Original Article

Rapunzel Syndrome: A Study of Self Discovery And Personhood In Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, A Jest Of God And The Fire-Dwellers

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Abstract

The present article will essay to examine Margaret Laurence's three novels – The Stone Angel, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers – by anchoring the discussion within the framework of Rapunzel Syndrome to expose social and personal barriers that act as drain on the female protagonists' realization of selfhood. The paper will chart out the odyssey of these independent, intelligent and confident women from being prisoners of socio-familial cages to eventual self-discovery, thus emerging as convincing and breathing women by shedding the false wrappings shrouding their personas.

Keywords: Personal Relationships, Societal Expectations, Trapped Self, Rapunzel Syndrome, Self Discovery.

INTRODUCTION:

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987), one of the great novelists of the twentieth century, has written award-winning novels, children's literature, an autobiography, a book of translations, poetry and numerous articles and essays. Known for her outspoken support of peace, women's rights and other progressive causes, her fiction focuses on New Woman who is portrayed as an independent, intelligent, confident and assertive person, in spite of her struggles for freedom, self-understanding and acceptance. Manawaka, the fictional town in the Canadian province of Manitoba forms the geographical backdrop of some of her novels and short stories. Laurence's *oeuvre* reflects her erudition and real life experiences as a minority in Africa which had transformed her from a young, idealistic western liberal to a mature woman with an empirical understanding of the problems of the emerging and developing nations, thus enriching her awareness of human predicament as reflected through her characters' inward odyssey of struggle and determination to survive against hostile circumstances to carve out their personal and professional spaces. Laurence's creative consciousness engages itself in the struggle of her female characters and their odyssey from unconsciousness to consciousness, blindness to self-awareness and from unknown to known to recreate their identities and contours of selfhood and become their fuller self by retreating to their inheritance to resolve the dilemmas of identity and survival. Her remarkable delineation of protagonists as opposites of the she-devil, the angel of the house, devoted spouse or healing Madonna dramatize their journey towards self-discovery by transcending the conventional sexual barriers. It illustrates, what women are and what they are supposed to be like. All her protagonists rebel against the conventions of society and it is not treated as a negative phenomenon because it leads them towards self-actualization.

The present article uses the concept of 'Rapunzel Syndrome' to evaluate Margaret Laurence's three novels - *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*. 'Rapunzel Syndrome' has been derived from a German fairytale character Rapunzel, who was trapped in a concrete tower and was rescued by Prince Charming. In Rapunzel Syndrome, the tower is symbolic of a cage comprising socio-familial expectations and stereotypical gendered roles. Margaret Atwood sets out four elements as, "Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her . . . the tower she is imprisoned in . . . the attitudes of society symbolized usually by her house and children . . . and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape" (Atwood, 209). In the fictional world of Margaret Laurence there is no liberating agent. However, the protagonists realize their situation, negotiate their nagging fears and weaknesses to regain strength and rediscover their identity and individuality to move forward to self-discovery and personhood by breaking the cages of patriarchy and gender, and breathing freedom.

The major aspect of discussion is the psychological facet of protagonists who feel entrapped in the 'concrete tower' of their bodies, which they cannot recognize as their own. As Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is contorted by old age and Stacey in *The Fire Dwellers* is distorted by fat, therefore they urge to search for their freedom, individuality and personhood. It is true that 'free will' is partially freedom but it's false to understand the concept of freedom in a concrete definition of dictionary. Freedom is subjective therefore, it can be perceived in a different way by different people in different situations. Freedom in one's life is as simple as the reality of the need to rest and eat and as ultimate as death. Freedom is not mere acceptance out of necessity but of choice. Correspondingly, freedom is not when one fights against reality but eulogizes reality.

In *The Stone Angel*, Laurence represents her first Canadian protagonist, Hagar Shipley, who developed in her mind through her Prairie background. It is considered the landmark work in Canadian literature and the foundation of Laurence's career. Her literary depiction of the fictional town Manawaka based on her hometown Neepawa, Manitoba placed it substantially in Canada's imaginative landscape. *The Stone Angel*, tells the story of a woman in her ninety, as an ugly old aged woman with distorted and twisted nature, self-caused by her whiplash tongue and proud nature. Thomas explains her situation as, "Above all she is rampant with memory, and she is still and desperately, rampant with life. We share in her last short and bitter struggle to maintain her independence; more important, we share in her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey towards self-knowledge and, finally a limited peace" (Thomas, 61).

For Hagar Shipley, the tower of imprisonment is her old age, deformed and ill body, which makes it uncertain for her to move freely or to take care of herself without depending upon others. Hagar's pride makes it difficult for Doris and Marvin to take care of her. The resent and merciless approach of Hagar toward people ruins her social relationships as well. Yet she has the capability of ruthless honesty regarding herself:

I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the…below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been struck there. The hair, which should by rights be black, is yellowed white…Well, Hagar Shipley, you are a sight for sore eyes all right. (The Stone Angel, 79)

Here, the spirited pride of Hagar works as the 'wicked witch' whose clasp is so tightly wrapped around her that she ignores the affection and concerns of her family like a proud peacock. She admits that "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone…for I carried my chains within me…" (*The Stone Angel*, 292) She confesses that pride did not let her acknowledge or confront fears and hatred.

Hagar has inherited her pride from her father as mentioned in the initial pages of the novel, "Above The Town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand… as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied…" (*The Stone Angel*, 3) She bears a resemblance to her father and her astute nature restrained her from talking to other people as she "never believed in wasting a word or a minute" (*The Stone Angel*, 6-7) on other people. Due to this reason, she was not socially active because she didn't care to spend time with others. She was always insecure and bumpy about anyone coming close to her, her brother, father or children, which destroyed her relationships with people.

Soon Hagar was made to leave the Currie clan and her father, when she married a young man, Bram Shipley against her father's will. She thought she could change him into a man of substance, but he like Hagar was trapped in his own nature. During her last few days in the hospital, she ultimately freed herself from the tower-prison when she encounters self-knowledge and self-awareness after hearing 'Old Hundred' by Mr. Troy. Hagar's search for physical and spiritual freedom is ultimately met when with love and care she was able to break the chains and discover a deeper emotion of maternal love openly and compassionately. With an act of affection and tenderness, she was able to keep her identity intact. Laurence in an interview with Michel Fabre mentions that:

From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*; "I spoke of survival as the ability to continue experiencing relationships with others, to continue reaching out and giving and returning love. In that sense, a part of Hagar had been dead for years through pride and strict sense of dignity even before she was old and sick. But in hospital she has come to grips with the reality of dying both physically and spiritually (Woodcock, 193).

She eventually broke the 'tower' of a deformed old-aged body and got rid of the clasp of 'wicked witch', i.e., her pride and move forward towards restitution and breaks the cages of 'self' towards self-knowledge and re-discovery of self.

On the other hand, Rachel Cameron, the protagonist of *A Jest of God,* is a maiden schoolteacher, who through an ordeal of one summer gained fragile but substantial selfhood. It won a Governor General's award for fiction in 1967 and is considered the most poignant work of Laurence. It was also adapted on screen entitled, *Rachel, Rachel*. It depicts the journey of a thirty-four-year-old woman into a mature and sensible adult. It successfully displays the struggles of a woman in Canadian society, the fears to live up to the expectations of society and to fulfill responsibilities of personal relationships. Laurence represents her as a terrified, isolated and alienated woman, who is also a victim of societal expectations. Unlike Hagar, Rachel is stuck with her fears, chafing bound of duties towards her widowed mother,

frustrating maternal affection for surrogate James and guilt-obsessed sexual feelings for Nick. Laurence portrays her in a quandary of societal expectations and her need for psychic peace. She constantly tries to break free from psychological, sexual and societal suppression, which leads to her indecisive, dubious and hesitant nature. Laurence portrays her in the light of a confused protagonist, who is stuck between two minds.

Rachel feels that she is trapped in the middle, that is the second world, "a weak area between millstones"(*A Jest of God*, 100). The first world is the world of pupils, and confident teenagers and the third world consists of people like her mother or mores of the Manawaka community. But she is excluded from both worlds, which generates inferiority, insecurity and fear in her. The cause of Rachel's quandary emerges from her mother's dominating nature. Her mother's temperament and hypocrisy make Rachel dislike her. Mrs. Cameron is a great barrier in the growth of Rachel from an adolescent to a mature adult because her mother always took it to herself to spoon-feed her, tell her the restraints and preach to her the duties. It is a trait of conformism that Rachel inherits from her mother that makes her suffer. Mrs. Cameron's parasitic and exploitative nature manipulates Rachel successfully for fourteen years. She feels insecure that her husband used to feel that she is stupid; therefore she has become both a bully and a victim. Rachel is aware that her mother is a bully but her timid nature makes her ignore the fact and she knowingly abandons her life to her fate and becomes a pawn in her hands.

For Hagar, if the elements of wilderness symbolize pride then, similarly for Rachel the elements of air symbolize fear. Restricted in her own fears and duties, Rachel desperately urges for real sexual or maternal relationship to avoid conforming to societal expectations. Laurence delineates the oscillation of Rachel between two distinct identities of being a disciplined teacher and a flirt with erotic fantasy. This gives rise to psychological distress and frustration, which is evident through her uncertain and tortured reactions towards everyone and everything. Laurence put forth Rachel's attitude as an exaggeration of her own shortcomings and inadequacies.

The persistent need for sexuality horrifies her because it suggests hampering her coyness and chiefly the fear to lose control over her. However, when Rachel accepts the offer to go to Tabernacle service with Calla, hysteria takes a hold of Rachel and she suffers more when she unravels Calla's affection as a lover and not as a friend. She states "… she kisses my face and swiftly afterwards my mouth. My drawing away is sharp, violent. I feel violated, unclean as though I would strike her dead if I had the means. She pulls away then, too, and looks at me with a kind of bewilderment, a pleading apology, not saying a word." (*A Jest of God*, 38) Therefore, the 'wicked witch' is Rachel's own need to fulfill societal expectations and 'the tower' is her house, which is arranged and decorated according to her mother's choices with Madonna prints, filet crochet patterns and flowered China. Rachel is trapped in the tower of embarrassment and suffocation, along with which sign of 'Japonica Funeral Chapel' adds to her misery.

Anger in Rachel suppresses her fear and gives her an experience of self-control and power. Consequently, she tries to break the prison of self-possession and enters into a relationship with Nick Kazlik, who is her schoolmate and has returned to Manawaka for summer. For Rachel, the affair with Nick was not merely overcoming her sexual inhibitions but also confronting societal restrains regarding her presbyterate childhood. Nonetheless, her burdened self found solace with Nick and soon afterwards she turned into a demanding partner. She expresses herself as, "I can want too. I'm thirty-four. That's not old. I haven't fossilized. Why do people assume it's so different for men?" (*A Jest of God*, 78) Nick turns out to be her rescuer, who helped her "to reach out to another person and to make herself vulnerable" and comes to "terms with love, with death, with herself and her world." He helps her to pave a way for her to understand and apprehend herself. She doesn't consider her relationship of deep emotions but the ultimate chance to save herself from spinsterhood. She acclaims, "Nick doesn't know how… I've wanted to lose that reputation, to divert myself of it as though it were an open yoke, to bum it to ashes and scatter them to the wind" (*A Jest of God*, 98). Her desire for love overweighs the fears and the embarrassment of virginity. Throughout that summer their relationship flourished but by the end, she bid it goodbye.

Rachel joins back to school with a sense of fear, terrible expectations of pregnancy and a void within herself. Shortly after she gets to know that it wasn't pregnancy but tumor. Indefinite struggle, torture of reality and operation helped her to grow mature. Her interior and exterior selves along with mind and body united together and gave her a sense of triumph. Authoritatively, she took hold of her life and left Manawaka at the end of the novel, leaving behind her mother. At this moment she comes to a realization, "I really wonder now why I have been so ruthlessly careful of her, as though to preserve her throughout eternity, a dried flower under glass. I'm not responsible for keeping her alive" (*A Jest of God*, 202). The movement of self from unconsciousness to consciousness happens not merely because of the recur but of her will to take risks, to love, to get hurt in the process and most importantly the will to live. Her moving out of town doesn't portray her will to run away but as a declaration.

Pride was the predominant feature of Hagar and the lack of it is Rachel's. She comprehends that freedom and duty are interdependent. At her realization and in her sense of freedom, she says, "I will walk by myself on the shore of the sea and look at the free gulls flying…I will rage in my insomnia like a prophetess I will be afraid sometimes. I will feel light-hearted…may sing alone, even in the dark I will ask myself, if I am going mad, but if I die, I won't know it." (A Jest of God, 209) This is how a new Rachel is born, as she claims, "I am the mother now" (As Jest of God, 196). She turns out to be capable to cope with colonizing forces symbolized by her mother and societal expectations and also

makes peace with the past i.e., her father's death. Thus it is a story of an introverted woman and her torturous struggle toward individuality. Rachel is portrayed as a neurotic and under confident woman, yet she freed herself from the tower, i.e., her mother's tyranny and from self-doubt and self-misery. She re-discovered herself and her identity in the process.

Subsequently**,** *The Fire-Dwellers*, a sequel to *A Jest of God*, tells the story of Stacey MacAindraa, who is the elder sister of Rachel Cameron. She is Rachel's married sister, who grew up in the Manawaka but ran from the restrictive influence of the Manawaka community to the city. Laurence in this novel employs a sophisticated kaleidoscopic technique to portray Stacey's passing through the past to present, reality to fantasy and inner conversations to outer observations. Like Rachel, Stacey also feels trapped in her body along with socio-familial responsibilities and duties. Rachel's journey was symbolic of liberation; Stacey's journey is of reconciliation. Laurence presents Stacey as a middle-aged woman in her thirties with the traditional role of a mother of four, wife and daughter. Stacey shares her experience, "I stand in relation to my life both as a child and as a parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 62). Stacey is seen trapped in a deceptive and manipulative society, where she fears both social and personal expectations. She urges for a richer life, where she could accomplish her past passion, and get over her anxiety about the safety of her children and uncertainty of her marital relationship.

Stacey's inability to communicate with her husband creates fear and anxiety in her. After spending the whole day alone, she expects her husband to tell her something about the outside world but his incapacity to respond beyond monosyllables fills Stacey with a fear that her husband has lost interest in her. She mentions her struggle, "Can you imagine what it's like to live in the same house with somebody who doesn't talk or who can't or else won't and I don't know which reason it could be" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 197). Stacey's dissatisfaction is not limited to her husband but also to her children. Stacey's daughter Katie talks rudely, Ian and Duncan are argumentative and the youngest son hasn't started to talk at the age of two, which all add to her concerns. She believes that, "Everything would be all right if only I was better educated. I mean or I were. Or if I were beautiful. Okay that's asking too much. Let's say if I took off ten or so pounds" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 8). Therefore, Stacey is seen trapped in the traditional role of motherhood, wife and her body. The aspects of society, family and children bind her down and she desperately necessitates a redeemer. She states, "Nobody could help feeling some lift on a day like this. I don't get out enough. My boundaries are four walls, whose faults? Okay mine" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 69). This depicts that the four walls of her house are symbolic of the 'tower' she is trapped in and the 'wicked witch' is her unnecessary anxiety about kids, husband and family.

Later, when Stacey felt that everything is falling apart in her life and the centre is not holding up at that time, Luke Venturi becomes her ' momentary rescuer', as they both were able to communicate without any hesitation or inhibition. He helped her to recognize and confront her fear and reach her true self without bringing in any imposed stereotypical roles of mother, wife, daughter, mistress or lover. She accepts that she "was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 276). With this realization, she also puts an end to her insecurity about her relationship with her husband, as she tells him, "Okay, I guess it had to be that way Mac. It would've helped me, though. It would've made me feel you needed me, even just to talk to" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 234). She reaches to the eventual realization that duty and responsibility are interconnected. At the closing, Stacey reconciled with both her family and her 'self'.

It is considered that the protagonists examined under the concept of Rapunzel Syndrome in the Canadian background suggest that Rapunzel and the tower are the same because women have internalized the cultural values to such an extent that they have imprisoned themselves. They are all trapped in a negative shell of family, themselves or society. According to Laurence the general lives of people shape society and her characters constantly struggle to self-analyze, introspect and come to terms with themselves by isolation, or outside support to reach inner satisfaction and personhood.

Thus, the concept works as a distinguishable pattern, where protagonists of Laurence's novels temporarily break through the tower of imprisonment by their rescuer and maintain their individuality and self-awareness till the end. For instance, Hagar acknowledges her pride and defies the hurdles till death, Rachel acknowledges her deep-seated fear and her rebellion breaks through her inhibition of spinsterhood and Stacey's perspective of married life after re-vision reconciles the family. They all with dignity march towards their independence, consciousness, self-awareness and self-discovery. Therefore, Rapunzel Syndrome could be read as a concept to study the journey of self-discovery and personhood to the eventual victory of protagonists through the selected fictional framework.

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