

Spinsterhood: A Reflection on Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

Mithu Dusad

Research Scholar, Department of English, Assam University, Silchar, India.

History may be a compilation of lies;
nevertheless, it contains a few truths, and they are the
only guides we have for the future.

– Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*

Human experience, for centuries, has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy. Systematic subject-deprivation of woman has been a fact as much as in life as in literature. However, in literature different tools have been used to analyse various issues which may be consciously or unconsciously dealt by the authors in their texts; Feminism being one of them. In other words, Feminism is a diverse collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women, especially in terms of their social, political, and economic situation. As a social movement, feminism largely focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests, and issues in society. Within academia, feminists focus on documenting gender inequality and changes in the social position and representation of women. Others argue that gender, and even sex is a social construct, and aim at researching the construction of gender and sexuality, and developing alternate models for studying social relations.

Jean Margaret Laurence is a Canadian novelist. Her major novels are *This Side Jordan* (1960), *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974). This paper carries out an analysis of spinsterhood in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* while discussing the effects of spinsterhood of a woman whose sexuality is being ignored. This study initially focuses on the development of woman's sexuality in relation to the female model described by heterosexual hegemony and the alienation of conformist and non-conformist female characters under patriarchal forces in Laurence's *A Jest of God*. Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God* tries to overcome the repressiveness of small town life; she is constantly in turmoil with the inner and outer self. At the same time, the paper also discusses women's role in the society as being the other. The worth of a woman is merely being measured in terms of a man. Without a man by her side she is nothing in the eyes of the patriarchal society. Lastly, the pattern of personal development from a position of weakness

and alienation to a position of self-understanding and responsibility is also examined in this paper.

As the paper aims to study the work of Margaret Laurence so a brief literature review has been attempted to conduct on Laurence's works. The books consulted in this regard are *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism and Feminism* (1996) by Greta M. Coger, *New Commonwealth Writing: A Critical Response* (1996) by M. L. Pandit, *The Dominion of Women: The Personal and the Political in Canadian Women's Literature* (1991), *Canadian Literature* (2007) by Faye Hammill and *Self Knowledge and the self* (2000) by David A. Jopling.

Margaret Laurence, in her novel, *A Jest of God*, displays the development of female sexuality which has been restricted so far to conform to the social norms. A feminist perspective has been taken in this paper to deal with her portrayal of Rachel Cameron; as a spinster in a patriarchal society.

Talking about spinsterhood, as Simone de Beauvoir has said, "Most women are married or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (164). For it is marriage which gives to women the ultimate respect and recognition. An unmarried woman is looked down with suspicion and pity. With the security of the marriage, the all powerful domination of the husband, a woman is supposed to lead a confined and obedient, hence an ideal existence; the few respectable choices left to women were: indissoluble marriage, or the dedicated life of a nun – a life of severe abnegation – and the much scorned choice of an old maid or spinster. Marriage was important from the point of view of the fulfilment of the husband's need, both physical and genealogical. It is also significant to see what oaths the life partners take in marriage. The husband promises to love and cherish his wife, whereas the wife on her part takes the oath to love and obey.

In *A Jest of God*, Laurence depicts the life of Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four year old unmarried woman whose life has been singularly uneventful. She has lived all her life in Manitoba and has led a conventional life of caring for her mother, teaching her second grade class, and occasionally attending church or watching a movie with her friend, Calla. Rachel, at the beginning of the novel, is a meek, vacillating, and silent character who is completely dominated by the voice of her manipulating mother. Her allegiance has been to her father and mother, and because both are associated with death – her father by virtue of his profession as undertaker and her mother by her life-denying words and actions – Rachel has been increasingly alienated from other people and from life. An affair with Nick Kazlik, a high school acquaintance who returns to Manawaka for a summer visit, provides the motivation which Rachel needs to escape from the tyranny of her mother's voice and from the memory of her dead father. In choosing to love Nick, despite her mother's unwillingness, Rachel chooses to get herself attached with life. Even though Nick leaves her for good and provides her neither love nor the children she craves for, yet he does help her reach the point of speaking unreservedly, passionately, "from faith, not logic" (Laurence 130) for the first time. This affair with Nick makes her a self-actualized individual. It is ironical that it is Nick's inconstancy that finally helps Rachel discover her own identity.

The Manawakan society in which Rachel lives has fixed notions about how a woman is supposed to behave. Living with her mother, Rachel has ample opportunity to be reminded of the voices of patriarchy. May Cameron has taught her daughter to identify unacceptable behaviours and beliefs, and has stressed on the notion that a woman's virginity is her "most precious possession" (147). As an adult Rachel is able to act according to her own rather than her mother's beliefs and has a relationship out of wedlock, but it's torn apart by doubts. However, Rachel's affair with Nick is her attempt to free herself from the conventional gender norms in order to attain self-realisation. But she is weighed down by what she considers the natural and right code of conduct, and her mother plays a crucial role in her gender socialisation which draws limits on her sexuality. Rachel only remembers her mother's preaching voice which makes her feel guilty whenever she fails to act acceptably in a patriarchal culture with rigid binary divisions between men and women, women exist only as the reflections of men and as other of the same, and not as "the other of the other" (Beauvoir 174).

In the opening lines of the novel itself, when Rachel has been introduced, she has begun to question openly the necessity for reserve. In fact, she is almost desperate in her need to express herself to others, especially Nick, the first man with whom she has been in any way intimate. Rachel is impressed by what she perceives as Nick's fluency and is hopeful that with him she will find a more fluent voice of her own. But still she continues suffering from silences. The voices that she hears within herself are various, each clamouring for attention, each expressing a different facet of personality. Certainly, Rachel frequently indulges in self-pity, and, as Laurence observes, tends "to exaggerate vastly her own inadequacies and shortcomings" (58). However, in contrast to the voice which bemoans Rachel's failures and weaknesses is another voice, an ironic voice of wit and perception. According to H.J. Rosengarten, "this second voice can step back from the mental action and mock the self-pity and the self-dramatization; there is an internal conflict between that part of Rachel which does wail pitifully, and that part of her which is harshly self-critical" (192). There are other voices as well. However the reconciliation of the conflicting voices within her will help her to find her identity. Nevertheless, a voice that Rachel struggles hard to free herself from is the voice of her mother which stands for the traditional patriarchal values. To take an instance, when Nick first engages her in conversation, she finds herself bristling at one of his comments, "Who does he think he is? High school or not. Nestor Kazlik's son. The Milkman's son. It can't be myself thinking like that. I don't believe that way at all. It's as though I've thought in Mother's voice (Laurence 60). The process of rejecting May's ideas is the one which takes her away from her living death of her mother and nearer to a life of her own.

Moreover, Rachel's world is divided between the public realm and the private. She tries to escape the constraints of society and language by giving vent to the imaginary double of herself in the form of fantasies. She uses imagination not only to analyse the voices that she hears but also to invent the voices that she would like to hear. She, in order to survive, must release some of the feelings which have been so long and sternly repressed, and the only voice she can find for this release is an innocent babble.

However, Rachel's emotional outlet is the beginning of her freedom. She finally disregards the insistence on proper appearances, correct speech, and decorous behaviour. Beginning with the hysterical outburst at the Tabernacle, however, Rachel's voice begins to change, and her relationship is eventually affected by the new sound. The pride that has kept Rachel from uttering what she wants is what the Manawakan society has inculcated in her. In rejecting this false pride, she has reached a new level of self-realisation. On what turns out to be their final evening together, she again sneaks to Nick in her new voice, without reserve. In a glow of happiness after their successful love-making, she tells him what has been in her mind for sometime: "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours" (130). He has in fact indirectly helped Rachel at least to begin solving her problems. He brings her to the point where she is compelled to break the barriers of silence and gives vent to her suppressed emotions.

Rachel's problem is defined through a man. Her passivity is evident in her responses to Nick. She likes, "just to sit here beside him, in this security and hear his voice, whatever it happens to be saying" (105). Paradoxically, Rachel's state of security is her greater danger. Desiring security, she seeks protection with a man. Although she makes him her protector, she assigns him responsibility to determine the bounds of protection. The determination can be a sacrifice for liberty and even amount to repression. Rachel is unaware of that and will suffer for it.

Like several other works of Margaret Laurence, especially those concerned with the inhabitants of Manawaka, Rachel's story is told in the first person and is the story of a woman who is trapped in a prison, which is partly of her own making. Rachel's prison is so hard for her to get out of because it is made mostly from virtues gone sour: filial devotion, self-sacrifice, the concern for appearances as a sense of duty, the desire to avoid hurting others, and the wish to be loved. A good deal of desperation and a little courage is needed to go against such overwhelming social assumptions, to assert instead, one's self, as Rachel finally does.

While *A Jest of God* is structured almost entirely around children, and the flow of time and emotion is in and around children, ironically the protagonist of this novel, Rachel, is a spinster. Thus, it becomes a novel against mother and mothering, fathers and fathering, and the relationships, often interchangeable, between those who mother and are mothered, those who give and receive nurturing and receive comfort. Rachel's false pregnancy is an ambiguous indication of the lesson she comes to learn: how to be a mother, to herself first of all, since true mothering has been denied her.

Rachel Cameron begins as a child, still stuck in the time of the little girls' skipping chant she hears through her open classroom window, still playing dutiful daughter to a mother who treats her only as half-grown. At the age of thirty-four, she arrives at gawky adolescence, agonizing over her appearance and sexuality, going through a painful and unrequited crush. But she ends as an adult, having realised the childishness of her own mother and thus her inability to offer emotional safety, having accepted the risks inherent in being alive, having taken her true place in time, "Besides me sleeps my elderly child . . . What will happen? What will happen. It may be my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's" (209).

Finally Rachel is able to achieve independence when she acknowledges Nick's problems, ceases looking upon herself as a victim, and acts as an individual, independent of hierarchical constraints.

To sum up, it can be said that accepting of the situation on Rachel's part opens a new life for her, both in the sense of not being too easily affected by the opinions of others and trying to live one's life according to what one supposes to be the right thing to do. This nice-girl dilemma, along with dealing with women's sexuality, was loosening its grip in the mid 1900s as the number of single households and the age of first marriage was rising. These two factors, among other things, helped to transform the stereotype of unmarried women as spinsters by gradually changing the image towards the more favourable and flattering term of a single woman.

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