



A Search for Identity in Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God

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ABSTRACT:-

Margaret Laurence is one of the famous and the most outstanding writers of Canadian literature. Margaret Laurence, hailed as the first lady of the Canadian literature, has set mark in the realm of literature through her Manawaka series, which offer a board panorama of twentieth century Canadian life. Her novels become memorable not only with the unique Canadian voice which she provides through her novels but also with the depiction of her female protagonists. A common theme of freedom and survival can be found in all her Canadian fiction which she beautifully explores through her female characters .The central characters in a Jest of God is Rachel, a schizophrenic spinster forever anxiodtrouble and confused, she never can make a decision for herself. Always considering herself to be inferior, she fails to enjoy the pleasures of life. The novel depicts how Rachel comes to terms with herself , her mother and her circumstances.

Key Words:-

Freedom, survival, realization, motherhood, identity.

Introduction:-

Margaret Laurence is one of the Canadian most distinguished novelists. She began writing as a child in her birth place, Neepawa , Manitoba, contributed to school and college magazines. Her mature writing career began in Somalialand and Ghana where stayed from 1950 to 1957. Her popularity rests on a series of five novels ,all set in the prairie town of Manawaka ,A fictional variation of her native place

neepawa, which includes *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). *A Jest of God*, is second in the series, it won the Governor General award for fiction in 1967, written at Elm cottage, Margaret Laurence's house in Buckinghamshire in England, in 1964 -65, this novel about a spinster school teacher was made into a successful film entitled *Rachel*, *Rachel*

Rachel Cameron, the protagonist of the novel is an oppressed individual, obsessed by her fears and inhibitions. a middle –aging school teacher in the prairie town of Manawaka, Rachel's life is very dull due to its narrow range. She lives in cosy flat decorated according to her widowed mother's tastes and teaches in a school meant for children. The bond of duty to her mother isolates her from most human contacts. she has neither close friends nor close relations. Amongst the people she meets in the school, she becomes friendly with Calla, a fellow teacher. But the fundamentalism of Calla's Pentecostal religion keeps Rachel on guard. she is embarrassed at Calla's talking about the Tabernacle in the presence of her mother. Moreover, Calla looks and acts strange. Rachel wishes that Calla were like other girls not so unusual. Another person who offers friendship to Rachel when she moves to Manawaka is Lennox Cates. He quite often asks her out but Rachel does not want to become the wife of farmer who has not even finished high school learning. Lennox gets married leaving Rachel to her loneliness.

Rachel is dogged with a feeling of failure in life. She can see no dignity in the kind of life she is leading. As the novel opens, one sees Rachel standing near the window of the Grade two classroom and looking out at the children playing in the schoolyard. At the age of thirty- four, Rachel does not want to become an eccentric spinster, a stereotyped but of cruel laughter. She feels isolated because she thinks she is not attractive. She consist herself to be the object of the children's songs. During the course of the novel, she refers to herself as "a thin giant", "that giant she", "a stroke of white chalk on a blackboard" (29), "a stick of chalk", "some ungainly bird" and having the "crane of a body" (115). Rachel thus tends to exaggerate her own inadequacies and shortcomings.

Rachel feels a mixture of resentment and envy towards her sister Stacey. She compares her narrow existence to that of Stacey who lives in Vancouver with four healthy children. After her father's death fourteen years ago, there was not enough money for Rachel to complete her studies at the University. At the age of twenty, she had to take upon herself the responsibility of looking after her mother and come back to Manawaka to teach in a school.

Rachel has a strong desire to have children. As the novel opens, one notices her soft corner for James Doherty, one of the boys in her class. However, she tries to repress her feelings because she fears that James will have to suffer if his classmates come to know her liking and admiration. A show of affection might hurt the boy and he in turns might start hating her. The conservation society of Manawaka has taught Rachel to hide her feelings. That is why she want to escape from this society even in the dreams. In one of the dreams,

Rachel finds herself in a gaudy Hollywood orgy in an ancient Egypt, In real life, when she surrenders to Nick, the two are outside the town

Rachel's brief affairs with Nick, one of her schoolmates, during the summer holidays bring a sea change in her. Nick is a teacher in Winnipeg who has come to his father's farm near Manawaka. Rachel has such a deep-felt need for love that she overcomes all the constraints and inhibitions of small town girl and enjoys physical relationship with Nick. When he asks her out she joins, when he kisses her she responds, when he makes love to her she is ready. She takes the initiative in her first physical love with Nick. She goes all out during her sexual encounter and wants to know Nick's body to the last detail.

Rachel's relationship with Nick offers her an opportunity to free herself from the control of her mother. Her attitude towards her Mother changes as she goes steady with Nick. On the night when her mother and her friends play bridge, Nick invites Rachel who crosses all hurdles to go out with him. She has the words "I won't go then" (107) in her throat but she forces them in. This new-found ruthlessness exhilarates her.

Rachel's mother does not approve of her daughter's relationship with Nick. She considers Nick inferior to them because he is the milkman's son. But Rachel does not let her mother come between the two. She schemes to deceive her mother by telling her lies. However, Nick withdraws from the relationship very soon, saying that he is not God and that he cannot solve anything. When Rachel expresses her desire to have children, Nick shows her the snapshot of a boy. In fact, it is the photograph of Nick as a child but Rachel mistakes it to be that of his son.

When Rachel is sure that she has become pregnant her first worry is about her mother. She is conscious that she should conduct her life as per code of conduct prescribed by the society. A conflict ranges in her mind as to whether she should accept the child or reject it. She harps on the idea of abortion. However, Rachel finds no confidant who can advise her on the procedure of terminating the pregnancy. With no help coming forth, Rachel gets desperate. The birth of a child would mean eighteen years of responsibility. Rachel thinks of going to her sister Stacey but realizes that the latter cannot be of much help. She thinks of Cassie Stewart who has had twins of Wedlock. She decides to consume sleeping tablets with whisky and that way induce abortion. Rachel takes one tablet but has no guts to go beyond. She throws away the rest of the tablets and decides to rebel against the norms of the society.

Rachel experiences a gradual change in her. She slowly comes out of her mother's control and exudes confidence. When she goes for a medical checkup, she is told that she is not pregnant – it is only a uterine irregularity. The growth within her is not life but a benign tumour which has to be removed by an operation. The struggle she endures has a powerful liberating effect. In hospital at Winnipeg, the little tumour is removed from her uterus and with it goes her association with Nick. Rachel emerges as an adult, free from dependence on her mother. Despite her mother's protests, Rachel decides to leave Manawaka to take up a

teaching position in Vancouver .Her mother becomes Rachel's "elderly child "(203) and accompanies her to the new city .Her decision to move away Manawaka indicates that she is now an authentic individual ,trying to carve an identity for herself .She does not aspire to take a passionate flight and find social independence; instead ,she chooses to accept the care of her mother and lead a quite new life.

A negative self -concept or low self -esteem is not congenial for the establishment and maintenance of harmonious relationships. In *A Jest of God* Rachel develops a low self esteem because of her not being able to continue with her university career. Her father's profession as an undertaker always makes her feel inferior to others. She admits ,"All I could think of ,then was the embarrassment of being the daughter of someone with his stock in trade"(36) .The unpleasant fact that even at the age of thirty-four she is single further forces her to develop a negative image of herself. Her fleeting affairs with Nick is neither a deep nor a permanent emotional involvement; rather, it is her last effort to save herself from the shame of external spinsterhood:

Like Rachel,Nick too seeks to establish his identity in relation to his parents who inextricably bind him .His brother's death and his guilty refusal to work on his father's farm fetter him .He cannot do for this parents what Steve, his dead brother ,would have done When Rachel meets Nick's parents on the street and comes to know that Nick lied to her about his being married ,she observes, "He had his own demons and webs. Mine brushed across him for an instant, and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing what I wanted from him was too much"(189).Thus, negative self-concept or low self-esteem of the central characters in the novel prevents them from establishing a harmonious relationship with one another and also with the external world .

Critics of Margaret Laurence have been unanimous in their praise of Laurence's remarkable gift for characterization. Her central figures are strong and strongly maternal .Rachel is the central character who is an epitome of the best character sketch from Laurence. Her desire to establish her motherhood and feminine identity speaks for her kind heart and loving nature. She considers her school children as her own children and one of her students James is her favourite.She finds satisfaction in showing unique affection for James which is symbolic of her yearning for motherhood .Her discontinuing of university education and acceptance of the monotonous job of a teacher for the sake of her family welfare imply her responsibility as a fatherless daughter. Even though she hates her mother her unwillingness to go against her wish in an instant of her respect for elders. She hesitates to go out with Nick when he invites for a film on her mother's bridgenight. Even in her friendship with Calla she goes to the Evangelical church with her, after making sure that it is not on her mothers' bridgenight.Sometimes at the tabernacle with Calla, she feels that she cannot involve herself in the preaching, for her desire to go back to her Mother is so overpowering .She suffers from guilty conscience as she is unable to neglect her duty as a daughter.

Conclusion:-

Each Manawaka novel exploits one element of Nature or the other Air, in the form of wind and voices, is the dominant element in A Jest of God. Air has both good and bad aspects. Rachel finds the wind and the voices of those who speak in tongues threatening since they represent the same thing: escape from her prim, restricted existence into freer expressions of her inner most desires. Towards the end, Rachel does make a choice. Her decision to move away from Manawaka indicates that she is an authentic individual, trying to create her own identity. She proves herself capable of freedom. She does not achieve passionate flight and social independence; instead she is free to accept the care of her mother and to move westward into a new life.

The interior voyage is the refuge for the inner solitude which the remote life of Manawaka country farms impose on all women .As the interior journey gathers significance ,the younger generation begins to revolt against stoic creeds and narrow tradition .This is what happens in a Jest of God that satirizes small town life in the Prairies. The young women at the center of the story represents the passive and feminist component of the canadian story. Laurence deals with the status given to women in the patriarchial society of Manawaka through her vivid characterizations of her heroines in the various novels .The sidelining and victimization of women and their gradual awakening and employment have been depicted powerfully.

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