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**RACHEL AND STACEY: CONFINED IN FAMILIAL ROLES IN A *JEST OF GOD*
AND *THE FIRE-DWELLERS***

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A Jest of God (1966) and *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) are closely related novels in the Manawaka series that deal with the struggle of sisters to find their identity since they have the feeling of their confinement in traditional roles. Rachel Cameron, the protagonist of *A Jest of God*, asserts, "I am the mother now" (Laurence, AJG, 191), and her sister, Stacey MacAindra, the protagonist of *The Fire-Dwellers*, insists, "it's myself I'm thinking about, as well as them" (Laurence, TFD 280) in statements, made toward the end of the novels by Rachel and Stacey, affirm the changes in the lives of the Cameron sisters. Both are struggling in their life to assert their identity, which is effaced by the familial and traditional roles they are performing. Rachel and Stacey acquire weaknesses in the family and society that inhibit their growth and personal relationships. After heeding calls to action and making successful exits from the atmosphere, each of the sisters overcomes her weakness and completes their journey towards individuality.

Readers and critics alike respect Hagar for her outstanding effort to escape the stony pride that stultifies her life. Readers also appreciate Morag's achievements as a published novelist. Laurie Lindberg feels that "Morag somehow reaches a higher level of self-awareness and a greater measure of wisdom than any of the others" (Lindberg, 187). The women in *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* are psychologically the prisoners in their traditional role, which was accepted earlier as their responsibility and duty towards their family. Performing these roles has effaced their identity and individuality, of which they were not aware earlier. They accepted it as their moral and loyal duty without considering it a trouble. As time passes, they feel suffocated in their roles, until now, they performed with happiness and without grudge. The sense of entrapment makes them restless and awakens their rebellious spirit. Here, it is proved that both sisters are questers of their identity, and these sisters are successful in their quests for change because of their struggles. Therefore, the Cameron sisters qualify in both an archetypal and a feminist definition of a hero. These characters are representatives of the latter half of the twentieth-century women's predicament in Canada.

Laurence's women are heroic in their struggle. They are seen as successful questers. They demonstrate how they are heroes in the feminist sense of the term. The protagonists begin life in the home and community where they are socialized. It is observed that the weaknesses and problems they must overcome in life are inherited or learned in society and family. For this reason, it is necessary to see Rachel and Stacey together as sisters with the same parents and societal surroundings, sisters who begin a quest for renewal in the spring of the same year. By



examining the archetypal imagery, the characters surrounding them influence their mind. Interestingly, Laurence takes these sisters down completely different paths, even though they originate from the same milieu.

Rachel and her elder sister are brought up in the same atmosphere, but there is a difference in their nature. Stacey is bold and “very decisive” (Laurence, AJG, 17), but Rachel is meek and cannot make her own decisions. Stacey has not cared for her mother and never felt that it was her duty to look after her. Though the mother has given the same treatment to both as well as conditioned in the same way, the difference lies in their natural behaviour and thinking. Stacey has not allowed herself to be trapped in her mother’s responsibility. She is married and has gone away from her mother and Rachel. Stacey, “[she] knew right from the start what she wanted most, which was to get as far away from Manawaka as possible. She didn’t lose a moment in doing it” (Laurence, AJG, 17). Lastly, Rachel fears her future in the small town of Manawaka. She fears living a dreadful life identical to her mother’s, without change or excitement. As a result of her mother’s unstable health condition, Rachel feels trapped and tied down to a miserable future. Rachel constantly hopes to move away and expresses her jealousy of Stacey, who lives freely on her own. Unfortunately, their mother’s health prevents Rachel from escaping the dull borders of Manitoba to live a life like Stacey’s.

The mother has kept her under control; she has not given Rachel a little freedom so that she can attain her maturity. The mother’s interference in Rachel’s life is more than the expectations from any mother. She is always concerned with Rachel’s trivial matters, though it is harmful to her attaining maturity. She shows that Rachel cannot understand herself and her troubles. The mother shows that she knows more about Rachel than Rachel knows herself: “you say you’re fine, but don’t forget I know you pretty well, dear”. (Laurence, AJG 20) Rachel is under her arm so the mother can live an easy life. With her age, she has learnt the tactics to control the lives of other people, especially Rachel. She has used these tactics with Rachel and controlled her life, so she could not develop her ability to make her own decisions even in a small matter. On the other hand, Stacey understood the situation and made her own way in order to not get trapped in her mother’s responsibilities.

Both Foster Stovel and Howells maintain that the diverse lifestyles the Cameron sisters live are due to their natural differences in personalities. Laurence demonstrates that Rachel has always been shy while Stacy was an outgoing teenager. Readers see this in the scenes where each sister remembers going to dances. Rachel recollects, “Sometimes I’d go with three or four other girls, scarcely wanting to, for the peril undertaken, the risk of no one asking a person to dance. But I dreaded not going even more - having to make up an excuse which anyone could see through” (Laurence, AJG, 66).

Stacey remembers the dances this way: “Stacey Cameron in her yellow dress with pleats all around, the full skirt. Knowing by instinct how to move, loving the boy’s closeness, whoever he was” (Laurence, FD, 124). Their unique personalities play a large part in their lives, but family and society also contribute to the specific problems that the women acquire, struggle with, and overcome.

Rachel’s primary weakness is that she has not allowed herself to mature. Helen Buss suggests that Rachel needs a “long overdue growth from maiden to woman” (Mother and Daughter 44). Like the “girlish” (Laurence, AJG, 22) bedroom she sleeps in, nothing has changed in her life though it has been for a very long time. She is not capable of asserting herself in any aspect of her life, nor does she feel that she deserves to assert herself. She feels that her mother,



May, “speaks as though I were about twelve” (Laurence, AJG, 63-4), and even worse, Rachel sees herself as a not-grown-up person. Considering her mother and Stacey on the same level when she says, “Mothers of the world, unite” (Laurence, AJG, 28), she proceeds to position herself with her nieces and nephews, “You have nothing to lose but your children” (Laurence, AJG, 28-9).

Stacey has moved past Rachel’s underdeveloped emotional maturation but has her own problems. Stacey, as the wife of Mac MacAindra and the mother of Katie, Ian, Duncan, and Jen, has misplaced her sexual self while becoming a helpmate and a caregiver. Katie’s budding sexuality is a constant reminder to Stacey of the part of herself that she can no longer express. She questions, “What’s left of me? Where have I gone?” (Laurence, TFD, 70).

The atmosphere in which these sisters have grown up has taught them to repress natural feelings. May, the mother of Stacey and Rachel, believes that people must put on a good appearance and repress emotions or face censure. When a member of her church sings an off-key solo, May calls it a ‘disgrace’ that should not be allowed (Laurence, AJG, 49). May is always critical of everything and everyone, “never tired of saying how others ought to be and never were” (Laurence, TFD, 21). She is cute and slim and has the vigour for weekly hairdos and bridge parties, but she plays her unhealthy heart as a trump to control others, especially Rachel. Margaret Atwood calls May a “mother who plays guilt like a violin” (Laurence, AJG, 214). As Rachel says, a mother’s “weapons are invisible and she would never admit even to carrying them, much less putting them to use” (Laurence, AJG, 46). May is a dominant character, having the capability of putting others in her control. Just the same, May’s manipulations pass a panic of being judged onto her daughters.

May is in power to decide which behaviour for her girl is decent and acceptable in society. She only allows what she considers polite speech and teaches her daughters, “don’t talk about it - it isn’t nice” (Laurence, TFD, 155) because May cannot tolerate openness. Stacey wonders, “what would happen if just for once I put down what was really happening” (Laurence, TFD, 138). May has never offered them a chance to go their own way since their childhood. Although both sisters are grown up, they cannot escape from the hold of their mother, so they struggle to overcome this learned weakness in themselves.

The mother is the most influential factor in their life, and they learn lessons from her; Rachel and Stacey also retain things they learned from their father. Because their father died fourteen years ago, readers meet Niall Cameron only through the memories of his daughters. A funeral director and an alcoholic, he avoided his family as much as possible. Rachel wonders, “whether he possibly felt at ease with them, the unspeaking ones, and out of place in our house, things being what they were” (Laurence, AJG, 20), while Stacey remembers father as, “capable only of dressing the dead in between bouts with his own special embalming fluid” (Laurence, TFD, 11). The Cameron sisters learned to avoid directness in communication and life from their father. Because he lived a life that was as much dead as alive, they too accept positions in life that are less than complete. Foster Stovel accuses Niall of burdening his daughters with “a living death in the mausoleum of the Cameron Funeral Home” (Stovel, 121). Rachel tolerates a life that is less than fully adult, and Stacey accepts being a fragmented woman.

In bringing up a child, not only does family play a role, but also at the same time society contributes to its development. Besides, weaknesses from their family, these sisters also have their problems imposed by the society that was their youthful, atmosphere. Though the Cameron sisters may be women of the 1960s, their role models for womanhood are of their mother’s generation, forcing the younger women to grapple with extremely restricted societal roles for women. Howells

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suggests that the cultural and social inheritance seen in these sister novels makes a noted impact on Rachel and Stacey, “Here female voices speak out of domestic spheres and nurturing roles, never openly dissenting from them any more than their mother had done, and indeed in their own lies confirming traditional cultural patterns” (Howells, 94-5). The parochialism of Manawaka society that is noted in *The Stone Angel* continues to imprison its inhabitants even many years later. Atwood states that Rachel is the “epitome of what nice girls were once educated to be” (Atwood, Afterword, 214), which is self-sacrificing in the extreme. Both girls are caught up in their society’s demand for appearances, which leads more to anxiety and hypocrisy than to truth. The societal atmosphere is as damaging as the Cameron family atmosphere.

To prove and assert their identities, they need to break free from the mindsets developed in their family and society. Before examining their departures from these atmospheres, it is important to understand how devastating the impact of their weaknesses is for both sisters. As adults, they are seriously hampered and haunted by their acquired weaknesses, and so the reader appreciates the difficulty of Rachel’s and Stacey’s quests. Both sisters show the effects of their upbringing before they fall from innocence and heed the call to adventure. The communication difficulties of each woman are noted, as well as proof of Rachel’s immaturity and Stacey’s loss of Eros.

The hero’s quest is not easy, and here, Rachel’s coming to terms with her individuality is not fighting with anything outside, but to kill the weakness she has retained and nurtured since childhood. Most heroes become orphans in one manner or another before they begin a quest. Because Rachel does not yet assert herself as an adult, she cannot accept the thought of losing her remaining parent and living on her own. She fears that if she upsets her mother, her heart will stop. So as not to take a risk for change, she keeps her life as stagnant as her mother’s; her routine is ever the same, and she curtails her social life to wait on her mother. While inwardly complaining and flagellating herself for wanting to break out of this stifling routine, Rachel says, “I can’t begrudge her. Anyone decent would be only too glad” (Laurence, AJG, 21). Yet, she does resent this subservient position. She has a sense of her suppressing feelings, but she is helpless. She does not question. Instead, she continues the routine. She sees her former students mature in sex; she feels mocked. Her attachment to her mother and her heart makes her weak; she does not want to take any step that may either hurt her mother or put her in danger.

Though, Stacey is in some manner different from Rachel but retains weakness in adult life. Stacey is also confined to her circumstances since she is married because, archetypally, married women are frequently seen in “enclosures” (Pratt, 45). She thinks, “I don’t get out enough. My boundaries are four walls” (Laurence, TFD, 69). As a wife and mother, Stacey MacAindra misplaces the Eros that had given such pleasure and definition to Stacey Cameron as a single woman. In separate examinations, Bailey and Bus point out that what Stacey seeks is an integration of her maternity and her sexuality.

Laurence emphasizes that Stacey’s struggle... is to maintain the real and erotic part of herself that Manawaka society had tried so hard to destroy, but that is essential, according to psychologists, if a woman is to be able to value individual relationships and the fulfilment of personality, rather than simply subordinate personal identity to family and social norms (Bailey, 113).



In a patriarchal society, a mother is expected to devote herself to her husband and children. She should be selfless, and her life is only for them. Here, Stacey has the same problem, but aware of her wishes and confinement, she falls into a dilemma.

Stacey internally fights against the “injustice” (Laurence, TFD, 15) that labels her not as a sexual individual but as the mother of four children and as Mac’s wife. Since she is longing for the past, her thirty-nine-year-old looks bother her; she is sure others see her only as “this slightly too short and too amply rumped woman” (Laurence, TFD, 15) who never manages to keep up with the latest styles or fashion colours. When Buckle’s sexuality excites and frightens her, she handles him with her “good wife and mother voice” (Laurence, TFD, 49). She feels that her maternal role is exclusive and that she must destroy herself.

Stacey’s problem with communication is apparent in her dealings with her husband and her children. The relationship between her and Mac is every bit as strained as were the exchanges between May and Niall Cameron. In order to avoid it where Niall had used the mortuary to avoid communicating, Mac withdraws from his study. Stacey is tired of her mundane life. In her mind, she pleads, “Can’t we ever Say anything to one another to make up for the lies, the trivialities, the tiredness we never knew about until it had taken up permanent residence inside our arteries?” (Laurence, TFD, 25) Mac insists that their lack of communication “doesn’t matter” (Laurence, TFD, 25) and “there isn’t any use in talking” (Laurence, TFD, 58), but this void torments Stacey.

Lacking communication with Mac, Stacey diverts it on her children but feels inadequate. The most noticeable metaphor in the novel for the communication problem shared by the MacAindras is Jen’s “determin[ation] not to communicate” (Laurence, TFD, 9). This youngest child makes only unintelligible noises, much like the way Stacey feels she communicates. Katie let her mother know that she talks in, “outdated slang” (Laurence, FD, 48), so when Stacey cannot find adequate words, she pours another gin and tonic, retreats into her own mind, and crowns herself, “Explainer of the Year” (Laurence, FD, 47). Her sons hide their feelings from her, and she does not have the power to break through to their young male thoughts, their “locked rooms” (Laurence, FD, 198).

Laurence provides her heroes with guides, who encourage them to make forward movements in life, and captors, who hold them back. Laurence often complicates characters by giving them more than one role, so a hero must be very careful in deciphering mixed signals. Nick Kazlik appears as the person who affects the major change or “fall into life” (Pearson and Pope, 142) for Rachel. We see him as the catalyst that drags her into the world. As a green-world lover, he challenges her to break away from her mother’s domination and accept his sexual advances. He is an example of an adult in charge of his own life. Still, through no fault of his own, the positive act of challenging Rachel becomes a negative one, and Nick becomes not a saviour but a seducer.

These sisters have been carrying weaknesses adopted from the family and society, which have made their lives tedious and troublesome. They are trapped in a perverted identity. The Cameron sisters are imprisoned by their problems. Seeing how debilitated the sisters are with their communication problems, Rachel’s lack of maturity, and Stacey’s loss of Eros, we now have a greater respect for the quests that the sisters are about to undertake to find wholeness. Their confinement is not their destiny; they should be the author of their lives. They should take the initiative to gain their freedom. No saviour is coming to take them out of their predicament, but in their quests, Rachel and Stacey both meet seducers and guides, hear calls to action, take a fall from innocence, and do battle with their weaknesses before they make the changes necessary for their own salvation.



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