

# **Panic and Anxiety in Women: A Study of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God***

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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 Jefferies 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 Rapunzel 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

hysteric”(GG 12) who, chained to a domineering hypochondriac mother, endures a dull, introverted living death above the funeral parlour which her father owned during his life time. Rachel’s tormented mind and heart and her alienation from herself and those around her is revealed to us through her interior monologues. Rachel attempts to reconstruct her psyche through nostalgia and her present vocation as a teacher, “the one with the power of picking any coloured chalk out of the box and writing anything at all on the black board” (1).

Rachel attempts to exist for herself and herself only and she is continually given to herself, as she contemplates, “Stop. Stop it Rachel. Steady. Get a grip on yourself, now. Relax. Sleep. Try.” (17) and , by the end of the first chapter, Laurence externalizes her restlessness or the inner anarchy through the statement, “I can’t sleep” (18). The novelist foregrounds the statement in preparedness for a worse condition of Rachel’s mindset which induces her to run away.

Amongst the people she meets in the school, she becomes friendly with Calla, a fellow teacher. Calla’s scorn for female fashion, her religious fervour and her independent spirit is a perfect foil for Rachel. Rachel is imaginative, and frail, hard pressed by the narrow orthodoxies of Calla’s Tabernacle and the hovering brutalities of Mr. Willard, the headmaster and her growing realization of her mind’s drift into fragmentation. Yet, Rachel soon after, with a sense of an exuberant pride and ego, rejuvenates herself and progressively develops an overwhelming sense of respite. Laurence fixes Rachel pitted against her sister Stacey. Rachel always considers her an intruder. For instance, the following quote might illustrate the point. Laurence writes, “When Stacey was here the last time she came into my bedroom while I was dressing. She never knocked or said could she come in” (20).

Similarly, Rachel is just irritated by her colleague Calla’s overwhelming sense of sin into which the severity of *The Tabernacle* has precipitated her upon the occasion of intruding upon Rachel’s privacy. Rachel feels quiet restless and so apprehensive that she can hardly accept Calla’s sense of religion “in a pretence of quiet” (34). She is not ready to listen for one simple reason that “People should keep themselves to themselves – that’s the only decent way” (35).

Margaret Laurence generates another Rachel in the book – the one who endlessly, yet consistently communes with herself especially on solitary walks about the River Street. The following passage could be taken as a brilliant illustration.

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 dishd 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.

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