CHAPTER III

JOURNEY INTO WHOLENESS :
A JEST OF GOD
Margaret Laurence's *The Jest of God* explores and explodes the myth of spinsterhood. At the outset, she presents Rachel Cameron, a woman struggling to come to terms with love, with death, with herself, and her world. Everytime she lacks in confidence and poise. She is abnormally timid. All these hinder her from establishing meaningful relationships with men as well as with other women. Rachel is a victim of low self-esteem, which is not congenial for the establishment and maintenance of harmonious relationships. Rachel thinks of herself as dry and empty, but she fights with darkness which makes her life significant. Clara Thomas describes her condition and the affirmation of life and living which the novel makes in the following words:

*A Jest of God* makes a great affirmation of life and living, happening in the midst of and in spite of terrible muddle, anxiety and confusion. Rachel does not grandly go mad 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 again for her, bringing vitality and at least some hope out of defeat.¹

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Rachel dwells in a void obsessed by her fears and inhibitions. She is desperate and in need of reaching out so as to touch some life outside her own and yet she is bound by the negative imperatives that make up her own emotional life: the chafing ties of duty to her mother, the frustration of her surrogate maternal affection for young James Doherty whom she teaches, and the guilt of her obsessive sexual fantasies. She is full of fear of everything within her claustrophobic circle of hell, and of anything outside of it. She speaks first as she stands looking out of the window of her grade two classroom at the children in the school yard. She is walled in by glass from even the illusion of freedom that their play presents, and she is desperately afraid of her own shadow fears and fantasies. The first page of the book tells us of Rachel’s tormented, present state of near hysteria:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky
Rachel Cameron says she’ll die
For the want of the golden city
She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is the queen of the golden city -
They are not actually chanting my name, of course, I only hear it that way from where I am watching at the classroom window, because I remember myself skipping rope to that song when I was about the age of the little girls out there now. Twenty-seven years ago, which seems impossible, and myself seven, but the same brown brick building only a new wing added and the place smartened up. It would certainly have surprised me then to know I'd end up here, in this room, no longer the one who was scared of not pleasing but the thin giant she behind the desk at the front...²

Rachel and her mother live in a cosy flat which is bedecked to her widowed mother's tastes with puce-coloured madonna prints, crocheted doilies and flowered china. She teaches in a school for children in the prairie town of Manawaka. Rachel exhibits her resentment and envy towards her sister Stacey living in Vancouver. After her father's demise fourteen years ago, they were not gifted with enough, Rachel helplessly dropped her studies at university. She felt the responsibility to support her mother and came back to Manawaka to take up a job at school.
At this precise moment in her life, she fails to notice what she is doing or what she has done. She manages to get through each day, and worse still, by teaching. Each tormented night moves on to the next, but she does manage to support, pamper, and even feel some indulgence for her mother. All these facts mean nothing to her. She fears being thought an eccentric spinster. She identifies herself to be the object of the children's songs. During the course of the novel, she refers to herself as "a thin giant," "a stroke of a white chalk on a black board," "a stick of chalk," "some ungainly bird" having a "crane of a body." (121). Margaret Laurence makes a fine statement of Rachel's orientation towards life: "Rachel tended to exaggerate vastly her own inadequacies and shortcomings."³

Rachel's exaggeration of things gave room for low self-esteem in her. It is a product of consequences, Rachel develops it because of her not being able to continue with her university career. Her father's peculiar profession always made 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" (42). Another unpleasant fact that even at the age of thirty-four she is alone also forces her to have a negative image of herself. The isolation from which she suffers so much is, in part at
least, self-induced. There have been hands stretched out to her, but through fear or snobbery or insecurity, she has pushed them away:

When I first came back to Manawaka, Lennox cates used to ask me out, and I went, but when he started asking me out twice a week, I stopped seeing him before it went any further. We didn't have enough in common, I thought, meaning I couldn't visualize myself as the wife of a farmer, a man who'd never even finished high school. He married not long afterwards. I've taught three of his children. All nice looking kids, fair-haired like Lennox and all bright well. (32)

Her colleague Calla offers friendship too, but Rachel is embarrassed by Calla's differentness, by her uninhibited sloppiness, and most of all, by the fundamentalism of her Pentacostal religion.

If only Calls wouldn't insist on talking about the tabernacle in mother's hearing. Mother thinks the whole thing is weird in the extreme, and as for any one speaking in a
clarion voice about their beliefs - it seems indecent to her, almost in the same class as what she calls foul language. Then I get embarrassed for Calla, and ashamed of being embarrassed and would give anything to shut her up or else to stop minding. (32)

Even the conservative society of Manawaka forces her to develop a low self-esteem herself. She wants to escape from society in her dreams as it repressed her feelings. When she fantasies her lover entering her, the locale is either a forest or a beach because "it has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen" (24). Rachel finds herself in a gaudy Hollywood orgy in ancient Egypt. In real life, when she surrenders to Nick, her lover, when the two are outside the town. To some extent it is so because the narrow, cramped atmosphere of Manawaka offers no scope to Rachel to come into contact with men who are intellectually her equals. Besides, at this stage, she lacks the moral strength to confront life on her own terms. Instead, long accustomed to the town's expectations, she has readily accepted its value systems. Rachel accepts, thus, the conventional notion that a woman is crippled without a husband to depend upon for emotional, financial and sexual needs.
The bond of duty to her mother isolates her from human contact. Mrs. Cameron, Rachel's mother, is an egocentric, hypochondriac bound to her fears and her pills. Her pleasures in life are the small varieties of high levels, fussy blue-rinsed curls, and bridge parties. Mrs. Cameron also contributes to Rachel developing a negative concept of herself. Rachel's life is conditioned by her mother who governs her feelings and activities to a large extent. Mrs. Cameron checks Rachel's growth to mature womanhood. Rather than be a source of life, warmth, and connectedness, the mother creates in the daughter, guilt, repression, and a state of ingrown virginity. Rachel falls very readily into what might be called the 'compassionate trap.' David Stouck characterizes Mrs. Cameron as "a frail but vain little woman whose tyranny over her daughter ranges from sharp censure of her activities to pathetic intimations of her own death."5

All the time Rachel is bothered about what the mother would say. She wants an extension cord attached to the phone so that she can take it to her room. However, she doesn't do so because she will never be able to explain it to her mother in a way the latter would accept. Again, when she mentions to Calla that she intends doing an extension course in English the next term, the mother overhears and resents that Rachel had not mentioned it to her. The mother
exercises such a hold on Rachel that she makes her feel sorry for not mentioning the course to her:

Of course, dear, I quite understand it perfectly, all right. It isn't as though I expect you to tell me everything you do. I mean, after all it's your life isn't it? It is just that it seemed rather a peculiar thing to keep quiet about. I mean, it isn't as though there were any reason to conceal it ... I'm not annoyed, Rachel, you mustn't think that. A little hurt perhaps. But there. It's probably foolish to feel that way. You have a perfect right to keep anything secret if you want to ...

Such an attitude leads Rachel to hide facts from her mother. She does not tell her mother that she is accompanying Calla to the Tabernacle. Later, when Nick phones her up, she wishes that the mother had not answered the phone so that she could have told her that Calla was ill and that she was going there. What Rachel dreads is her mother.

Laurence described Rachel as 'a potential hysterical who does not for quite a while realise this about herself.' Rachel represses in herself all those burgeoning intimations
of life and emotion. She leads a shadowy Prufrock-like existence, too afraid "to eat the peach," (42) too timid to "dare the universe." (60) Rachel's consciousness and her mind are so completely, neurotically obsessed, she cannot see the world around her or the people in it, particularly her mother and Nick.

Individuals with a low self-esteem depend on others for a sense of identity, well being, and happiness. Rachel's fleeting affair with Nick during the summer brings a sea-change in her. It is not a deep emotional involvement. Rather, it is a last ditch effort to save herself from the shame of eternal spinsterhood. "Nick doesn't know - he does not know how I've wanted to lose that reputation, to divest myself of it as though it were an oxen yoke, to bury it to ashes and scatter them to the winds" (120). The arms of her lover rescue her from the "one absorbing anguish what will become of me? Me" (146). Her involvement with Nick frees her from such nagging fears and anxieties. She tells Nick, "I used to fear and don't fear now" (41). This affair arouses in her the hope of marrying and of having children. She overemphasises the improvement in her situation: "I've felt a damn sight better" (121). The urge to have children becomes stronger, as Rachel get thicker with Nick:
I can't believe it could happen, though a thing like that to grow a child inside one's structure and have it born alive? Not within me. It couldn't. I couldn't really believe it could ever happen. Nick, give it to me.

The moment Nick realises that Rachel has become dependent on him for the gratification of all her needs, he withdraws himself: "Not a muscular withdrawal. Something different, something unsuspected." (187) In a very subtle manner but without any ambiguity, he comments upon the limitations of human relationships: "Darling" he says, "I'm not God. I can't solve anything." (182)

When Rachel came to know of her pregnancy, a conflict rages in her mind whether to accept the child or discard it. Rachel harps on the idea of terminating her pregnancy, but she has no confidants who can advise her about it. Rachel gets desperate and decides to consume sleeping tablets with whiskey which is supposed to induce abortion. But she fails to consume more than one tablet and declares her decision to have a child of her own: "Look it's my child, mine. And so I will have it." (177)
Rachel leads what George Bowering aptly describes as 'a strangely pendulum life' oscillating between the world of social convention and her will, which is a negligible force. She does thing and makes decisions hardly at all by choice but simply through desperation or in the hopeless rut of lethargy that abdicates action for routine. Rachel's desperate struggle between acceptance and rejection of the child-to-be is all brought to an anti-climax. The growth within her is not life, but a kind of nothingness, a benign tumour:

All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque light headedness at the fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one. (188)

Through the torture of her struggle, however, and the reality of her operation, Rachel does learn to accept and to live with her limitations and life's limitations too: "I am the mother now" (184). These words she murmurs under the anaesthetic become real to her. They are the key to a degree of freedom and acceptance of herself as she is. Her choices are human and humanly limited, but she does have choices and she makes one of them. She is no longer afraid to leave
Manawaka, for she is no longer dependent on her fear of town for a kind of tortured security of identity. Rachel decides to leave Manawaka to take up a teaching position in Vancouver. The mother becomes "an elderly child" of Rachel and accompanies her:

We watched until the lights of the town could not be seen any longer. Now only the farm kitchens and the stars are out there to sign post the night. The bus flies along, smooth and confident as a great owl through the darkness, and all the passengers are quiet, some of them sleeping. Beside me sleeps my elderly child.

Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. May be I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshore man, or a cattle-hoof-timmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have my children in time, or may be not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen? What will happen. It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's. (207)
Kenneth Hughes brilliantly sums up the symbolic significance of Rachel's false pregnancy and the surgical removal of her tumour: "In terms of the individual Rachel, the tumour represents symbolically the internalized psychological watch-dog of an external repressive society the surgery makes the removal of a paranoic and paralysing self-consciousness which frees Rachel for action as a self-moving, whole individual."^8

Several emblematic episodes in A Jest of God are seen to lead the way to an emotional release of negative self-concept in Rachel. Usha Pathania says: "The self-concept, an important variable in personality dynamics, has traditionally been assigned an important place in formulations regarding the social nature of the individual and the character of social interaction."^9

But Rachel framed the things in a negative manner. This resulted in her manifesting her own whims and fancies of her life which are touched with putri relationships with men and women. These develop in her loneliness. The Tabernacle episode becomes Rachel's initial act of articulation, although it remains incomplete. Calla - whom Buss sees as mother surrogate (46) - helps Rachel reach her feminine maturity. Calla helps to release Rachel from her
artificially preserved maidenhood. Nick plays a less selfless and a more unconscious role in helping Rachel's growth. Their affair initiates Rachel into love; it reaffirms the Eros principle and simultaneously connects her to the maternal source of life. Rachel finds wholeness through her own being and her own 'birth' into mature womanhood. Her journey is a journey into the wholeness of life, not into death. Margaret Atwood aptly says:

To go against such overwhelming social assumptions to assert instead one's self, as Rachel finally does, takes more than a little courage and a good deal of desperation. Desperation and courage are the two magnetic poles of this book, which begins with the first and arrives at the second.¹⁰

The glimpse into the psyche of her parents gives Rachel a new awareness of herself. As she leaves Manawaka, she admits to Hector that she is doing at last what she wanted most. Earlier the loneliness of the father had aroused a sense of identification with him in her but now she is prepared to seek out life, not death. By the end of the narrative, her physical and psychic territories have expanded. Her oft-quoted words, "I am the mother now," are
the key words that suggests her maturing into maternalism. Unlike Rachel, Stacey in The Fire-Dwellers governed by the maternal principle. She is despair-stricken because her maternal voice of compassion is drowned in the chaos of the urban inferno that the city is. The maternal process is however disoriented into negative channels in her so that she attempts to live solely through the lives of husband and children. This leads to a greater fragmentation and self-destruction. However, like Rachel, Stacey is also self-aware and self-analytical. Initially, however she finds herself without a support system. Her mother's memory always fills her with a sense of guilt. The mother had demarcated as forbidden that territory where neither she nor her daughter could enter. Stacey wants to communicate with her family, but she seems to fail. The key episode here is the one in relation to her daughter Katie. A Jest of God, written from the daughter's perspective, portrays the dilemmas of the younger women and those of the mother. What Stacey looks for, and by extension, what Katie looks for is a common ground where mother and daughter can meet. The first crucial episode dramatically rendered is the one where Stacey returns home after her data Luke in the manner in which her teenage daughter might have love. It is the daughter who rebukes the mother by putting on the mother's tone and expressing her rebelliousness as well as her mother anxiety.
Her words are on purpose not loud enough to wake the younger kids. Just don't even bawl me out again eh?

(The Fire-Dwellers, 182)

A more radical reversal of roles is perceived when Stacey absolve Katie rescues her kid her sister Jen, from the neighbour Tess. Mother and daughter can now encounter each other as two individuals. Both strong and vulnerable. They give mutual support and trust to each other and share common anxieties and fears. Paradoxically, this equality makes Katie accept Stacey as a mother.

Stacey recognises all at once the way in which she and Katie have been talking. They have never before encountered one another as persons. At the same time, Katie has been unwittingly calling her mum instead of mother.

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In this novel, Margaret Laurence writes with deep passion about Rachel trapped in a milieu of deceit and pettiness. Through her summer affair with Nick Kazlick, a schoolmate from earlier years, she learns at last to reach out another person and to make herself vulnerable. She recognizes Nick's role as that of the other self: "He had
his own demons and webs mine brushed across him for an instant and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much" (189). After symbolic completion the 'rite de passage,' Rachel is 'reborn.' She can now cope with of the imperialistic and ;colonizing force symbolized by her mother and society. She asserts her independence by deciding to leave Manawaka against her mother's wishes. She is able to make her peace with her inherited past symbolised by her great father. She thus acquires a holistic sense of reclaiming and valuing her inherited ancestry.

Rachel's story is told as first person narration. It is the story of women trapped in a prison partly of her own making. But the prison here is more tightly locked. Hagar of The Stone Angel, Stacey of "The Fire-Dwellers," and Morag Gunn in "The Diviners" travel to Vancouver, England, Toronto. We never see Rachel anywhere but in her home town, except for the trip to the hospital, she makes her break for freedom exists mostly in the future. Her prison is so difficult to get out of because it is made from virtues gone sour. Rachel alternates between the two poles of courage and desperation. At the end, she realizes the childishness of her own mother, and her inability to offer emotional safety. She acknowledges our human, necessary limitations.
REFERENCES


