



# Estranged Self and Silent Desires: A Psycho-Literary Study of Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper studies Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* through a psychoanalytic framework, focusing on the fragmented inner life of Rachel Cameron. The novel presents a sensitive portrayal of psychological repression, emotional fear, and unfulfilled desire within a rigid social environment. Using Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression, anxiety, and the unconscious, the paper argues that Rachel's mental conflicts arise from the tension between social norms and personal longing. Laurence employs first-person narration, interior monologue, and symbolic imagery to expose Rachel's estranged self and silent desires. The novel reveals how emotional suppression leads to fear, self-alienation, and moral paralysis. At the same time, it suggests that limited self-awareness and acceptance can offer a fragile but meaningful form of survival. Ultimately, *A Jest of God* presents the human psyche as divided, vulnerable, and shaped by social forces, while affirming endurance as a quiet form of resistance.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Human Psyche, Repression, Desire, Fear, Endurance,

Margaret Laurence is one of the most respected and influential writers in Canadian literary history. She is best known for her major novels *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *A Jest of God* (1966), both of which explore themes of identity, memory, and the inner lives of women in Canadian society. Her literary achievements earned her several prestigious honours, including multiple Governor General's Awards and appointment as a Companion of the Order of Canada. In recognition of her lasting contribution to Canadian literature, she was also designated a National Historic Person in 2016.

Margaret Laurence's fiction consistently explores the struggle for inner freedom, especially in the lives of women. Her novels present female protagonists who search for personal identity within restrictive social environments. Identity, in Laurence's work, develops through relationships with others rather than through isolation. Unlike the traditional male hero, Laurence's women do not separate themselves from society to achieve maturity. Instead, they define themselves through emotional connection. Yet this connection often becomes a source of psychological entrapment. Laurence's women experience a strong desire to escape small-town life and dependence on male authority figures such as fathers, husbands, or grandfathers. At the same time, their financial and social freedom remains limited. Their choices are more restricted than those available to men. This limitation creates inner conflict. The need to escape exists alongside an equally strong need to belong. This tension produces estrangement within the self and leads to the repression of desire.

In *A Jest of God*, this conflict is central to the psychological condition of the protagonist. Laurence uses the theme of divided identity to reveal how silent desires and social pressure shape the female psyche. The search for selfhood in the novel remains incomplete, marked by fear, restraint, and emotional struggle. Through this portrayal, Laurence emphasizes that the journey toward identity is shaped as much by repression and silence as by desire and connection. In *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron clearly embodies the struggle for inner freedom. She is an oppressed individual who lives in constant fear and inhibition. A middle-aged schoolteacher in the prairie town of Manawaka, Rachel leads a life that appears dull and narrowly confined. After her father's death fourteen years earlier, there is not enough money for her to complete her university education. At the age of twenty, she assumes the responsibility of caring for her mother and returns to

Manawaka to work as a schoolteacher. This decision marks the beginning of her emotional confinement and the postponement of her personal growth.

Rachel is unmarried and socially isolated. She lives with her aged, ailing, and psychologically unstable mother, May Cameron. This domestic arrangement deepens Rachel's sense of obligation and guilt. She sacrifices personal desire to fulfill familial duty. As a result, she lives a divided life. Outwardly, she performs the role of a respectable schoolteacher. Inwardly, she remains fragile, anxious, and deeply insecure. This split between her public identity and private self creates intense psychological conflict. It shapes her thoughts, emotions, and actions throughout the novel. Through Rachel's divided existence, Margaret Laurence reveals the cost of repression and social conformity. Rachel's estranged self and silent desires reflect the broader condition of women trapped between duty and individuality. Her life becomes a study of delayed selfhood, emotional restraint, and the painful struggle to recognize personal desire.

May Cameron is portrayed as an egocentric hypochondriac, who is obsessively preoccupied with her illnesses, medicines, and imagined fears. Her world is confined to minor vanities such as carefully arranged blue-rinsed curls, high-heeled shoes, and social rituals like bridge parties. Although she appears physically weak, May exercises powerful emotional control over Rachel. This control is subtle yet persistent, rooted in guilt, dependence, and emotional manipulation. As a result, Rachel becomes neurotic and emotionally dependent, unable to assert an independent will. Psychologically, both mother and daughter remain trapped in a state of arrested development. Neither is willing to mature or allow the other emotional freedom. Their relationship becomes mutually sustaining yet destructive. Each feeds upon the other's weakness, creating a closed cycle of dependency that prevents growth and self-realization.

Rachel's will is fragile and indecisive. She does not act out of confidence or self-belief but responds through fear and emotional desperation. She frequently feels overwhelmed and close to hysteria. Her inner voice is marked by anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional strain. Laurence's use of first-person narration intensifies this psychological exposure. The reader gains direct access to Rachel's disturbed mental state, fragmented thoughts, and recurring fears. The novel's psychological power lies in this intimate narrative voice, which closely aligns the reader with Rachel's inner turmoil and estranged sense of self.

The novel opens with a powerful visual and psychological image of Rachel Cameron standing inside her Grade Two classroom, looking out through the window at children playing freely in the schoolyard. The glass window functions as a symbolic barrier, separating Rachel from vitality, movement, and emotional freedom. While the children embody spontaneity and innocence, Rachel remains confined within an enclosed space, both physically and psychologically. Even the mere illusion of escape unsettles her. She is deeply afraid of her own thoughts, suppressed desires, and recurring fantasies. Laurence thus establishes from the opening scene Rachel's intense inwardness and her inability to participate fully in life.

Rachel's domestic environment reinforces this sense of confinement. She lives with her mother in a small, oppressive flat located above a funeral parlour. This setting is highly symbolic, suggesting emotional suffocation, stagnation, and a constant proximity to death. The funeral parlour beneath their living space reflects the lifelessness of Rachel's existence and her unconscious fear of emotional extinction. The absence of warmth, privacy, and autonomy in this shared space intensifies her psychological distress and reinforces her sense of entrapment.

Rachel frequently compares her own life with that of her sister Stacey, who is married and lives in Vancouver with four children. Stacey represents a life of movement, social belonging, and emotional fulfilment everything Rachel feels she has been denied. This comparison generates a mixture of resentment, envy, and self-contempt within Rachel. Her sense of failure is rooted in past loss. After her father's death, financial constraints prevented her from completing her university education. At the age of twenty, she assumed responsibility for her mother and returned to Manawaka to work as a schoolteacher. What initially appears as an act of duty gradually becomes the source of her emotional imprisonment. Fourteen years later, Rachel finds no dignity or purpose in either her past choices or her present circumstances. She experiences her life as wasted, static, and devoid of meaning.

Rachel's professional life offers little consolation. Her school environment mirrors the same powerlessness and repression she experiences at home. Her principal, Willard Siddley, appears to her as authoritative, cruel, and emotionally insensitive. His strict disciplinary methods, particularly his frequent use of corporal punishment, deeply disturb Rachel. She perceives him as a figure of institutional oppression, embodying rigid social control and moral hypocrisy. Her repulsion toward Siddley also reflects her own suppressed anger and inability to assert authority.

Rachel's frustration becomes most visible in her relationship with her students, especially James Doherty. She develops intense but unexpressed maternal feelings toward him. This frustrated maternism reveals her unfulfilled emotional and nurturing desires. However, Rachel lacks the courage to challenge Siddley's authority or to protect James openly. Her silence and compliance expose her emotional paralysis and reinforce her sense of guilt and inadequacy. Through Rachel's experiences in the classroom, Laurence exposes the broader social structures that silence women and discourage emotional expression, reinforcing Rachel's psychological alienation.

A pivotal incident with James Doherty highlights Rachel's moral and psychological conflict. Although she knows the truth about Gil Maitland's deliberate act, she remains silent out of fear of authority. This moral paralysis intensifies her guilt and self-loathing, illustrating how repression, fear, and social conformity shape

her psyche. Rachel's estrangement extends beyond her domestic life to her own sense of self. She constantly doubts her worth, appearance, and emotional stability, fearing ridicule and judgment. Laurence portrays Rachel as a woman whose identity is fragmented by internalized social expectations and emotional repression.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Rachel's condition reflects Sigmund Freud's concept of repression. Freud explains that "repressed wishes continue to exist in the unconscious and strive for satisfaction" (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 147). Rachel represses her anger, desire, and frustration in order to appear respectable and controlled. However, these suppressed emotions do not disappear. They re-emerge as anxiety, fear, and self-loathing. Rachel's frequent physical symptoms, such as nervous tension and emotional exhaustion, reflect this inner conflict. Her mind and body both register the cost of repression.

Rachel's professional life as a schoolteacher further reveals her psychological conflict. Although she performs her job efficiently, she derives little confidence or fulfilment from it. She feels powerless in the classroom and inferior to authority figures. Her principal, Willard Siddley, represents rigid discipline and emotional cruelty. Rachel strongly disagrees with his harsh treatment of students, yet she remains silent. She confesses, "I knew what he was doing was wrong, but I said nothing" (63). This silence reinforces her sense of moral failure. Rachel's inability to act according to her conscience deepens her self-alienation. The episode involving James Doherty exposes Rachel's psychological paralysis most clearly. James is a sensitive child who seeks Rachel's protection. She feels a strong emotional connection with him and senses his vulnerability. However, when James is unjustly punished, Rachel lacks the courage to intervene. Her fear of authority overrides her moral impulse. She later reflects with guilt, "I betrayed him by my silence" (67). This moment reveals the destructive effect of repression. Rachel's fear prevents ethical action and leaves her emotionally wounded.

Laurence's use of first-person narration deepens the psychological insight of the novel. Through Rachel's perspective, readers gain direct access to her thoughts, fears, and fantasies. Her inner monologue is fragmented, repetitive, and obsessive, reflecting anxiety and self-scrutiny. Rachel often imagines social humiliation and catastrophic outcomes, admitting, "I rehearse disasters in my mind before they can happen" (23). This constant anticipation shows a mind dominated by fear rather than desire. Rachel's relationship with Calla Mackie provides a striking contrast. Calla is emotionally open, expressive, and spiritually intense. Rachel initially feels discomfort and embarrassment in her presence. She confesses, "She frightens me because she feels too much" (91). This reaction reveals Rachel's fear of emotional release and vulnerability. Yet Calla's unconditional support during Rachel's breakdown challenges her assumptions. Calla embodies an alternative model of connection, based on care and acceptance rather than repression. Through this relationship, Laurence suggests that healing and psychological growth require openness, even if it is difficult or incomplete.

Rachel's brief relationship with Nick Kazlik marks a significant shift in her psychological journey. Nick awakens Rachel's suppressed desires and provides her first experience of physical intimacy. With him, Rachel feels temporarily free from fear. She reflects, "With him I am not always afraid" (114). This relationship allows Rachel to confront her own longing for connection and affirmation. However, her emotional dependence on Nick reveals unresolved psychological needs. She unconsciously seeks security and rescue rather than mutual companionship. Nick's refusal to assume this role forces Rachel to confront reality. He tells her, "I am not God. I can't solve anything" (131). This statement exposes Rachel's desire for an external saviour. Psychoanalytically, this reflects a regression to dependency. Freud observes that individuals under emotional stress often seek "parental substitutes for protection and reassurance" (Civilization and Its Discontents 72). Rachel's disappointment signals the collapse of this illusion and pushes her toward self-recognition.

Rachel's belief that she is pregnant intensifies her psychological conflict. The imagined pregnancy symbolizes fulfilment, identity, and continuity. At the same time, it heightens her fear of social judgment and maternal domination. She oscillates between hope and terror. She admits, "I want this and I am terrified of it" (158). This ambivalence reflects the divided psyche. Desire and fear coexist without resolution. When the pregnancy is revealed to be a tumour, the emotional shock is profound. The false promise of life exposes the depth of Rachel's repression and longing.

Rachel recognizes that she must care for herself emotionally and morally. She begins to accept responsibility for her own life rather than seeking validation through others. Although fear remains, it no longer paralyzes her completely. Rachel's decision to leave Manawaka represents a modest but meaningful assertion of agency. She chooses movement over stagnation. She acknowledges uncertainty but embraces change. She reflects quietly, "I do not know what will happen, but I will go" (189). This decision does not erase her psychological wounds. Instead, it marks the beginning of self-awareness and acceptance.

In *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron's psychological state is marked by fragility and inner division, largely shaped by repression and emotional control. Margaret Laurence illustrates the damaging effects of silence, fear, and rigid social expectations, while also portraying endurance as a quiet form of resilience. Viewed through a Freudian lens, Rachel continually represses her anger, desire, and bitterness in order to conform to expectations of obedience and propriety. This repression results in anxiety, self-criticism, and a fractured identity. Her position as a teacher heightens this tension. In the classroom, Rachel lacks confidence and authority, reinforcing her sense of powerlessness. Her moral inaction particularly her failure to stand up for James Doherty highlights the conflict between her inner moral awareness and her outward compliance.

Laurence's narrative technique plays a crucial role in revealing Rachel's psychological state. The use of first-person present-tense narration, places the reader directly inside Rachel's anxious mind. Her thoughts appear fragmented and repetitive. They move between memory, imagination, and fear. Rachel constantly anticipates humiliation and judgment. Even in ordinary situations, she imagines ridicule. She admits, "I am afraid of being laughed at, afraid of being seen" (19). This fear governs her behaviour and reinforces her isolation. Silence becomes her defense against exposure.

Freud notes that anxiety arises when "repressed desires threaten to enter consciousness" (The Ego and the Id 58), reflecting Rachel's inner conflict as her long-suppressed desires emerge. The revelation that the pregnancy is actually a benign tumour shatters her illusion but becomes transformative. Confronting reality, Rachel declares, "I am the mother now" (181), signaling her recognition that she must take responsibility for her own life. Laurence portrays growth not as liberation from fear, but as the strength to live with it.

Rachel's final decision to leave Manawaka and accept a teaching position in Vancouver represents a limited but meaningful assertion of agency. She does not escape her fears. She does not achieve certainty or happiness. Instead, she chooses movement over stagnation. She reflects, "I will be alone, but I will be free to choose" (190). This decision reflects psychological maturity. Rachel accepts uncertainty rather than paralysis. The novel's religious dimension deepens its psychological inquiry. Rachel struggles constantly with belief and doubt. She rejects rigid doctrine and inherited moral authority. At the same time, she yearns for mercy and understanding. Her final prayer, "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools" (192), expresses humility rather than faith. Laurence presents spirituality as fragile and humane. It is shaped by fear, longing, and limitation. *A Jest of God* offers a nuanced study of the estranged self and silent desires within a repressive social framework. Through Rachel Cameron, Margaret Laurence reveals how repression fractures the human psyche and restricts emotional expression. At the same time, the novel affirms the possibility of limited self-awareness and moral responsibility. Rachel's journey is not heroic. It is hesitant and imperfect. Yet it is deeply human. Laurence transforms private anguish into a universal reflection on fear, desire, and the quiet courage required simply to endure.

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