



Narrative Structure in *A Jest of God* by Margaret Laurence

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence is one of the eminent novelists of Canada who tries to focus on women's problems, seeking to develop an identity for Canadian women. In A Jest of God, the reader can find a sign of feminism and Laurence's emphasis on women's life. Laurence, through this novel, teaches valuable lessons to the readers; for example that it is possible to change in every phase of life. Laurence also teaches the reader to develop strong relationship with other.

Keywords: Feminism, identity, Canadian women, narration.

Introduction

A Jest of God (1966) is the story of a school teacher, Rachel Cameron, and it is narrated in first person narrative. Rachel sees her life devoid of spirit, thoroughly restricted. The novel is a story about the past and present events. The story is about Rachel's childhood until the time of her middle age. Laurence only shows the narrator's suppression of disagreeable memories. Through her memory Rachel finds a change in her life. She makes a psychological journey to achieve insight into her real self. The climax of the story is in the coincidence of the story's past and present.

In *A Jest of God* survival and freedom are the major themes of the novel. They form the structure of the novel. Laurence uses these themes to show the horrible 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. Laurence repudiates the social constrictions of a small prairie town of Manawaka in all her novels. Laurence's novel portrays the inner struggle of Rachel towards self understanding. Rachel is afraid of being used by other people and society.

This novel is about the ordinary and intelligent protagonist who is searching for her true self-identity. In this novel, Rachel 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. In this way she finds her voice and re-emerges stronger. The readers can find her transforming herself from passive to active. 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.

Laurence uses the first person narrative to help the reader to be aware of the problem of Rachel, through her eyes. Laurence

uses the present tense in the narrative to show the predicament that Rachel falls into. The change from the present tense back to the past tense is an important part of the structure of *A Jest of God*. Rachel narrates the story as an observer, how, as she watches the children in the yard, she ponders about her present situation as a teacher and recollects her own childhood. Her voice is halting because she criticizes herself, she says "am I beginning to talk in that simpler tone?"¹ She can't accept her voice "my own voice sounds false to my ears"¹.

Laurence expresses that the first person narration causes the novel to be narrow but so was Rachel's life². Laurence believes that "work out their own forms and means of expression through a strong compulsion to get closer to their material, to express it more fully."¹ Laurence wants this novel to have strong influence on the readers. She decides to use the third person narrative and says: "tried again and again to begin the novel in the third person and it simply would not write itself that way"¹. Rachel's narration is more influential than the third-person narrator "the character of Rachel would not reveal herself. So finally I gave up and stopped struggling. I began to write the novel as I really must have very intensely wanted to write it...in the first person, through Rachel's eyes"¹.

Rachel's narration is replete with "interruption and fragmentation"¹. She sees the other character through her eyes. Her rebellious friend, mysterious lovers, nagging mother, her dead father are seen through her eyes. This narrative depicts also her sexuality about her mysterious love affairs. Rachel as a narrator explains the other characters in the novel, her mother, who raised her based on puritan values of her society. Living in the small city brings some sense of confinement to Rachel. Her mother leaves her to avoid embarrassment. She can't judge easily about others. Nancy Bailey writes: "Rachel engages in discourse with herself but usually as if and she were addressing an external and unsympathetic listener"³.

Laurence's use of imagery is vivid; her visual imagery

combines with voice imagery. Rachel's use of eye imagery shows her unconsciousness, the vulnerable eye imagery can be seen in her imagination about the eyes-glass eyes, cat's eye marbles round glass beads blue and milky un winking "through again let of eye's"¹. (*A Jest of God*) Sometimes she imagines "the eyes all around have swollen into giant's eyes"¹. (*A Jest of God*).

Rachel's fantasies and dreams are alive with excitement. Laurence uses her protagonist's dreams and by the use of vivid imagery, shows Rachel's world of fantasies. The opening part of the novel shows the process of image juxtaposing. Rachel wishes to be "the queen of the golden city"¹ and in May Cameron's bridge party, Rachel shows her anguish, she is so worried that and she is unable to sleep: Tonight it's hell on wheels again. Trite, *Hell on wheels*. But almost accurate, the night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning one for each house, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or, wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling.¹ (*A Jest of God*).

Laurence uses poetic tone and rhymes to reveal the condition of Rachel's inner landscape of mind. Rachel speaks ecstatically in the church. In each outer landscape like home, school, church Rachel doesn't have freedom in each place as she suffers from an inability to communicate truly, for example, May Cameron's church is a solemn, that wants the visitors to be silent. In other landscape Rachel finds the student's voice offensive. Like other heroines of Laurence, Rachel's mindscape is full of contradiction about real world. Rachel imagines forest as a frightening place: A forest is a really frightening place this night. Sometimes it is a beach. It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen. The trees are like huge walls, tall and shielding, boughs of pine and tamarack, ... Rachel is unable to see his face Cleary. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. Rachel finds only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply dark, his belly flat and hard. His dress is only tight- fitting jeans, and his swelling sex shows. She has in touch with him, and he worriess, absorbing her fingers' pressure. Then they touch one another, their skins slippery. His hands, his mouths are on the wet warm skin of her inner things. Now Rachel didn't like it. It was only to be able to sleep. The shadow prince is she unbalanced? Or only causes laugh? That's worse, much worse¹. (*A Jest of God*).

Laurence through this narration criticizes the male dominated society of Canada. Rachel is victimized in traditional patriarchal society. She is as a teacher, daughter, lover, sister, fool; she is not satisfied in each role. She experiences fear at the beginning of the novel. "God forbid that I should turn into an eccentric". (8) But at the end she accepts that her behavior was more eccentric all the time. "I may become, in time, slightly more eccentric all the time. I may begin to wear outlandish hats,...I may sing aloud, even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it"¹.

Rachel as a narrator, as an observer of her life criticizes her own

past; Connection of past and present is seen in Margaret Laurence's novel. Rachel looks at her body and her desire and to her unreal imagination; Rachel tries to evaluate her acts. Rachel struggles to be a normal person because her desire is normal. Her desire for sexual pleasure and her death acceptance of the reality of normal, but she is unable to communicate about her desire, Carol Ann Howells in her article "Weaving Fabrications: Woman's Narratives in *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*" explains about Rachel's "consciousness is dominated by gaps in comprehension and by the untranslatability of language, where words become signifiers whose meaning is always deferred. In her mind words separate themselves from meaning or at best exist in unstable relationships, so that language becomes the agent not of human communication and self-expression but of alienation"⁴.

One of the techniques of narration is the gradualness of change. Rachel's weakness and frustration are with her until the end of the story but these features are accompanied by the later experience. When she goes to the Parthenon Cafe to think about her pregnancy, but after some days she thinks about abortion and there is a crisis in Rachel's inner landscape. Sometimes she wants to speak with Nick or Calla, her close friends, to make a decision. Laurence shows inner problem of Rachel's mind and then shows the outer landscape reality. Rachel's experience shapes through these conflicts.

From another aspect, *A Jest of God* is romantic. Rachel has contradictory feeling; she loves her father and hates him. She loves her mother but she wishes her death. Rachel's sexual love with Nick is the main theme of the novel; Rachel wants to find a new identity in this sexual relationship. Through an affair with the Ukrainian Canadian Nick Kazlik, Rachel is able to escape from the traditional ethics of society.

The other common theme of the novel is about sexuality. Relki puts in "Pillar, Speaker, Mother: The Character of Calla in *A Jest of God*": A woman has different ways of encountering with her sexuality in ultra-conservative small town: she has to marry and keep on a heterosexual lifestyle; she can ignore her sexuality and let it to cause a neurotic problem, as repression is doing to Rachel; or she can sublimate it in religion--turn her sexual energy into spiritual energy. It is this final chooses which Calla selects. She ignores her sexuality⁵. When Rachel separates after the moment of union, she comes to know that Nick also exists in her inner landscape and her imagination. Her fear of isolation brings so many problems for Rachel. She demands more of human relationship. During the union with Nick "Nick, give it to me... Nick answer "I'm not God, I can't solve anything", she wants a child for her own desire, but she carries a tumor in her womb not a baby. She names "a jest of God"... "I am the mother now"¹. Rachel's request about solution to her problem is a big demand and Nick is unable to solve this problem. Nick tells: "I can't solve anything, I am not God"¹. When she thinks she is pregnant, she thinks her baby is the solution for her.

Laurence uses a series of binary structures in this novel. This method is another ability of Laurence in *A Jest of God*. Rachel at first thinks about her body and then she changes her idea. Rachel does not have good feeling in this comparison; she suffers from lack of confidence. Rachel's problem is related to her inner mindscape. She did not have the good role model during her life; her father was a shadow in her life. Her mother was a strict person.

Rachel sees herself powerless. For her mother is a symbol of good person and her father is a bad one, Rachel is also bad and Stacy is good. She changes through the story, but she is not aware of this movement. She subverts her idea about patriarchal society: If I could put on a little weight, I would not feel the cold so. But I've always been too thin, like Dad. Stacey takes after mother, and in consequence has good figure or had. I haven't seen her since the last two were born. I haven't seen my sister for seven years. She never comes back here. Why should she? She's lived away for years. She has her own her home, and wouldn't be bothered to visit here, not even so Mother might see the children¹.

This paragraph shows Rachel's feelings about comparison and challenges: if only Stacey were there if only she were more decisive, if she were the first kid of the family... Her feelings changed from passive to active. Rachel narrates her change and the moment of liberation beautifully. She frees herself from the domination of the mother. When she is able to find her weakness, she begins to have normal desire for sexual pleasure, she begins to imagine herself from "a thin giant" in "to queen"¹. Her transformation from invisible internal landscape moves to a visible landscape: The wind bellows low, the wind blow 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 city¹. (*A Jest of God*).

The Jest of God is called as a Gothic novel because in this kind of narrative Rachel hides herself in womblike places and her sexual desire form looks like Gothic. After sexual relation with Nick, she thinks he is vulnerable, Claire Kahane explains the Gothic plot: Within an imprisoning frame, a heroine almost a young woman whose mother has died, is forced to find out the core of a mystery, while vague and sexual threats to her, some powerful male figure threatens her. She... finds a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this frightening secret place of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves are confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? Or merely a disappearance?⁶.

In the form of narration it can be said that the novel follows the Gothic narratives, because it combines the element of fantasy and realism, it shows the conflict between inner and outer landscape. It shows the qualities of women's moral quest for self realization. This novel is about woman's position in the family and in outer landscape. Rachel suffers from the contradiction of her inner landscape and desires a better world,

in her interior landscape. Rachel fanaticizes about a colorful world but she thinks it has to be stopped. "This must stop, it isn't good for me. Whenever I find myself thinking in a brooding way, I must simply turn it off and think of something else"¹.

This novel is not the story of silence, the voice of Rachel can be heard during her silence in confusing moments. The beginning of the story is about her memory about the city. Rachel thinks, her city is opposes her mind landscape. She is trapped in her isolation. Rachel thinks she is a real part of the outer world. Rachel is also unable to communicate her feeling. She can't shape a true relationship with anyone. W. H. News writes about *A Jest of God*: 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 pathological fear, an all pervasive anxiety that tends to choke the life out of all Rachel's experience⁷. Rachel is afraid that someone assumes her to be fool:

I can't bear watching people make fools of themselves I don't know why, but it threatens me. It swamps me, and I can't look, the way as children are used to cover our eyes with our hands at the dreaded parts in harrier movies¹.

Rachel narrates the story as if she is an observer of her life and she did not have any responsibility for her life. She thinks all people are stranger. "People should keep themselves to themselves. That's the only decent way"¹. she is unable to communicate her pain and sorrow, even to her mother and her sister, "there is not much to say about myself, nothing can be spoken"¹. Rachel finds that she is not satisfied with this kind of life as though her mother dictates to her.

Conclusion

Laurence ends this novel with happy ending Rachel narrative voice is pull hope for future. She sees herself as a part of landscape the wind reminds her to be active. Laurence in *A Jest of God* changed the destructive modernist narrative with the story of transformation of Rachel. As Rachel sees the divisions in Manawaka she is able to see the division between her body and desire. Through her memory and hope, Rachel creates a community for herself and her mother beyond the confines of space and time.

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