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IGNORANCE, ACCEPTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION IN CANADIAN FICTION: A STUDY
OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S *A JEST OF GOD*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels – *The Stone Angel* (1964) *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1972) bring to the fore the lives of four women – Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Morag respectively belonging to a fictitious small Canadian prairie town, Manawaka. In these novels Margaret Laurence deals with the feeling of isolation and alienation of Canadian women and the resulting otherness and futility of their life. In order to achieve personal development, they frequently confront with their ancestral history and individual past; they achieve the deeper understanding and fuller appreciation of life which further leads to the development of survival ethic. The journey of all the Manawaka heroines culminates with the acceptance of their conditions of life as they are which they repudiated initially at the beginning of their journey. The present paper illuminates the journey of Rachel Cameron, the central woman protagonist of *A Jest of God*, a thirty-four years old neurotic spinster school teacher living a confined life with her obsessively dependent, hypochondriac mother. She was highly frustrated with the futility of her life and had intense feeling of insecurity for she has no one in whom she can confide. Margaret Laurence seems to suggest that to live a life with fuller appreciation and deeper understanding does not necessarily require a change in the outer forms of one's life, what it requires is a change in perception of life.

Key words: Acceptance, futility, ignorance, Manawaka, perception, transformation.

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Clara Thomas rightly observes that "Margaret Laurence has always written of the dispossessed" and it is apparently observed as the fundamental concept in her Canadian fictional works, more specifically in Manawaka novels (170). Margaret Laurence's characters are dispossessed in terms of their identity, their individuality and they live a life of disillusionment and destitute as they have lost their true self. Margaret Laurence spent her childhood in loneliness and alienation in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa and her stay in Africa intensified her preoccupation with isolation and Clara Thomas notices "that [Margaret Laurence]

explored themes of exile, loss and mankind's stubborn valiant quests for home and freedom, they also led her to see that these themes were particularly urgent to her own people as well" (188).

All the four Manawaka novels – *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners* bring to the fore the lives of four women – Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Morag respectively belonging to a fictitious small Canadian prairie town, Manawaka. In these novels Margaret Laurence deals with the feeling of isolation and alienation of Canadian women and the resulting otherness and futility of their life. A number of factors, personal as well as social are responsible for their isolation, including their feeling of ignorance and inability to accept their self and separation from the environment in which they live. In order to achieve personal development, they frequently confront with their ancestral history and individual past; they achieve the deeper understanding and fuller appreciation of life which further leads to the development of survival ethic.

The journey of all the Manawaka heroines culminates with the acceptance of their lives as they are which they repudiated at the beginning. They realize that the responsibility and the control of their lives rest with them. With their new vision of life and through the positive acts of their will they take charge of their lives and finally get success in altering it, partially if not completely. To live a life with fuller appreciation and deeper understanding does not necessarily require a change in the outer forms of their life, as they realise during their course of journey that it requires a change in perception.

The trend of concern with isolation in Canadian literature has emerged fundamentally because of the physical size and relatively sparse population of Canada, Moss believes that "the imminence of geophysical reality in relation to the pattern of human isolation evokes a profound response in the Canadian imagination" (109) and that "by addressing . . . the universal reader . . . Laurence treats Canadian experience as the valid continuation of larger world" (228). The experience of isolation and journey to personal development can be considered not only as Canadian but also universal as it is a common and frequently discussed theme in twentieth century literary works. By discussing the issues of the discovery of lost personal self of her characters and their search for meaning and significance in life, John Moss states that, "Laurence . . . share[s] . . . in a vision of individual isolation that is both universal and contemporary. [Her novels] participate in the traditions of Canadian fiction that they are also continuous with the cosmopolitan tradition of contemporary literature written in English is not irrelevant" (237).

The present paper illuminates the journey of Rachel Cameron, the central woman protagonist of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, a thirty-four years old neurotic spinster school teacher living a confined life with her obsessively dependent, hypochondriac mother in the same apartment over the years since her father was alive. She was highly frustrated with her life and had intense feeling of insecurity for she has no one in whom she can confide. She has been living a fragmented life and her feeling of otherness is observed from the first page of her chronicle when she listens to children's song and imagines her own name in it:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she'll die
For want of the golden city. (*JG* 7)

The above lines apparently indicate the theme of the novel that Rachel is ignorant of the world she has inhabited and it explicitly expresses her tremendous loneliness and dissatisfaction with life. She wants to go away "out of this town" to the "golden city" and flee like Spanish dancers. Rachel feels like "other" in her own town Manawaka, in the community she lives and even in her own house. She finds her house dull and lifeless with an extremely formal environment; the town itself is unappealing and the life there is full of falseness, phoniness and artificiality.

Rachel's past has intensively influenced her life and it is responsible for her restraint; "In my family,' she says, 'you didn't get emotional. It was frowned upon'" (88). Her Presbyterian family background is responsible for her communication problem. Rachel has adopted her mother's decorum and physical constraints as well as her father's silence. She is taught to be lady like who takes part in all petty social rituals even if they are meaningless. In a patriarchal society a woman is expected to have relationship only with those

whom it considers as right people. May's prudish behaviour trains Rachel to have control over her body and never speak in "tongues" and to her nudity "doesn't look very nice" (123). The silence she inherits from her father keeps her mute even at the moments of emotional outburst. When she is very angry at Dr. Raven she says "I could hurl at him a voice as berserk as any car crash" but she chooses not to speak (155). She is truly an "echo" of her mother and calls herself "My father's child" (9,148).

The parental values along with the values she inherits from Manawaka are largely responsible for creating feeling of otherness in Rachel. Striving to abide by the society's code for women she has lost her true self. She has internalized the fear of eccentricity and accepted Manawaka's demand for conformity. On the verge of insanity she monitors and censors her every action and analyses her every reaction.

She has been suffering from the inner turmoil and she says that "No one would ever know it from the outside, where I'm too quiet" (10). Trapped in the cage of respectability she rages against her self, her physical appearance. She hates her own body because of her extreme thinness and unusual height. She has a loathing feeling for her body that she perceives as long and narrow like some awkward type of bird. Her reflection in shop window or mirror appears to her as "the stroke of white chalk on a blackboard" (29) or "some skinny poplar sapling" (61) or she describes herself as "this giraffe woman, this tank scamperer" (75). Her face is narrow and angular and her hands are "large and too thin like empty gloves" (8). The above description suggests Rachel's loss of respect for her own body and it appears "other" to her. It simultaneously displays her acceptance of "a masculine society's emphasis on a woman's appearance and the competitiveness and superficiality which it promotes in women's relationship with each other" (Judy Kearns 115).

Rachel's loneliness and resulting inability to communicate with others is reflected repeatedly by M. Laurence in the novel. Due to lack of emotional exposure she feels herself weak and indecisive in dealing with life and finds herself unable to handle even the petty issues of day-to-day life. She does not know what to do or say and even what to wear. She is ignorant of things happening in life. Rachel feels like an outsider, passive observer when she comes upon two teenagers making love on a hillside and thinks "I was the intruder" (JG 79). At this point Rachel begins to realise that she is alienated and detached from the world. It is this realization that works as an impetus to begin her journey towards the development of self-identification that culminates in her growing understanding of responsibility and survival instinct.

Canadian literature shares its theme with other modern literatures. The isolated life of Rachel can be analysed under the light the twentieth century existentialist literature. She experiences self-isolation and the alienation from the environment in which she lives. In her journey to self-discovery she comes to terms with "the stultifying effects" of the past and finally attains self-identification (Laurence "Sources" 15). The inner psychological and emotional journey she undertakes to reach a level of self-knowledge, to attain mental peace and satisfaction is analogous in many ways to the figure of outsider of existentialism. Rachel Cameron is also an outsider who deals with life positively and attains fullness and significance of life. To overcome her feeling of insecurity, Rachel retreats to past; gains control over her life by facing it, accepting it, and surviving with a transformed life. Clara Thomas states that "the strong 'outsider' figure ... has been central to all Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels in the persons of both women and men" (57).

Like an outsider Rachel accepts life with all its disillusionments and flaws but she wishes to unfold the reality of life as she is "awakened to chaos" (Wilson 15). The journey of Rachel to resolve the predicament of life by struggling with it, gaining learning experiences at every stage of life can be appropriately related with the "victim experience" as described by Margaret Atwood in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. In Atwood's terms the outsider begins the voyage from "Position One" i.e. the denial of his condition as a victim, passing through "Position Two" in which he acknowledges his condition believing it as an act of his destiny, and it concludes with "Position Three" i.e. the acknowledgement of his condition but not accepting it as unavoidable and irreversible. It seems that both outsider and Rachel are linked in various important ways and most significantly in dealing with the plight of survival.

To search for meaning and truth in life and to reaffirm the value of life one must change his perception and overcome the sense of futility. An individual has to learn to face and accept the responsibilities assigned by life. Those who share the characteristics of an outsider, they "keep up a pretense, to themselves,

to others. Their respectability, their philosophy, their religion are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational, something which is savage, unorganised, irrational" (Wilson 13). These characteristics are observed in many of Laurence's Manawaka characters as Mrs. Cameron, Brooke Skelton, Buckle Fennick, Tess Fogler and Mac including others. It is very apt to quote David Blewett here to support the idea that:

[the] inhabitants of Manawaka are cut off from one another by pride, timidity, the awareness of social differences, and as a result are largely unable to communicate their feelings, or even to recognise their emotional isolation and imprisonment . . . they are spiritually dead and if they live in Manawaka long enough, like Rachel Cameron's mother, they prefer not to be disturbed. ("Unity" 31)

Such type of circumstances of the outsider to do so may lead his choice of actions towards suicide but this is not acceptable for a "Position Three" outsider as he is a survivor, he will alter his circumstances and attain the reaffirmation of value of life. The achievement of freedom cannot be conferred on instead one has to pursue it actively and claim it as a right. It is the freedom, the significance of her life and the meaning of her existence in a spiritual sense that Rachel aspires to gain.

Margaret Laurence has presented various manifestations of Rachel as an isolated outsider for she is not a true part of the world she has inhabited. She feels alienated from the world in which she lives, when she watches the young girls she feels that they "look like . . . another race . . . But that's wrong too. This is their planet. They are the ones who live here now" (JG 12).

It is difficult for Rachel to open herself to others and to understand others' intentions and actions. She perceives others with their mysteries and believes that no one exposes oneself to others. For instance, she notices Hector "living there behind his eyes" (128) and Nick also "doesn't reveal much. He only appears to talk openly. Underneath everything is guarded" (85). She seems to justify her silence by saying that it is a virtue that "people should keep themselves to themselves – that's the only decent way" (35). Even her mother does not know her pain for she feels that she "wouldn't even want her mother to know" (65). Rachel does not feel anything about herself that she should communicate with others "there isn't much to say about myself, nothing that can be spoken" (107).

Rachel's inability to expose herself develops in her unreasonable fear and this fear, like Hagar's pride, is her demon that restricts her from forming relationship with others. Sandra Djwa seems to support this point here "Just as *The Stone Angel* can be seen as a study in pride, there is a sense in which *A Jest of God* is a case study of a pathological fear, an all pervasive anxiety that tends to choke the life out of all of Rachel's experiences" (77). Rachel's fear prevents her to show her affection for a student, James Doherty because she does not want to be laughing stock for others by revealing her affection, "laughable . . . That's worse, much worse" (JG 19). She gives undue importance to what others think of her.

Gripped with fear Rachel becomes suspicious of others; for Willard Siddley she fears "I've nothing to be afraid of, with him. He has never given a bad report to the School Board on my teaching, as far as I know" (7) and "What is he looking for? What has he found? Have I done something?" (23). Similarly, she unreasonably worries about her sister's letters: "If it was a reference to me, mother wouldn't let me see" (21).

Rachel rejects Calla Mackie's friendship for she is embarrassed at her eccentric behaviour and appearance. Calla is also an outsider but she is a survivor and lives her life in her own ways, not caring what others may say of her. Rachel is in dilemma; at one time she favours Calla's flamboyant ways "I wish I were more like that" (174) and at other time her views are conservative like her mother "I wish Calla looked a little more usual" (87). She feels torn between the two ways and not able to decide which way she should follow. She is neither comfortable at Calla's Tabernacle nor she is at peace with mother's congregation. "I was neither one way nor another" (90). Rachel's acceptance as well as rejection of a thing presents her ambivalent feeling which further indicates her fragmented or divided self.

Margaret Laurence assists Rachel with Nick Kazlik, the person who introduces her to her body and teaches her to take control of her life and live it the way she should. In order to escape her isolation she accepts Nick's love and conceives a child with him, which can be considered as an attempt "to escape her isolation as a separate being" (McLay 181). Unfortunately for Rachel, it does not fulfill her wishes to overcome her isolation for she expects too much of the relationship. Nick realizes the seriousness of Rachel's needs and

reveals his inability to fulfill these “Darling, he says, ‘I’m not God. I can’t solve anything’” (JG 148). The other possible solution in front of Rachel is suicide but she rejects it as she is an outsider and survivor who does not surrender to problems of life. Rachel is not beaten by her failure instead it enables her strength and insight to try other measures to overcome her dilemma.

In her journey towards self-understanding Rachel comes to terms with her past; she meets Hector Jonas, a man who takes over her father’s business. He proves to be her saviour like Murray F. Lees in case of Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*. He is the only person from whom she could know about the life of her father and in a way about her own life. He explains her that our destiny is in our hands and we live our life the way we want and he tells her about her father “I would bet he had the kind of life he wanted most” (124). After knowing about her father’s life her perception of life begins to change; now she is able to comprehend the situation and responsibility of her life. She realizes the possibility and her capability to change it the way she wants. She thinks “if my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better, but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I, with mine?” (124-25). She has freed herself from the repentance she had for her father because Hector Jonas tells her that her father was satisfied with his life. She feels “If It’s true he wanted that life most, why mourn? Why ever cease from mourning?” (125). Rachel has developed interest in her own life. She becomes aware of her responsibilities and takes control of her life; if not complete, at least partial control. George Bowering’s observation that “Her early weakness and confusion, her thirty five year old character traits are still there, at the end of the book. They are just not so bad now” marks Rachel’s transformation (173).

Rachel must understand the meaning of C.M. McLay’s statement that “Margaret Laurence in *A Jest of God* suggests . . . that every man is an island,” (177) and her saviours Nick and Hector grant her freedom from her sense of guilt about her father’s life and the burden of the responsibility of her mother’s life. When Nick tells her that her mother is not her responsibility she gets immensely relief, “I’m not responsible for keeping her alive. There is suddenly, some enormous relief in this revelation” (JG 195). Rachel is now aware about her own life and she will no longer retreat to her dream world: “I thought if the old game could be coaxed and conjured up once more, it would be a way of seeing the days through by not seeing them . . . if gate closed, quite quietly and when I tried to open it again, it wouldn’t” (182-83).

Rachel’s experience of development to self-knowledge is observed when she switches over from dream world to the world seen by her “other eyes” though it took her very long: “The layers of dream are so many, so many false membranes grown around the mind, that I don’t even know they are there until some knifing reality cuts through, and I see the sight of my other eyes for what it has been, distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke if viewed from outside.” (151).

Rachel has done away with her fears “there never was any reason to be afraid. It was only my nervousness . . . conjuring up dragons to scare myself with” (156-57). Her new awareness and willingness to accept her isolation has given her strength to face her sufferings; alter her perception and finally live with dignity. Rachel’s perception of life has changed and it is reflected in her thoughts towards the end of the novel. She has realized that life will remain as it is now and it cannot and indeed need not change; it is our own perception and understanding that is to be changed.

The title of the novel *A Jest of God* signifies that love and death are unified by Margaret Laurence. The “Jest” could be considered as a reference to the perception that life is a joke in itself. Everyone has got life and it is to be lived. Rachel and indeed all human beings have to accept this joke as a challenge and find out its significance. Rachel must “understand . . . that if life is given in jest, the joke is here to live” according to Robert Harlow (191). Initially, Rachel seeks a child as a protection against her isolation. She thought that it would help her to get answer to her dilemma but Rachel’s child turns out to be a tumour. At this she feels distressed but subsequently she realises that having a child is not the solution to her problems as it is said by McLay “motherhood does not ensure immunity from isolation” (182). After intense investigation she infers that it is ‘death’ not the ‘child’ that has led her to the path of self-knowledge. She has learned to take responsibility in life and attained knowledge and understanding of the role she has to play in her life as well as her mother’s

life. She acknowledges the dependence of her mother as an “elderly child” (JG 201) but will no longer allow her conventional perceptions of life.

In an interview, Bernice Lever questions Laurence whether “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 justifies her claim by presenting the ordeal of Rachel that culminates with the acknowledgement of her aspirations and survival ethic in life. Laurence shares her views about her Manawaka heroines including Rachel that “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).

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