Jest of God apart from being a psychological study, is also a representation of social historical forces within Canada and its relation to Great Britain” (38). In explaining this symbolic comparison, Hughes says, “Mrs. Cameron is the mother country, the imperial power and Rachel ‘a Canada seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past and to make its own future’, her tumour, the colonial past and its values, and its removal, the end of the colonial state of mind” (50-51). The novel culminates with the evolution of emboldened Rachel breaking the fetters and the realisation that Rachel should use her own strength though small and that, the town of Manawaka – her source and inheritance of her identity will go with her always offering her the nostalgic that would sustain her in dire circumstances.
Works Cited


********************************************************************************