

A Study of Alienation in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

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Abstract

The present study entitled "A study of Alienation in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*" aims at presenting the alienation of protagonist and her self-realization. Margaret Laurence novels are divided into two phases, The Africa and The Canada. The Canadian novels, named as Manawaka novels. It consists five novels in which, this study confines a novel *A Jest of God*, has been taken for analysis and examined. The theme of loneliness, isolation, assimilation, alienation and identity, are the dominant theme in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels. This study has to prove that the psychological and emotional journey of the alienated protagonist. They struggle with alienation from her environment and personal loneliness and isolation. They learn to face the misery of life and its beauty, they have to use their knowledge to pursue a deep appreciation of life. Finally, Margaret Laurence's protagonists are achieved a personal and social integration. They emerged as triumphant of their sufferings.

Key Words: Loneliness, Isolation, alienation, assimilation and self-realization.

Introduction

Canadian literature began to flourish in 1960s. In the first half of the 19th century, Canadian literature remains invisible. It is not noticed by the outside World. It enriched its heights after the arrival of ever green writers, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence. Margaret Laurence was born in 1926. Her parents were Scottish and Irish descent. They are follower of Puritanism. She grew up in a small town in Neepawa, Manitoba, during the years of World War Second. She was married to a civil engineer Jack Laurence in 1948, and they moved to England in 1950. Her personal experiences shaped her writings colorful.

Margaret Laurence was a Canadian novelist and short story writer, who occupies a prominent position in Canadian literature. Based on her personal experiences, her novels divided into two categories one is Africa and another one is Canada. The study restricted only Canadian novels, it also named as Manawaka novels. Isolation exile, alienation are the common themes in Manawaka novels. It comprises five novels, *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House* and *The Diviners*. *A Jest of God* has been taken for this study and examined exhaustively.

Review of Literature

This study presents review of literature related to the major critical works done on Margaret Laurence. This study provides the major controlling ideas of the research paper. The survey of

literature establishes how the present research deviates from the other critics in the appraisal of critical texts written on Margaret Laurence. A single attempt at a scrutiny of “A study of Alienation in Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God*” has not been made and this study fills in the gap. The paucity of critical studies and evolutions, an attempt is made in this research paper to study exhaustively Margaret Laurence alienated protagonist. This review of literature provides objective of the study. This study is a modest attempt and proposes to analyze the predominant themes in Margaret Laurence’s novels. A handful of critics avail in the critical cannon of Margaret Laurence.

Margaret Atwood is one of the greatest Canadian writers of the twentieth century. She is a literary critic, poet, novelist, and essayist. She wrote a book on Margaret Laurence is *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. It was published in 1972 and consist twelve chapters, which peaks about Canadian Literature and. It deals with the problems of individual’s struggle for survival. Clara Thomas has written a book called *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. It deals about fictional landscape of Laurence Manawaka. Greta M. Coger, is a Canadian English and Educator of the World literature. She penned a book *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminis*. It speaks Margaret Laurence’s Artistic technique and her innovative style.

Dr. Kaptan Singh is a professor and editor presently worked at Army Cadet College in Dehratun. She has written a book *Women in Exile and Alienation: The Fiction of Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai*, in which she dealt the problems of search for identity, self and social isolation and struggle for survival. Pendyala Yamini writes a book named *Fictional World of Margaret Laurence A Critical Study*. It discusses the problems of identity, ethnicity and multiculturalism. The researcher has consulted a critic and few writers. The view of the different critics, writer and authorities on Margaret Laurence has been analyzed in the study. But no critical text has been written on alienated protagonist of the Margaret Laurence’s novels. So this study assumes originality and fills the research gap.

Isolation and Alienation

In the novel *A Jest of Gog*, isolation and alienation is the dominant theme. Rachel Cameron is a protagonist of the novel. She is a neurotic, spinster and schoolteacher. She is thirty-four years old. She is trapped in a life of personal loneliness and isolation, caring for her obsessively dependent, hypochondriac mother. This paper discusses how Rachel meets the challenge of gaining control over her life and how she achieves self-understanding. It shows how the growth of her personality follows the pattern of the isolated protagonist’s progress to self-knowledge established earlier in this discussion.

Protagonist Rachel is alone in life, approaching middle-age without the comfort of a spouse or anyone really close to her, with whom she can confide. She feels keenly her lack of emotional security. She is made intensely aware of her loneliness by her sense of not being a true part of the world in which she lives, one of the first manifestations of her role as an isolated outsider figure. She has outgrown her place in the world and now feels alienated from it. Rachel feels powerless to deal with her loneliness and frequently withdraws into daydreams. Consequently she becomes uncomfortable and is conscious always of not knowing what to do or say, how to act, or even what to wear. Rachel feels this lack too, and chastises herself for her ignorance of things. Her isolation, especially her lack of love, is reinforced by Laurence in a scene reminiscent of the one in *The Stone*

Angel, in which Hagar lies listening in the next room while her son and his girlfriend make love in the kitchen. This scene, in which Rachel comes upon two teenagers embracing on a hillside, is similar in effect to the scene from which Hagar remains detached. Protagonist of the novel Rachel is, indeed, alienated from the world she glimpses here, and she knows this herself. "I was the intruder," she thinks (79) as she hurries, embarrassed, away. This realization is the first step in her path toward the development of self-understanding, responsibility, and ultimate survival. Rachel's essential loneliness is reflected back at her by others, and the ultimate impossibility of communication with anyone else is repeatedly emphasized. Rachel's story, like that of other isolated heroines, is one of coming to grips with the realization of isolation, facing it, and accepting it, and surviving in spite of it. She, like Hagar, is unable to communicate with others, for her demon; like Hagar's, is fear. Fear permeates Rachel's life and prevents her from forming a true relationship with anyone.

Rachel fears, for instance, to show her affection for James Doherty, for such affection she perceives as a weakness. Rachel is approaching the realization that she must take responsibility for her own life, but as yet is unable to face or accept it, and continues to retreat to the security, albeit false, of conventionality. She cannot face any such emotional exposure, believing that "people should keep themselves to themselves. That's the only decent way." (35) Later in the novel *A Jest of God* she will recognize a similar attempt at retreat when she meets it in Nick Kazlik, with whom she has a brief affair. This is among the experiences which, finally precipitate her action in taking control of her life. Nick, like Rachel, is at this point unable to face anything that demands a strong emotional response or commitment from him. He is able to accept a willful action on his father's part, but cannot look upon the weakness of senility. The position of people like Nick or Rachel is precarious; neither is ready yet to encounter pain or responsibility. It retreats from such sights, which might bring their knowledge of isolation to the surface.

Rachel perceives others hiding within themselves as she hides inside herself. Later realizes that all people remain hidden inside themselves, revealing little. She is unable to know them not only because of her own refusal to see, but because of their refusal to show themselves. She also becomes aware of just how difficult it is to really perceive another. She cannot delude herself into taking for absolute truth. She knows that her words are not absolutely reliable either. Rachel is not only unable to read others. She is also unable to communicate her own pain. Even her mother does not know her, in spite of her contentions to the contrary. Rachel ultimately realizes that her innermost feelings are incommunicable and for a long time she convinces herself, as does Hagar, that her silence is a virtue. Here we may once again recall her belief that people should keep themselves to themselves that's the only decent way.

Rachel's mother typifies the kind of person who buries herself in the superficial concerns of daily life to prevent herself from facing the terrifying reality of total alienation and isolation. She suffers without recognizing the cause because she fears taking responsibility for her existence and clings instead to the dubious security of a conventional life. How much of Rachel's insight is shared by Mrs. Cameron is unknown to us, as it is to Rachel, although we are aware that she suffers and is frightened and clings to Rachel for protection.

Rachel's fear of exposure develops into a kind of paranoia, which leads to a great deal of suspicion of others. Rachel is so involved with herself that she does not recognize a kindred spirit in Willard. He also feels a sense of loneliness and is as insecure as she is, and he enjoys the experience of being flattered by her attention. It is Rachel's demon, fear, which causes her to interpret such

dependence as a threat. She is similarly unreasonably suspicious of her sister's thoughts about her and worries about what Stacey's letter might contain. Rachel is at first unable to control this way of thinking, even when she realizes how unfounded it is. It is in part Rachel's inability to deal with emotional intensity which leads her to reject the friendship of Calla Mackie, whose eccentric behavior and appearance embarrass Rachel and seem to her to expose too much of Calla's personality.

Calla is also an outsider, but she appears to have come to terms with her existence. She does not fit into the world which surrounds her, but neither is she made uncomfortable by it. She leads a life that suits her, painting her apartment in odd colours and dressing as she pleases, despite what the town may say of her. Calla is a survivor, one of the few who sees in a land of the blind. Rachel cannot decide which approach she prefers, rejecting at once the wild emotionalism of Calla's Tabernacle and the stiff-necked reserve of her mother's congregation. This division of self is yet another aspect of the path to self-understanding followed by the isolated heroine as she is torn between accepting her experience or blinding herself to it. Rachel, to solve her problem, she must find her own way and not rely on imitating either her mother or Calla. Part of Rachel's restraint, like Hagar's, is due to her Presbyterian background. Like Hagar, Rachel finds that her memories of the past are dominated by her confusion about her father's life. Hagar was an uncommunicative man, whose profession, undertaking, set him apart from others. Rachel regrets that she knew so little of the man. She has yet to realize how little can be communicated, and grieves for the fact that she had not spoken to her father about his life. For Rachel, her father's mystery is the key to her association of love and death, which are juxtaposed in her mind throughout the novel. Nick tells Rachel, for instance, that their place in the woods is as private as the grave. It is also in a place from which you could see the cemetery that Rachel sees the two teenagers embracing. Both love and death are, in some measure for Rachel, attempted solutions to the problem of isolation. Both of these means of resolving her conflicts are investigated by Rachel before she becomes willing to face her problems head-on.

Rachel tries to overcome her isolation through accepting Nick's love and through conceiving a child with him, which is an attempt to escape her isolation as a separate being. Such an escape is not achieved, because Rachel asks too much of the relationship. She demands that Nick save her from her sense of loneliness, which is increasing, and with which she does not want to contend. Nick realizes the depth of her need and his inability to fulfill it. He gently tries to let Rachel know the impossibility of what she asks him. The other possible solution to her problem, suicide, is rejected because it signifies a total surrender to isolation. The failure of these solutions to Rachel's problems rests on the fact that both are external to her. Neither is an active affirmation of life on Rachel's part, but instead involves escape from her dilemma without actually solving it.

Rachel must not be defeated by her isolation, but must accept it and allow it to become a source of strength which will lead her to ultimate survival. Love and death are further united in the 'jest of God' to which the title refers. Rachel's child turns out, ironically, to be a tumour, a dead thing, rather than a living being. In another sense, the 'jest' spoken of could be a reference to the view that life itself is an immense joke. The challenge facing Rachel, and indeed us, is to take such a joke and make it into something of value.

Rachel finally realizes that a child would not have been the answer to her dilemma anyway. Ultimately, to have a child would not solve the problem she seeks an answer to anyway. Rachel seeks a child initially as a means of insulating herself from the pain of her isolation. It is the 'death' she experiences in discovering that her 'child' is not one at all which brings her to the Verge of self-

knowledge and the realization that she must find her own way in life. With this realization comes a fuller knowledge and understanding of the role she must play in her mother's life. But will no longer allow herself to be manipulated and controlled by her. The dawning of self-understanding shows itself in Rachel's thoughts.

Rachel does not try to speak her truths, however, and, knows instead that they will remain hidden, but by the close of the novel she has also realized that life cannot, and indeed need not, be other than it is. It is her perception of her life and her ability to control her own life that matters. What has brought her finally to this realization is an experience similar to Hagar's with Murray F. Lees. Rachel's savior in this case is Hector Jonas, the man who has taken over her father's business. Set apart initially by his chosen profession, Hector is another outsider who appears, like Calla, to have reached peace with himself. He is able to answer her questions about her father's life, and also, by extension, those about her own.

At first she is unable to accept the contention that destiny is in the hand of the individual. She is now faced with the truth about her own situation. It is the combination of Rachel's encounters with Nick and with Hector which finally grants her freedom. Rachel loses her sense of guilt about the wasted life of her father, she realizes that the responsibility for her mother's life does not belong to her. Rachel is suddenly aware of what is happening in her life and is thus able to assume control over it. She will have, if not complete control, at least partial control over what will happen to her from now on. Rachel expresses the essence of her experience of growth to self-realization when she finally turns from her dream world to the sight of her other eyes. After such a vision, Rachel is no longer able to retreat to her dream world. But she realizes also that she hasn't so much need of the dream world now. She has not, she knows, changed utterly, but her new awareness and her willingness to face and cope with her will give her the strength she needs to survive.

Rachel has succeeded in altering her perceptions of her life. Our realization of this gives us hope for her future. She has taken the actions necessary to gain control over her life and will live it with more dignity, just as Hagar is able to die with dignity. Although she will always remain sensitive to human loneliness, she will nonetheless be able to live more abundantly through her acceptance of the value of and responsibility for her own life. Rachel Cameron exhibits all of the traits of the outsider described in the introduction to this study. The sense of social alienation experienced by all outsiders, the initial refusal to reach out to anyone to overcome what Patricia Morley calls the bondage of pride, which isolates into the freedom of love, which links the lover to other humans.

Rachel's gradual dawning of awareness, predicament, experience of death, the acceptance of the ineffability of life's experiences and her ultimate realization is clearly exposed in the novel. She is responsible for her own life and no one else. Finally, she moves to take charge of her own life. Although Rachel's life is not fundamentally altered her perceptions have changed as a result of the growth of her self-understanding, enabling her to live more fully, as each of these isolated protagonist desires to do. Margaret Laurence insists that her isolation and inability to communicate, factors which plague and produce the pattern of life of the protagonist. At last they seem triumphant.

Conclusion

The conclusion sums up the detailed study of the characters in the novel of Margaret Laurence *A Jest of God*. Isolation, loneliness, exile and alienation are found in the novel in the forms of bondage or psychic slavery. It might be imposed on the characters or it is out of their control. The

summation of the study sheds light on the characters' isolation and alienation, they want to breaks it. Finally, they attained personal and social integration is clearly pictured in the novel.

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