
Rachel as a Daughter and a Lover in Margaret Laurence Novel 'A Jest of God'

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*"My mother said I'd be alone And when I cried (she said) I'd be Columbus of my ships And sail that garden round The tears that fell into my hand."*¹

A Jest of God (1966) was written at Elm cottage, Laurence's house in Buckinghamshire, England, in 1964 and 1965, and was published in 1966.

Rachel Cameron, the Protagonist, daughter of Niall Cameron, an undertaker in Manawaka, is a spinster school teacher. She lives in uneasy misery with her widowed mother, locked within her own fears and inhibitions and her strength is constantly sapped. She seems to prefer be with her internal self to her external self, because it is abstract and hidden from Outsiders.

The hierarchy of Characters in A Jest of God (1966) implies that there are major, intermediate, and minor Characters of different degrees of particularization. It is precisely with the intermediate, and minor Characters - who can be accounted for either directly or implicitly to interpretations - that the psychological approach gets beyond its what connects all the individual Characters in the novel and makes them all relevant is the fact that they are social beings involved in struggle.

"Characters may be important in novels at different levels, just as people are important to us at different levels in real life."²

Mrs. Cameron, Rachel's mother, is an egocentric hypochondriac woman. Her pleasures in life are the small vanities of high heels, fussy blue-rinsed curls, and bridge parties. These and the dependence and servitude of her daughter are all she has. Rachel is neurotic and egocentric; emotionally, she and her mother are both childish, each unwilling and unable to grow up and leave the other free.

"The wind blows low, the wind blows high, The snow come 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" (JOG. 1).

The word 'Feminism' has picked up so many connotations of late that it seems to have no precise meaning, and what it stands for. According to Janet Radcliffe Richards,

"feminism has a strong fundamental case, is intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that 'women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex,' the proposition is to be regarded as constituting the essence of feminism."³

As a Daughter: Mrs. Cameron constantly compares Rachel with her sister Stacey, well-married and a mother of four kids. Stacey, like Fanny in The Aunt's Story (1948) by Patrick White, stays at a distance from her mother and only writes polite letters. Rachel and Stacey maintain a mutual

admiration for each other and the distance between them aids this. Unable to take a decision about her suspected pregnancy, Rachel feels that Stacey would know what to do in her position.

On the other hand, faced by all sorts of familial problems, Stacey feels that Rachel is clever in avoiding all these entanglements. Mrs. Cameron, Rachel's mother, is bound by her vanities in costume, appearance and bridge parties. She always cites her weak heart in order to gain Rachel's sympathy and attention.

"These and the dependence and servitude of her daughter are all she has, and to them she clings with every plot that cunning, born of self indulgence and a real and desperate need....."⁴

For instance, on one night of the bridge party, when Rachel decides to go out with Nick, she tries her best to stop Rachel from going:

"Well, dear, you do what you think best. I'd never suggest you shouldn't go. Only, on a bridge night-well, never mind we'll just have to stop playing while I do the serving, that's all'."
(JOG.100)

Stacey and Rachel maintain a remarkable understanding. This is evident in their description of their mother. While Rachel pictures her mother as "a simpering puce-mouthed Madonna," Stacey recalls her mother's "whining eyes" and the "long suffering" attitude "that never tired of saying how others ought to be."

On one side we have the readers who see a Woman who is a mother and a housewife and on the other hand Rachel who is a working Woman. The distinction between the statuses of Women belonging to two worlds is very well brought out by the Writer. But Wollstonecraft opines that Women had an independent right to education, employment, property and the protection of the civil law; this argument was needed to ensure that Women were not forced into marriage through economic necessity, and that wives were not entirely dependent on the goodwill of their husbands, Women therefore needed legal rights in order to make independent rational choices and achieve virtue; a Woman who is forced to perform the traditional female roles will do so very badly, but if men,

".....would ... but snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens....."⁵

We are held initially by the sadness of Rachel's voice and by the spread of her imagination. Every adult recognized her dream and its loss, and we become engaged in sympathy for her by the gap between her young, dream-self and her thirty-four-years old reality, shut in behind her window, looking out and worrying about turning into an eccentric spinster. There has not been enough money after her father's death for her to finish university. Fourteen years ago, she had come back to Manawaka to teach and to support her mother.

William Thompson saw women's oppression as a product of capitalism reinforced by unequal laws and also result of men's selfishness:

"whatever system of labor ... whatever system of government ... under every vicissitude of MAN'S condition he has always retained woman his slave."⁶

There is an operative irony in the fact that the story in the novel is being told in the present tense. Rachel's words on her wishing that something bad will happen to her mother:

“...You mean it all right, Rachel. Not every minute, not every day, even. But right now, you mean it. Mean. I am. I never knew it, not really. Is everyone? Probably, but what possible difference that can make? I do care about her. Surely I love her as much as most parents love their children. I mean, of course, as much as most children love their parents.....” (JOG. 114)

Rachel's mind picks things up and lays them down like a distracted woman walking through a department store. She gets a purchase on her life after she discovers that she is no longer the child, but something like the new mother.

A Jest of God (1966) moves Manawaka generations forward in time from Jason Currie and his like, the tough and “God-fearing” Scots. Rachel is a descendant of the Scots and Nick Kazlik of Ukrainians who entered into the area a little later:

“.....Half the town is Scots descent and the other half is Ukrainian. Oil, as they say, and water. Both came for the same reasons, because they had nothing where they were before. That was a long way away and a long time ago. The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God.....” (JOG. 65)

As a Lover :

Rachel's affair with Nick Kazlick serves to bring about a turn of events in the novel. Before the affair, Rachel is bound by the moral of Manawaka society represented by her mother, with her repetitions about “a woman's most precious possession” (JOG. 89-90). For the most part, Rachel mainly lives inside herself and breaks the social conventions only in her dreams which are masturbatory in nature. For instance, in the opening chapter of the novel, Rachel dreams of making love to a handsome prince, the setting is either a distant forest or a beach and the different features of the shadow prince are blurred.

“She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. He is wearing only tight-fitting jeans and his swelling sex shows.” (JOG. 18)

Rachel immediately checks herself by questioning whether she is unbalanced. Touch and trust in the physical existence becomes possible to Rachel only during and after her relationship with Nick.

“It is only during and after her affair that she ‘rediscovers body and mind as being one and the same’”⁷

For instance, when she thinks she knows nothing about Nick, her inner voice sounds her true position.

“Yet I've touched him, touched his face and his mouth. That's all I know of him, his face, the bones of his shoulders. That's not knowing very much.” (JOG. 85)

George Bowering's comments are perceptive on this point.

“But she (Rachel) has to learn that touch can come before and lead towards knowing ... and even that touch touches both ways, both people at once, so that knowing yourself happens from the skin inward.”⁸

This initial touch kindles in her the desire to know more.

“Then I want my hands to know everything about him, the way the hair grows in his armpits, the curve of his bones at the hips, the tight muscles of his belly...” (JOG. 104)

Bowering further observes that after her relationship with Nick, her obscure sex-fantasies are replaced by dreams of herself in bed with Nick. She overcomes her initial problem of communication by talking freely to Nick about their families. It is this optimism that makes Rachel,

"in a burst of self confidence that follows her first experience of physical release in love, she voices her need for a child – his child.”⁹

Nick replies by saying “I’m not God. I can’t solve anything” (JOG. 60-61).

He purposely deludes her by showing a photograph. Though Rachel is hurt beyond reason, at this point, she liberates herself from all possible constraints by accepting the suspected pregnancy and the tumor as jests of God to make fools of human beings. She also understands the confines within which Nick is operating. Rachel longs for the comforting presence of Nick. But later she cultivates an intimacy with Calla and decides to break away from the control of her mother.

Mary Wollstonecraft argued that if women appeared stupid and passive this was not because of some innate lack of intelligence but because women had not been told to cultivate their minds:

“.....Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers that little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience and a scrupulous attention to do a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man, and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives.....”¹⁰

Rachel’s need for love is so strong that she sets aside all her fears and self-doubts and enters a passionate physical relationship with Nick, hoping to become pregnant. The decision to have an affair with Nick is an important one for Rachel, since she learns to act courageously in the face of her fears, ignoring her mother’s (and her own) emotional sabotage. After Rachel makes love with Nick, the voice within her begins to panic. She betrays herself for her timidity, for her inexperience to Nick.

“He believes I was lying to him, out of some false concerns for what?” (JOG. 92)

Rachel’s brief relationship with Nick has an enormous significance in her life; she for once, takes courage to act instinctively, decisively and appropriately in the face of her fears. From this moment onwards she begins to identify her fears as inappropriate and irrelevant. For the first time in the narrative Rachel refuses to allow her uncertainty and timidity to dominate her, and her previously ignored maternal voice speaks, soothing her anger and confusion. From this point,

Rachel begins to act, her actions demonstrate her growing awareness for her own need. She starts to move towards people, to verbalize her resentments and express her need. The initial actions are small and tentative, they are crucial to her development and growth. Rachel as has been noted begins to change. When Nick stops the car she moves towards him;

“without thinking, I’ve put my arms around him, held my face to his, asking to be kissed.” (JOG. 93)

John Stuart Mill gave men and women equal political rights, and insisted there must be no bar to women’s education and employment, in practice he saw the sexes as playing very different roles in society; roles which largely are conformed to the ideology of separate spheres. Women, he argued, should be free to follow the career of their choice and they should not be forced into marriage through economic necessity: if, however, they do choose marriage, then this is their career, and they should accept the responsibilities that it entails. This means that a married women should be responsible for running the home, and the common arrangement, by which the man earns and the wife superintends the domestic expenditure, seems to me in general the most suitable division of labor between the two persons, so that,

“it is not ... a desirable custom, that the wife should contribute by her labor to the income of the family.”¹¹

Rachel as a lover needs Nick more urgently as a father for her children than as a lover. She cannot understand the depth of his own problem as a son of the Ukrainian immigrant and as a child who cannot do for his parents what Steve, his dead brother, would have done. Steve would have preserved the land that Kazlik loved and that Nestor would have preserved the land that Nestor Kazlik loved; Nick cannot. He understands Rachel better than she understands him. She does not lose Nick, because she never had him in any committed sense. Rachel’s real salvation and significance is that she is not a tragic figure, not a character in a drama that she sometimes makes of herself, but just an ordinary human being. In her despair, at her possible pregnancy, when the time comes to make the final choice then she throws the whiskey and the sleeping pills, for she cannot defy and reject life.

“At that moment, when I stopped, my mind wasn’t empty or paralyzed. I had one clear and simple thought. They will all go on in somehow, all of them, but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind.” (JOG. 170)

And at that point in her ordeal, she makes a confession that is comparable to Hagar’s confession of error, as she finds herself on her knees:

“.....I am not praying - if that is what I am doing – out of belief. Only out of need. Not faith, or belief, or the feeling of deserving anything. None of them seems to be so. Help me. Help – if You will – me. Whoever that may be. And Whoever You are, or where. I am not clever. I am not as clever as I hiddenly thought I was. And I am not as stupid as I dreaded I might be. Were my apologies all a kind of monstrous self-pity? How many sores did I refuse to let heal.....?” (JOG. 171)

Rachel has a final humiliation to undergo: her desperate struggle between acceptance and rejection of the child-to-be is all brought out to anti-climax. The growth within her is not life, but a kind of random nothingness, a benign tumor:

“All that. And that is 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 that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one.” (JOG. 181)

Laurence has admirably employed various techniques to unfold the story and reveal her characters.

Laurence used various other devices to bring out the twin motif. She uses puns and echoes, double plot allusion to twins, twinned phrases.

An extreme adaption of guise can be seen in Rachel Cameron. She herself detects, the ‘simpering tone’ in her voice to typical of primary school teachers.

This device of guise is used by the Writer to emphasize the essentially grotesque nature of existence.

She has used dreams and fantasies operate to bring out Rachel’s repressed sexual instincts. The opening chapter closes with sexual fantasy:

“A forest. Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach. It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen” (JOG. 18).

Rachel does not see her dream-lover’s features or face clearly. She only sees his body distinctly. Immediately following this is a dream of a mortuary where she sees silent people

“lips ticked and rouged, powdered whitely like clowns” (JOG. 19).

These two dreams reflect her revolt against the tabooed topics of Manawaka society - love and death.

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