
Journey from Isolation to Realization of Self Knowledge in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

¹Mrs. S. Aishwarya, ²Dr. Jadeedasaleem

(Reg.No: MKU22PFOL10324)

¹Part-Time Research Scholar in English PG and Research Department of English

M.S.S. Wakf Board College Madurai-625020, Tamil Nadu, India Email:
aishwaryaselvam96@gmail.com

²Associate Professor and Head PG and Research Department of English

M.S.S. Wakf Board College Madurai-625020, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

The article aims to provide alternative solutions and ideas for better understanding and appreciation of Native Canadian literature. It argues for a comprehensive approach, including engagement with Indigenous scholars and cultural specialists, to deepen the interpretative process. Furthermore, the study seeks to promote cross-cultural conversation, respect for Indigenous storytelling traditions, and recognition of the variety of Indigenous experiences. It hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of Indigenous literature, culture, and identity, therefore meeting the fundamental goal of the research. Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels primarily explore themes of loneliness, isolation, assimilation, alienation, and identity. This study aims to demonstrate the psychological and emotional path of an alienated protagonist. They experience feelings of alienation from their surroundings, as well as loneliness and isolation. Finally, Margaret Laurence's protagonists achieve personal and societal integration. They triumph over their sufferings.

Keywords: isolation, personal identity, death, female dilemmas, self-knowledge, responsibility

Introduction

While Canadian literature may not have as long a history as other literary traditions, it has had a considerable impact on global literature. Canadian writing has experienced a rigorous evolution, resulting in its current position on par with the global norm. Historically, Canada, like India, is under colonial control. The process of colonization prompted Canadians to exhibit their literary creativity across a variety of genres. Canadian writers began to record their experiences as slaves. Furthermore, they focused on the cultural deprivation that occurs in a multi-ethnic society. In addition to dominant themes, there is a significant increase in women's writing. Canadian literature frequently examines feminist issues, particularly those related to self-discovery and indigenous identity. Fictional writers use their creative works to share the lives and narratives of women with a larger audience. The article focusses on the function, status, and life of Canadians in society, despite the presence of numerous issues.

Review of Literature

Dr. Kaptan Singh is a professor and editor now working at Army Cadet College in Dehradun. In her book, “Women in Exile and Alienation: The Fiction of Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai,” she explores themes of identity, solitude, and survival. The study examines critics, writers, and authorities’ perspectives on Margaret Laurence. No critical texts have been written on the alienated protagonist in Margaret Laurence’s novels. This study presupposes originality and addresses a research gap.

As Nora Stovel describes in her book Rachel’s Children: Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God* (1992), later reactions to the novel are more positive. In particular, reactions to how Laurence develops her major character are more positive: Margaret Atwood, in the afterword to the 1988 New Canadian Library edition, characterizes Rachel’s inner monologue [as] a little masterpiece in itself. Lars Hartveit, writing a decade later, appreciates the “subversive potentiality” in Rachel that finally allows her to escape from Manawaka.

Laurence’s narrative innovation all the more remarkable, the choices of setting, theme, and protagonist in *A Jest of God* was, by her own admission, unpromising; her status as a writer of national repute is not yet assured; and, furthermore, psychoanalytic and feminist narratology, disciplines that would later provide lenses through which her work could be viewed, are still in their infancy. The historical present, sometimes known as the narrative present, is increasingly used in fiction. Fludernik notes that “from paragraphs and then entire chapters the present tense moves to usurp the place of the preterite as the basic narrative tense,” hailing Coetzee as a skilful exponent; like Cohn, she cites Atwood’s *Surfacing* as an example of how the narrative present “can be employed with great psychological validity” (Fludernik, “Historical” 88).

Margaret Laurence

Margaret Laurence was born as Jean Margaret Wemyss in Neepawa, Manitoba. Her father was of Scottish descent, while her mother, née Simpson, was Irish. Both lines of the family were Protestant, therefore the author grew up with Puritanism’s religious and cultural traditions. Laurence’s work can be separated into two parts based on the setting. African and Canadian. Five books are the product of Laurence’s seven years in Africa and her continuing interest in that continent: *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954), *The Prophets Camel Bell* (1963), *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963), *This Side Jordon* (1960) *Long Drums and Canons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists* (1968). Laurence’s Canadian works, also known as Manawakan works also number five: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire - Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), *The Diviners* (1974). Nancy Bailey says in abstract of her articles: “The woman novelist ultimately diverges into a significantly different psychological and cultural mythos of woman, one in which the integrated but isolated self must learn to be its own support and create its own finality”

Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka world is incredibly intricate, spanning four generations of men and women in a Canadian western village. All of the strands of her ancestral past have become intertwined with her own life, and the force of her own gift has compelled her to write about her people in fiction. The people, situations, and places of her background are critical to understand both the “why” and “what” of Margaret Laurence’s writing. She does not always write from within a framework of imaginative experiences and perceptions that are consistent with her place, time, and life. Greta M. K. Coger point out: “Margaret Laurence recalled experiences, gave impressions of how she felt, and responded to her fiction” (228)

Laurence’s Canadian fiction demonstrates that, among other things, travel has an important role in Laurence’s life. It influences her vision, and literacy has supplied her with a

primary metaphor. The psychic path is towards inner freedom and spiritual growth. Laurence has been granted the ability to comprehend the meaning of journeying and stranger hood in human experience, as well as to penetrate “the suffering and connectivity of in the Manawaka cycle, the beauty and eloquence of Laurence’s language, as well as the utilization of setting as a human equivalent, help to shape character. Laurence has a remarkable knack for creating compelling individual characters inside a vividly realized social milieu. Laurence can be called “a Canadian equivalent to Tolstoy”, not in terms of “literary gigantism”, but rather “in such terms as a writers’ relevance to his time and place, the versatility of his perception, the breadth of his “understanding, the imaginative power with which he personifies and gives symbolic form to the collective life he interprets and in which he takes part”. (Woodcock 134-135)

Laurence’s Manawaka fiction is shaped by themes such as origins and ancestors, human complexity, acceptance of the Other, and the desire for inner freedom. These problems originally surfaced in her African writing. Laurence’s journey took across Ghana and the seeking desert sun of Somaliland. Laurence’s grandparents, teachers, and upbringing in the prairie land of Neepawa, her Scottish northern lights, became the Wachakwa River, while Ridding Mountain on Clear Lake, where the Laurences have a summer cottage, some hundred miles north of Neepawa, models for Galloping Mountain on Diamond Lake Neepawa is already well established by the time it was incorporated in 1883. With the railway, it becomes a major grain outlet and the hub of a prosperous agricultural sector stretching from Riding Mountain in the north to Assiniboine territory in the south. It is also high in dairy products, timber, and salt. Neepawa is founded in the 1870s by Scottish pioneers who travelled westward from Ontario in quest of land. These founding families created a tightly knit, mostly Scottish group, which Laurence recounts with piercing truth in *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, and *The Diviners*.

Manawaka

After five books, the town of Manawaka may be precisely mapped. The geography is precise and consistent. Laurence has come to terms with her ancestral past through Manawaka, which she considers to be a necessary responsibility for all humans. She is able to find direction, identity, and roots through the concept of Manawaka. Laurence believes that nations, too, must understand their past in order to establish a national identity. Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and Morag are unique, each perceives Manawaka through their own set of fears, hopes, and biases, resulting in a distinctly personalized reaction. They all remember their childhoods.

As a result, the reader can vicariously experience what it is like to be both the message and the medium, the shaper and the shaped, in a little prairie town in the first half of the century. Hagar resists life, blinded by her own obstinate pride. Rachel is filled with self-doubt; Stacey is looking for a stable centre. Vanessa tells anecdotes about her growing understanding of life’s difficulties and complexities. Morag deals with changes her youthful and passionate aspirations of the world and herself. “The centrality of the land in prairie fiction, a land of extremes provokes deep emotional responses. Though Laurence concentrates on people, the prairie emerges as an essential background to her portraits of them. The sensual appeal in the landscape is always felt” (Donald G 1). In Laurence’s writing the theme of the conquest of the land is linked with the theme of the imprisoned spirit. “Manawaka is a mythic territory, mapping universal human experience, and a Scots-Canadian subculture in the Canadian West. Laurence has emphasized that societies need their own myths, generated by their own artists in order to understand and fulfill themselves as communities.” (Patricia 77)

Plot of Jest of God

A Jest of God is a wonderfully realized yet claustrophobic story narrated by a lady on the verge of madness; Rachel's existence is incredibly limited, conducted always under the motto of "proper appearances." The connection of obligation to her mother keeps her isolated from most human contact. The novel is very different from *The Stone Angel*. Rachel is younger (34 years old), has not yet left Manawaka, and has never rebelled against her family. The novel tells the narrative of a spinster schoolteacher who lives with her widowed mother. Rachel Cameron's image is a near-perfect example of a "old maid" concerned with her worries and inhibitions. The novel depicts Rachel's brief affair with Nick Kazlik, a Winnipeg teacher staying at his father's farm near Manawaka for the summer. Rachel's yearning for love is so intense that she overcomes all of her anxieties and self-doubts and gets into a passionate physical relationship with Nick, wanting to become pregnant: "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" (AJG 181).

Bernice Lever asks Laurence "Canada is a country of Old Testament . . . one of exile and alienation and punishing gods...Or is here...a sense of hope and expectancy of the New Testament in our literature?" her response expresses her belief that "I think there's both" (31). She explains her argument by depicting Rachel's ordeal, which ends with the recognition of her aspirations and survival ethic. Laurence believes that her Manawaka heroes, such as Rachel, "each finds within herself an ability to survive . . . not just to go on living, but to change and to move into new areas of life" ("Sentences" 15)

Discussion

Survival becomes the central theme in *A Jest of God*. The personality's endeavor to survive with dignity while carrying the load of excess baggage that everyone carries till the time of death. This theme is linked to a number of interconnected themes, including the incompleteness of human relationships, which results in loneliness, the ambivalence of human relationships, miscommunication, human alienation, personal identity, and the case of women in a male-dominated world.

The subject of isolation is thoroughly examined in the article. Because 'death' isolates and romance is an attempt to breach the limits of isolation, this concept of 'death' which figures strongly in the novel is opposed with love and is thus depicted as a recognition of isolation. The third argument is that isolation means being separated from both other people and God. Rachel feels separated from both humans and God. With their small-town mentality, Manawakans avoid both 'Death' and 'God'. Laurence's theme of ancestors, acknowledging our roots and past, emerges at the end. Rachel Cameron represents the conflict between the qualities instilled by Manawaka's pioneers and the dreadful limiting influence of the town's limits. Rachel realizes that, while Manawaka is responsible for her ordeal, she has no identity without them. When she ultimately leaves for Vancouver, she realizes that Manawaka must and will always be with her.

However, *A Jest of God* is more than just a psychological study. It is also a depiction of socio-historical processes in Canada and its relationship with Great Britain. The novelist has discussed pre and post-colonial Canada mindset through Rachel because the Canadian people tried to get freedom from authoritarian British like that Rachel tries to get freedom from authoritarian society in the novel. Rachel represents a Canada seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past and to make its own future. Rachel's tumor represents that colonial past and its authoritarian values, while its removal signifies the end of the colonial state of mind.

Women's issues and the ancient identity conundrum. Laurence's longing for, yet fear of, actual closeness "constant communication" demonstrates that for her, the concept of voice encompasses the entire delicate, painful enterprise of personal and literary connection. When Rachel speaks, but only to herself: , "Nick - listen", she is calling for the attention of a sympathetic audience. Hagar, in *The Stone Angel*, made the same silent appeal: "Listen. You must listen its important" (AJG 282).

The story would be inadequate without a thorough examination of the theme of solitude. Although *A Jest of God* appears to be a love story with an unhappy 'ending', the novel's fundamental relationships are numerous and equivocal, rather than restricted and unchanging. The present research attempts to demonstrate this fact by focusing on Rachel's main relationships with her father, mother, her student James Doherty, Nick, her lover, her "child," and God. The people seek out partnerships in order to escape feelings of isolation. Rachel seeks long-term partnerships in order to reach out and escape into the persona of someone else. The dominant relationship in the novel between Rachel and her child is also an attempt to find the elusive personal identity.

Laurence discusses death as an acknowledgement of isolation. Death reveals the fundamental character of our individuality, which is why the people of Manawaka avoid facing it. Rachel, on the other hand, is obsessed with and terrified of Death. Rachel's meeting with the concept of death in the novel, as well as the relationship between love and death, will be examined in depth. Towards the end, one can learn that, despite her fascination with death, Rachel struggles for survival. As a result, one can observe that, although death isolates, love attempts to overcome isolation. However, isolation can include not only separation from other people, but also separation from God.

The section on God is an attempt to comprehend Manawaka's portrayal of the God figure. Manawakans avoid genuine recognition of God, as they do of Death. Laurence's, *A Jest of God*, implies that the work is concerned with something beyond human constraints, with an all-powerful yet mocking God, who, as an outsider, looks down on a world that is distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke. Rachel believes that the congregation utilizes religion to break free from isolation and form relationships with individuals around them as well as with God. Rachel's relationship with God is equivocal, as are her other relationships.

A Jest of God is a powerful affirmation of life and living, happiness in the midst of tremendous muck, anxiety, and confusion. Rachel does not grandly go insane or tragically die like those who would break life to their wills: she bends to life's blows, as most mortals have done before her, and life plays its amazing, everlasting trick once more for her, restoring vitality. Rachel's story, like all Manawaka works, dramatizes the plight of women in a male-oriented chauvinistic society in which both sexes are frequently unconscious of bias and social conditioning. Hagar's experience could be transferred into a male tonality with small changes, while Rachel's is unmistakably female. Her fundamental insecurity and passivity, financial worries, and her sexual vulnerability in the event of pregnancy, and her responsibility for her mother are all traditional female dilemmas.

The entire narrative of *A Jest of God* revolves around Rachel Cameron. As a result, a significant portion of the novel will be devoted to her character, whose analysis will provide light on the book's primary themes. The actual subtext of Rachel's story is her fear of dying. Isolated within her own mind and body, she is frequently estranged from others and, on occasion, herself. Rachel's unusual consciousness splitting. Manawaka has also helped to shape Rachel Cameron's personality. Rachel Cameron is fighting for the strengths that Manawaka's pioneers instilled in

the community, as well as the horrible limiting power of its limits. *A Jest of God* tells the account of Rachel's agony and her modest victory. As a result, Rachel begins her life in chains, some of her own making, but others imposed by her parents, ancestors, and the village of Manawaka. She resents the chains, but without them, she has no identity. She couldn't rely on her own strength. She has broken free from the binding-supporting chains and realizes how tiny her strength is. She must use and that Manawaka as an inheritance and the source of her identity at the end of the novel. Dr.M.P.Ganesan Points out: "Patriarchy is an unjust system that is oppressive to woman" (83).

Conclusion

Margaret Laurence's novel *A Jest of God* combines love with death. The term "Jest" may allude to the idea that life is a jest in itself. Everyone has a life to live. Rachel and all humans must accept the joke as a challenge and determine its importance. Rachel understands: ". . . that if life is given in jest, the joke is here to live" according to Robert Harlow" (191). Rachel first seeks a kid to shelter herself from isolation. Rachel's child has been discovered to be a tumour, despite her hopes that it would provide an answer to her dilemma. After feeling troubled, she understands that having a child is not the isolation to her difficulties, as McLay states that "motherhood does not ensure immunity from isolation" (182). After thorough analysis, she concludes that it is 'death', not 'child', that lead her to self-knowledge. She has learnt to accept responsibility and comprehend her position in her own and her mother's lives.

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