



RACHEL'S JOURNEY TOWARDS AUTONOMY IN A JEST OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

A Jest of God, the second of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels, dramatizes the life of a tender-hearted, spinster schoolteacher named Rachel Cameron who is living with her dependent mother. Readers are introduced to the Rachel Cameron's tedious life. She is working in Manawaka, Manitoba where she is adjusting her life with her mother. At the age of thirty-four she is single and resides with her widowed mother in a small apartment above a Funeral home without caring for not fully grown as an independent entity. She is trapped in a life what family and society expected, caring for her obsessively dependent, hypochondriac mother. Though she is of middle age she has not learnt to retain her identity with the growing age. Identity crisis, Isolation, repression, exploitation and dependency are the major themes of the novel, they form the structure of the novel. Laurence has used these themes to show the terrible condition of women in the mid-twentieth century in Canada. Laurence encourages her protagonist to move out of the feeling of inferiority and to gain her real identity to make herself free from socially imposed responsibilities. Laurence is against the social constrictions of the small prairie town of Manawaka in all her novels. Laurence's novel portrays Rachel's inner struggle towards self-understanding since she fears being used by other people and society. Rachel Cameron is an ordinary and intelligent protagonist who is searching for her true self. She is victimized in many ways, but she ultimately becomes a survivor. She survives because she undergoes a transformatory journey and does her best to change her way of thinking and living. At the end she finds her voice and reemerges stronger, and asserts her identity. The readers can find her transforming herself from submissive to authoritative. Laurence through this novel shows how her protagonist struggles to survive psychologically and even physically. Rachel finds her inner voice and strength after completing the inner journey.

From childhood, she has been besieged with the necessity of behaving in the manner expected of her, and she has grown up into a quiet, inhibited woman. Rachel appears to accept the role, she is expected to play which is a devoted daughter and dedicated school teacher. This suggests that she has successfully lived up to the town's and her family's expectations. According to society woman's life is not complete until she marries and becomes a mother. Being unmarried Rachel is one of those women with no status in a male-oriented society. Even Grace Doherty, whom she considers moronic, has been able to fulfil her role as a female. Rachel's confinement is not obvious but is imposed by the expectation of surrounding. Atwood says:

"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 advocated by St. Paul, a sense of duty, the desire to avoid hurting others, and wish to be loved. It may be hard for us to remember, now, that Rachel is not some sort of aberration but merely the epitome of what nice girls were once educated to be." (Atwood, Afterword 214)

Rachel, weak and insecure, attempts to conform to the expectations of her society as taught by her mother. She represses her dreams and desires, practising apologetic submission, obedient service and a frightened mixture of rebellion and dependence, "Do I doubt her pain? At times I do and then again at other times it causes a panic in me and I wonder what I'd do here, by myself" (Laurence, AJG 54).

She is fed up with life in Manawaka, "right away from everywhere" (Laurence, AJG 21). To find a brief sexual release she is constantly torn between her desire for freedom and the restraints of her society, her "mother's voice". (Laurence, AJG 9). This sense of demeaning herself psychologically contributes to lessening her self-confidence. A crisis point has been reached in the life of thirty-four-year-old Rachel; she is convinced she is going mad. Trapped in this Manitoba town where she has been living since her childhood, she feels stifled by developing a sense of being imprisoned. This very state of mind makes her restless, so she imagines escape from the city. In the words of Clara Thomas:

"Everyone recognizes the dream and its loss; the childish doggerel blinds us to Rachel in sympathy as we must be bound if we are to bear with her self tortures, and her delayed adolescent search for identity and self knowledge." (Thomas, 47)

This place is imprisonment for her, she is not able to fulfil her wishes due to her inabilities she has been carrying since her childhood. From her childhood she has followed her mother and cherished her teaching as an ideal path of leaving good life. Unaware of the truth of existence she remains obedient daughter to her mother. She has not understood her needs and wishes till this age because she is always engaged in looking after her mother, caring for mother's needs and suppressing her wishes. Rachel is confined to this place and her assumed duty, so her longing for another place is in her unconscious mind.

Rachel may have the power, but she feels imprisoned in this

school where she has been confined for fourteen years in a perpetual childhood. She thinks, "I would like to leave this school" (Laurence, AJG 25), but she does not have the courage to break out the childish cocoon in which she has been sheltered. Since she is a good and obedient daughter; she never thinks of leaving the place instead she suppresses her feelings and continues taking care of mother. She feels that taking care and keeping mother alive is her responsibility. D. K. Pabby says, "She feels much repressed under the suffocating dull environment at home dominated by her mother, and the dehumanizing ambience at the school, and as a natural consequences, she longs for personal independent identity and freedom" (93).

Rachel does not see the world through her own eyes, she analyses and evaluates each situation through other's perception. She is over conscious about other's thinking and opinion. Most of the time she makes her opinion about somebody not due to her own perception instead, she considers the other people's opinion. While talking about Willard, the principal of her school, she says, "He is a good principal,... I don't question that. Everyone says so." (Laurence, AJG 12) She cannot deny anybody's opinion or oppose somebody that shows her lack of confidence. It is extreme that she cannot take her routine decisions, feeling she is not able and only mother can take accurate decision. She believes, her mother has common understanding, that she lacks. This very nature makes her to be submissive and allow to be dominated. She can easily be controlled and imposed the decisions upon by the people who come in her contact.

She sacrifices her own wishes in order to fulfil the needs of her mother. Once when Willard invites Rachel for dinner at his home, she replies, "Oh – thanks –that's awfully nice of you, but I'm afraid I can't. Tonight is Mother's bridge night. I always do the coffee and sandwiches. She gets too fussed if she has to do everything herself" (Laurence, AJG 14). The same thing happens with Calla when she invites her to Tabernacle service, Rachel's answer is the same. Calla reads her mind, "You don't get out enough" (Laurence, AJG 16). These situations show Rachel is living forced life but not of her own wish. She could have gone with either Willard or Calla, but her duty towards mother has restrained her.

First time she escaped from Calla's invitation going to Tabernacle, but meanwhile, unconsciously, she promised her that she will come next time. When next ritual is at Tabernacle Calla asks her, since Rachel has promised her to accompany her. Calla is quite mature, she understands her dilemma she says, "if you don't want to come, Rachel it's quite okay. Don't worry about it" (Laurence, AJG 34). Calla offers her chance to get rid of, still Rachel does not understand how to get rid, unconsciously she says, "Oh I'm not worried in the slightest... I'll come along, Calla. Of course I will" (Laurence, AJG 34). In order to not to offend anybody she gets trapped in her own words to endure the tortures which are the consequence of her own acts though it is against her wish. After agreeing to go with Calla She thinks, "But I don't want to go. I cannot bring myself to go. Calla smiles thankfully that I feel I ought to say No, don't, or to warn her. When she has gone, I'm left with this

helplessness. I can't go. I can't not go" (Laurence, AJG 34).

She is over-conscious about People's responses to her behaviour and activities. She always takes care at public places so that something wrong should not happen on her side. At the Tabernacle she cannot bear watching the rituals performed, but cannot dare to escape from there, "I hate this. I would like to go home. Sit down. The others are sitting down. Just don't be noticeable" (Laurence, AJG 38). She takes the burden of the other people caring what they may think or say, so she continues bearing though she does not want to. Rachel has become used to repressing her will not only in public places but also in her private life.

It does mean that Rachel does not take into account her necessity, if she will do something, it is only for the sake of people. Rachel does not have self-respect, she cannot fulfil even her little necessities which could make her feel better. Even she cannot change her underwear to her wish. Wearing old underwear is not only a matter of concern that nobody is going to see but, "It's self respect, really." (Laurence, AJG 26)

Mother shows that she knows more about Rachel than Rachel knows herself, "you say you're fine, but don't forget I know you pretty well, dear." (Laurence, AJG 20) Rachel is under her arm so, her mother can live an easy life. With her age, she has learnt the tactics to control the lives of other people, especially Rachel. She has used these tactics with Rachel and controlled her life, so Rachel could not develop her ability to make her own decisions even in a small matter.

Rachel is bearing two personalities one is rebellious in her unconscious mind, and another outwardly a submissive and obedient daughter. Rachel is not able to understand the personality beneath her conscious mind. She is Rachel with her outer personality who will never go against her mother. If she continues in this entrapment, she will not have scope to assert her individuality.

This conditioning and socialization made her unaware of her own identity and her wishes; instead, she had to look after the needs of other persons in the family. Socialization of women has always reduced their status as well as their confidence which leads them to lose their identity. Rachel is an exceptional example of it. Society does not allow her to keep up with her natural behaviour and personality. She is taught the social laws. This very process makes her unaware of the debasing of her dignity and self-respect.

Mother's interference is not only important in the decisions of Rachel, but also she strategically imposes her choices on Rachel even in clothing. Rachel faces a dilemma when she hears her mother saying, "Are you going to wear that orange scarf, dear? Isn't it a little bright, with your green coat? ... Well, perhaps not. I would have thought your pink one would have gone better, that's all. But never mind you wear whichever one you want" (Laurence, AJG 46). Rachel who feels comfortable with the orange scarf but is given the choice by her mother falls into a dilemma, "I won't change. I don't like the pink scarf. But

now I won't feel right about the orange one, either" (Laurence, AJG 46). Rachel considers the opinions of other people in her daily routine, her decision is not firm and she cannot make her choice easily. She does not have her own choices, the limited choices she has she cannot maintain. She changes her mind when somebody gives her an alternative. She is not confident about what is better and suitable for her.

Grace Doherty, James Doherty's mother talks with Rachel, she boldly gives the reason for James' absence and wandering in the valley that was seen by Mrs. Willard. Rachel observes Grace gaining confidence and strength in the presence of James, so she feels that to become a mother is necessary to gain power, confidence and authority. Gradually Rachel is becoming aware of her unacceptable status. She has seen Grace Doherty and her sister have gained power and confidence by becoming a mother. She perceives in her unconscious mind, to become a mother is necessary to gain power and confidence. Mother is so conscious about Rachel's marriage that she has never thought of it or mentioned it at any moment, though Rachel is thirty-four years old. Mother has already lost one daughter. Since Stacey has married and gone away, mother only relies on Rachel so she does not want to lose her.

However, Rachel feels deeply that she is a failure because she has not been able to fill the role that society as a whole and Manawaka as its representative, sets aside for a woman that of wife and mother. She is a spinster, one of those women with no place in a male-oriented society. Even Grace Doherty, whom she considers moronic, has been able to fulfil her function as a female.

On one summer holiday, she meets Nick Kazlik who is a teacher now in Vancouver. Either she has to break her mother's spell or forget about the company of a man. From her childhood she has avoided men's company, but as a grown-up Rachel needs it either for physical satisfaction or to become a wife and mother. She has never experienced freedom until now and never shared her feelings with somebody. She develops a relationship with Nick Kazlik, her schoolmate. In his company, she lives a free life, experiences sex, goes to movies and discusses personal matters. Rachel was not open up with anybody before Nick's meeting. Nick has brought a new sensation to her life. His showing of new arenas of life greatly influences her living and looking at life. This change in Rachel's life is very important and will give a new turn and vigour to her life. She is enjoying away from the dull and suffocated life. It was beyond her expectations that one day she may have such pleasant moments.

Mother is always concerned with what Rachel is doing, where she is going, why she is late and so on. She plays her trick without letting her know. When mother learns that Rachel is going to a movie with Nick, strategically, she tries to stop them from going together saying either, "I may just get started on the laundry" (Laurence, AJG 73) or, "we'll see. There are those blankets we've been meaning to wash all spring—" (Laurence, AJG 74). Mother's strategies work on Rachel every time, but this time she does not care for her, "all right. All right. Wash them if you like. I can't stop you, can I?" (Laurence, AJG

74). Rachel learns mother is not her responsibility. Gradually Rachel feels that her mother is troublesome to her. Mother's burden of expectation, authority and responsibility is becoming intolerable since she is enjoying the company of Nick. Rachel thinks, "Why can't she die and leave me alone." (Laurence, AJG 120)

Her perception of her mother is changing slowly. She is getting a sense of her confinement. She understands the need to do something to come out of it. She thinks, "I must do something about myself right now or it will be too late." (Laurence, AJG 123) Her subconscious not only defends her but also grows stronger in defiance of her mother's authority. Now she is not afraid of her mother, she is ready to face her mother. Another character that is initially, seen as a guide but then as a seducer is Rachel's friend and fellow teacher, Calla. She is a good example of a single woman living life maturely and contentedly.

Nick has given her a new perception towards life but leads her into a problem. Rachel imagines that she is pregnant with Nick's child, but he is not willing to take responsibility for it. She had never imagined she might get caught in this big problem. Helpless to find an alternative Rachel takes a decision, "I am not going to lose it. It is mine. I have a right to it. That is the only thing I know with any certainty." (Laurence, AJG 179) Rachel decides to live and to have the child. After a visit with Calla, Rachel feels that she is ready to make her own decisions and knows she is going to be, "all right" (Laurence, AJG 182). We have proof that she makes up her mind to put her desires first because she thinks, "My mother's tricky heart will just have to take its own chances" (Laurence, AJG 183). These are her first selfish acts, her first mature acts. She insists, "It's my child, mine. And so I will have it because I want it." (Laurence, AJG 177)

Rachel is confident in her decision, but she is unfortunate, when Rachel gets checked up, she comes to know that she is not pregnant; contrary it is a little tumour. Though she has not given birth to a child she has given birth to her individuality. Nora Stovel says, "Rachel has not delivered a child, but she has given birth to an adult self. Moreover, she has become a mother." (Rachel's Children 68) She asserts, "I am the mother now." (Laurence, AJG 191) Putting the novel in a larger context of identity crisis, Kenneth Hughes makes these remarks:

In terms of the individual Rachel, the tumour represents symbolically the internalized watchdog of an external repressive society; the surgery matches the removal of a paranoiac and paralyzing self consciousness which frees Rachel for action as a self moving, whole individual (115).

She will now take the dominant role in organising her and her mother's lives. Atwood says, "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." (Atwood, Afterword, 214)

She comes to realise for the first time that her mother clings to

her because she is terrified of death. She decides to make a clean break with her past. They will go away to Vancouver where she will have a new job in a new environment and can make a fresh start. Now that Rachel has ceased to worry about what others will think, she can take a more positive stance. In the past she has been paralysed by fear, now she has gone through different situations. Mentally, as she has become strong, nothing will shake her.

Complete change has come over Rachel, now she is confident and decisive. She has decided to move away from the place that was the confinement for her. It is also symbolic that moving away from the place is breaking the circle in which she is confined. Roles between Rachel and her mother have changed; it is now Rachel who imposes the decisions on mother as she is in power. Mother is not happy with Rachel's decision, she grudges saying it is painful to her. Rachel is firm in her decision she does not take a back, she consoles, "hush. Hush, now" (Laurence, AJG 198). An unexpected change in Rachel, stuns mother, "Rachel, you're not yourself" (Laurence, AJG 199). It seems that their roles have been switched over. Rachel is treating mother as her child and performing the role of mother. She consoles mother, "hush, hush now. Sh, sh. I know it's not fair. You are quite right. Try not to cry. Here – here's your handkerchief. Blow your nose. Then you'll feel better. I will get your sleeping pill now. It'll calm you" (Laurence, AJG 200).

Rachel before this has never seen weakness in her mother. It was believed that mother was very strong and she would not lose her control over Rachel. Weakness of her heart she always imposed upon Rachel making her believe that it is her weakness. The communication between them reveals that the mother pleads Rachel but she has made up her mind.

'I don't want to move Rachel. Please'

'I know. But we have to'

'But why? Why?'

'Because it's time'

'Time? That's no answer' (Laurence, AJG 200).

Rachel used to explain whenever mother asked her, but now she seems no need to explain what the decision she has taken is right. Mother wants to know the reason behind moving away from this place, she simply says, "I know. But it's all the answer I've got" (Laurence, AJG 200). All this suggests Rachel is mature and confident in her acts, even though she does not want her mother to know why she is doing in this way.

Rachel has succeeded in gaining individuality by coming out of the circumstances where Nick had left her. She has emerged with her identity. She is a strong, mature and individual being. Rachel has gained a sense of motherhood. She treats her mother as a child who is dependent on her mother. While moving away from Manawaka in a bus, Rachel thinks, "beside me sleeps my elderly child" (Laurence, AJG 208). For Rachel, her mother is her child, and she seems commanding while saying it. Nora Foster Stovel states that Rachel, "realizes that she must be the author of her own life" (130).

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