

The Long Way to Emancipation in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

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Submitted: 28/04/2023

Accepted: 19/11/2023

ABSTRACT

Lauren Berlant's critical stance proves instrumental to carry out the analysis of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, a story dealing with personal insecurities and crises, related to feelings of loss, trauma, suffering or failure. There is no doubt that Rachel, the protagonist and first-person narrator, encompasses all the trappings around the notion of "cruel optimism," and the novel can be considered as a drama of adjustment, where the fantasies of the "good life" are interweaved with the suffocation of ordinary life. Rachel will have to dismantle the view that by being both a good citizen and a loving daughter she may achieve happiness or, at least, peace of mind. This story of personal struggle and emancipation can be eventually related to the political circumstances in Canada's long process towards autonomy and independence.

Keywords

Canadian Dream; Cruel Optimism; Margaret Laurence; Prairies

1. Introduction

Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" has proved a fertile ground for assorted academic fields such as anthropology, psychology or political studies.

Literature scholars are no exception; Berkely and Karlova (Prague) universities have recently offered comparative literature courses on classic and modern literature from the perspective of Berlant's *good life* formulation. Furthermore, Berlant's focus on the failed *American Dream* has inspired publications on Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, Salinger or Zora Neale Hurston. In fact, Berlant has framed her critical discourse within the context of the social crisis in Western countries, and particularly in the United States, after the 1990s, when an increasingly conservative establishment, supported by an equally right-wing electoral body (Barber and Holbein), radically confronted those advocating racial rights, gender equality and social justice. She has traced the disappointment at the dissolution of the *Dream* into the neoliberal dogma, or what she calls "the retraction during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3).

In this paper we will argue that Berlant's analysis can show light on works from any other historical period or background, particularly if we want to consider characters or circumstances whose emotional attachments have proved unrealistic or failed. Berlant has paid especial attention to those who live precariously and feel vulnerable because their emotional affections have been conditioned by the wrong choice of fantasies or desires, and Canadian literature has produced a number of works that are ideally suited to be analysed under these assumptions. Among them, we could consider the dystopian production by Atwood, or authors that question the utopic vision of Canada, like Ann Marie MacDonald or Mordecai Richler. The focal point of our analysis will be Margaret Laurence, a writer who should not be missing from any survey of Canadian literature. Although critics like Aritha van Herk have suggested that her influence has been waning in recent times (Rocard 88), Laurence has often been referred to as a major figure, as a matriarch, by Atwood (1988), Dvorak (68), Wainwright (xi), Hutcheon (182), and Stouck (241), among others.

Laurence's *A Jest of God* is one of her novels set in the Canadian Prairies, in fictional Manawaka; the time coincides with the post-war period, when the notion of a *Canadian Dream* is associated to the consolidation of an advanced economy and a generous welfare state; some even believe that Canadians ended up regarding this concept of an egalitarian society as a defining national characteristic, particularly when compared with the United States (Johnston et al. 349-377). However, with the passing of time, the Canadian social miracle has been the object of scrutiny and criticism (Saul; Bissoondath), and Berlant's critical work helps to explore the circumstances that surround Rachel, a first-person narrator, whose fantasies of the *good life* are unfulfilled. It is interesting to notice that Berlant has portrayed in her own work a similar character, Rosetta, who equally despairs in the pursuit of happiness, fighting for self-knowledge and survival, mired in the stifling shadow of her mother's

clutches (*Cruel Optimism* 169). Rachel's mother has been called "a real ghost of the past" (Hughes 40), a label that would be equally fitting for the constitutional role of the monarchy in present day Canada. Therefore, we may end up finding parallels between the ordeal of the protagonist and the historical and political developments in the country.

2. The Canadian Dream

Rachel, the protagonist of *A Jest of God*, suffers from a constant emotional shift between attachment and disappointment; she is apparently enjoying the comforts of a cosy home, where her mother caters to her needs and she even acts as an amiable flat mate. Rachel has been awarded a diploma in teaching and is now the main earner of her home, enjoying a comfortable position at the local school, living in "a good part of town" (11). In fact, she reveals that when she was a schoolgirl she had daydreamed about being a teacher one day; now she has fulfilled her ambition and Manawaka seems to have offered her a haven. However, very soon in the narrative, we realise that this is only a delusion, a fantasy of the good life; telling good from bad in Rachel's story will prove not an easy task. In fact, her childhood dreams prove trivial enough as her ambition is limited to being "the one with the power of picking any coloured chalk out of the box and writing anything at all on the blackboard" (1).

In Laurence's novel some authors have seen indications of a society that opens up to feminism and women's rights (Brandt 257). Her position as a schoolteacher has secured financial independence; Rachel, like millions of post-war women, has given up traditional social roles in favour of personal autonomy. Moreover, at a time when smoking was an indicator of social visibility, Rachel is often portrayed buying or smoking cigarettes or bonding with fellow smokers as her closest friend, Calla. Her mother's disapproval of the habit only emphasizes a generational gap.

In the 1960's there was a feeling of "optimism about structural transformation" in most Western countries (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3), shared by many Canadians who started to benefit from upward social mobility, job security, affordable housing, political and social equality. This would also attract thousands of immigrants, represented in the novel by Rachel's Ukrainian boyfriend. Therefore, Rachel might be considered an offspring of the *Canadian Dream*. However, she will soon reveal her frustrations. Notably among them, her failed attempt to finish her university degree. Rachel might represent one more among those under the "conceit that still saturates the sentimental educational rhetoric about the identity-forming, citizen-building, or ethical function of education... the subaltern female student... was trained to think that her education

would simultaneously help her to bone an authentic self-identity" (Berlant, "Feminism" 150, 154). Rachel will openly admit her belief in the capacity of university to provide social upward mobility when she ponders (supported by ingrained prejudice) about Nick's humble origins: "It's as though I've thought in Mother's voice. Nick graduated from university. I didn't" (Laurence, *A Jest* 64). The fact that she is not exactly certain about the reasons that frustrated her graduation (perhaps family's mismanagement or squandering) points to an open wound and her lack of satisfaction in her present role as a schoolteacher. In one of the most revealing passages in the story, Rachel suffers a nervous breakdown when her mother's friends show praise for her job performance: "This pain inside my skull. What is it? It isn't like an ordinary headache" (18).

Ambivalence, so often discussed by Berlant, can be found in assorted images and symbols in this story. For example, the Cameron's house represents a middle-class entitlement, a comfortable place where Rachel finds a space of her own; however, we realise that this shelter has a sinister symbolism. Of all associations, the town's funeral parlour is located on the ground floor; no wonder that Rachel relates her parents' bond to the house to paralysis: "[Father] has really attached to the place... Mother wouldn't feel at home anywhere else" (56). Berlant has often emphasized that the *American Dream* is only a trap for the average citizen (*Compassion* 3); the post-war fantasy, based on some of the material achievements that Rachel has effectively secured, can in itself involve entrapment rather than welfare. In the Canadian context, this plight should be related to one of the most visible of national stereotypes, the "garrison mentality," as codified by Northrop Frye. He has stated that Canadian literature abounds in characters overwhelmed by a hostile nature and isolation: "In the earliest maps of the country the only inhabited centres are forts... these beleaguered inhabited centres offer the individual a safe haven and the comforts of social intercourse, but they also demand compliance with unquestionable moral and social values" (227-28).

In fact, critics like Coral Ann Howells have accounted for the influence of geographical factors in Canadian fiction (*Contemporary* 11-12). Writers such as Stephen Leacock, Louise Penny, Eden Robinson, Jack Hodgins, Wayne Curtis, Elaine McCluskey and Alice Munro have provided abundant examples of characters whose life is cast in the narrow margins of small towns like Manawaka. Therefore, Rachel's entrapment, unravelled throughout the narrative, can be seen as the result of a toxic bond to her family, home and town. As Daniel Cockayne and Derek Ruez point out, staying stuck and being attached to circumstances might "provide satisfaction through their repetition as habit" but it ends up exhausting the individual (qtd. in Anderson et al. 147). Rachel may have fallen prey to a fantasy of expectations, but she will end up being a victim of such "cruel optimism" that will put to test her mental balance; thus, Robert

Lecker states that "Rachel Cameron's story is a study of anxiety bordering on madness, and of the society that nurtures these fears" (88).

Some critics have suggested that the reader will feel frustrated by the narrative, somehow sharing Rachel's frustration. Berlant would probably classify this attitude as "compassion," which is always based on a relation between the spectator and the sufferer: "You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering" (*Compassion* 4), as can be the case with critics such as Robert Harlow, who frowns upon the use of the first person narration, considered as a technical failure; he states this has the effect of hiding from the reader the real reasons why Rachel does not change course, sparking the above-mentioned feelings of compassion: "The reader, instead of identifying, finds himself (herself, too, I should think) silently shouting at her to get some eye-liner, save for a mink, strong-arm a man, kill her mother and stop bitching" (190). Stuart McClelland, Laurence's lifetime editor, trying to assuage these voices full of scorn spoke out: "A lot of critics didn't think that *A Jest of God* was an advancement on *The Stone Angel*, but this was not an opinion I shared, as you know. One was a critics' book; the other [*A Jest of God*] was a readers' book" (qtd. in Solecki 123). In fact, Laurence has admitted to having pondered the pros and cons of choosing one or another point of view: "I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very inturned person" ("Ten Years' Sentences" 21); Laurence also states that she failed when she tried third person narrative because "Rachel would not reveal herself" ("Gadgetry" 93); Clara Thomas sides with Laurence: "Rachel's voice, in the present tense, almost hysterical and yet propelling the reader compulsively onward, is the remarkable achievement of *A Jest of God*" (92).

Whatever our opinion about technical issues, the fact is that the reader is forced to pay attention to all that Rachel does not openly express but eventually reveals in one way or another. The story deals mainly with her feelings of confinement and entrapment and how she cannot find alternative ways of life; as Atwood has put it: "the story of a woman trapped in a prison partly of her own making" ("Afterword" 231). Berlant has explained that cutting off the ties and escaping may also bring about unhappiness and pain; therefore, afraid to venture out of the narrow boundaries of her apartment and, for that matter, of Manawaka's small social circle, Rachel will stay on, and the narrative of her life will be focused on describing her paralysis and feelings of entrapment. Thus, she perceives the house she is sharing with her mother as "not large"; other spaces are described as claustrophobic, symbols of Manawaka's suffocating atmosphere: the church she attends (the tabernacle) is "dense and murky, the way the sea must be, fathoms under... It's like some crypt, dead air

and staleness, deadness, silence" (Laurence, *A Jest* 36-37). Her friend Calla, who has drawn her to attend the religious services, is aptly whistling "She's only a Bird in a Gilded Cage" (53).

In one of the most significant passages in *A Jest of God*, Rachel pays a midnight visit to the funeral parlour located, of all places, on the ground floor of her own house. For all her life she had been avoiding coming down; this time she decides to confront her past, including the problematic relationship with her parents. Climbing down the staircase, she is making a Conradian journey into darkness where the parlour manager, a Kurtz-like figure, becomes her confidant and reveals existential truth. At some point, Hector will cease to treat Rachel as a mere visitor and invites her into a *sancta sanctorum*, a dark labyrinth: "He grasps my hand, and I'm tugged zigzag along a corridor, into the depths" (131).¹

It is significant that Rachel, unable to overcome the limitations imposed on her life, embodies Frye's notion that "The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him" (228). Rachel is the product of an oppressive environment that could be interpreted in broad generic terms as that of any other small community in the world, although hers is a typical prairie location; as Lecker has pointed out, "[t]he town is all pervasive but is seen at one remove, through Rachel's eyes and through its effects upon her" (88). We can definitely identify the place as Canadian: the calendar at the headmaster's office runs: "*Bank of Montreal*" (Laurence, *A Jest* 50); Manitoba, Alberta, Winnipeg or Banff are explicitly mentioned. The landscape is equally Canadian; the end of winter is evinced through the visual aspect of the maple trees (17), a description only to be expected since landscape and weather are on the foundations of prairie fiction (Lecker 147). Laurence has often expressed her mixed feelings about this environment; she has always felt attachment but has equally admitted to the difficulties it involves. She has even blamed the territory for the pathological inwardness of many inhabitants, a very important clue to understanding Rachel's characterization: "we are a very stiff-necked people... there's a sort of suppression, the kind of repression of emotion" ("Margaret Laurence").

The setting, as happens in so many literary works, ends up being part of the character of the individual and Manawaka is a microcosmos that Greta Coger has

1. This setting also bears a striking resemblance to Poe's burial chamber in "The Fall of the House of Usher," which is also located in a deep dark vault (150). This, combined with a "glossolalia" episode, accounts for alternative readings of *A Jest of God* as a gothic narrative (Stein 79; Heiland 157). Furthermore, Rachel's journey, a kind of katabasis, reminds us of contemporary works such as Doris Lessing's *Descent into Hell* (1971) and *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) or Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1992).

called "a Canadian Yoknapatawpha" (228). The experience of the pioneers in the Prairies and those who came later has never been easy. In fact, there has always been a demographic crisis because people end up leaving this territory: "Towns throughout Canada's prairies are dying slow deaths. All along the highways of Saskatchewan, abandoned buildings lean against the prairie wind, which blows through the cracked windows of houses" (Brown). Statistics show that only some urban areas, and rural settlements around them, have been able to retain population (Carlyle) and we often find in scholarly work references to "the long-standing sense of hinterland marginality" (Sangster 387). Neepawa, the inspiration for fictional Manawaka, is one of those prairie towns struggling to survive, although Donez Xiques points to this particular settlement as a lively place with a number of social and cultural facilities, such as an opera house (23). However, it is interesting to notice that Laurence, by making this fictional counterpart much gloomier, attempts to emphasize the harsh realities of scattered small towns and villages across the province of Manitoba. This is the background for the discourse on Rachel's cruel optimism, and can be linked, as mentioned above, to one of the major Canadian tropes, Frye's "garrison mentality" (233).

Rachel has identified Manawaka and her home as a fortress and is reluctant to venture beyond the narrow boundaries of the small town; even on her occasional walks on the banks of the local river she feels out of place. Critics and writers have once and again emphasized that the wilderness is a masculine territory. As Robert Kroetsch puts it, there is a dichotomy house vs horse, where the horse means movement and distance while house is related to stasis (76). In fact, the wilderness is present in the novel mainly on a symbolic level, as in the world of dreams. It is in her sleep that Rachel trespasses upon the moral strictures of Manawaka, dreaming of wild spaces that allow some emotional liberation. Margaret Atwood has discussed the importance for Canadians of the "Grey Owl Syndrome," which makes Western people feel the attraction of primitive life (*Strange Things* 43). It is interesting to note that, as mentioned above, Rachel feels the attraction of the unexplored land by describing her dream lover in a heavily racialised way, as an athletic sun-tanned man with Indian features. She daydreams by fashioning herself as living in a dwelling place amid nature, as the wife of a somewhat exotic man, replicating some settlers' attitude to indigenize on the land (Oliver and Dobson 16). The real-life lover is described in a similar way: "Prominent cheekbones, slightly slanted eyes, his black straight hair... one of the hawkish and long-ago riders of the Steppes" (Laurence, *A Jest* 92).²

2. Rachel's real life love affair with Nick resembles that of other women in English fiction who trespass the restrictions of sexually repressive societies by loving a stranger, an

As Howells states, wilderness, Canada's most popular myth, is fashioned in colonial discourse as a place "outside civilised social order and Christian moral laws... the space of freedom from social constraints" (*Margaret Atwood* 21). Henry Kreisel refers to a neo-Calvinist framework that straightjackets settlers of the vast plain: "The prairie, like the sea, thus often produces an extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast and seemingly unlimited space... It is natural that novelists should exploit the tensions which invariably arise when a rigid moral code attempts to set strict limits on the instinctual life" (623-625). Laurence, in one of her stories, had described loons as a bird species that best represents the uninhabited frontier territory: "No one can ever describe that ululating sound, the crying of loons, and no one who has heard it, can ever forget it. Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home" ("The Loons" 102). Similarly, Rachel is captivated by and scared of these birds: "They were mad, those bird voices, perfectly alone, damning and laughing out there in the black reaches of the night water" (Laurence, *A Jest* 168).

3. Paralysis and Descent into Hell

When Rachel looks out of the window the chilly air enlivens her imagination and she is transported to the prairie plains where freight trains send a prosopoeic whistle: "*don't stay don't stay just don't ever stay—go and keep on going, never mind where*" (Laurence, *A Jest* 173-174). The sound carries a message that she understands very well, as confinement is the most obvious leitmotif in *A Jest of God*. Window scenes make us aware of Rachel's physical seclusion, reminding us of Evelyn, one of Joyce's characters in *Dubliners*, who is also eternally looking out of the window, pondering about escape to distant Argentina with her boyfriend. Aptly enough, at the opening of the novel Rachel is also looking out of the window of an empty schoolroom; this tells us about her stance as a first-person narrator who will contemplate the world in the presence of a reader that is given privileged access to the innermost layers of her soul. Next comes her introspective stare; by being above the playground she enjoys an excellent vantage point to observe and describe, also affording the occasion for the first accounts of her failures in life. It is significant that by the

outsider or an exotic "Other," as can be seen in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and, at the same time, one more example of the Canadian settlers' notion that indigenous people are close to the natural world (Mackey 45).

end of the story we find Rachel in an analogous situation: "I walk to the window and look out at the playground, the gravel, the swings, everything the same as last year. Nothing has changed. Not anything or anyone" (165). As a passive onlooker, by the window, she mimics her ailing mother, routinely contemplating corteges: "She watches Japonica Street like a captain on the bridge of a ship, watching the ocean and hoping for some diversion. She almost yearns for funerals" (80).

Therefore, Rachel realizes that her role as spectator is not only sterile but also constitutes a barrier to acting, like a modern Hamlet: "I'm sitting here thinking of all this, when I should be doing something. I must get up now" (Laurence, *A Jest* 122); later on, when she discusses the prospect of departure with her mother she expresses once more her fear of remaining mired in words. At this point, she switches to second-person narration, summoning courage in an attempt to set herself in motion: "Do it Rachel. Or else quit" (201). Earlier in the narrative, we had already noticed she was aware of living with paralysis, as if she were one of Joyce's characters: "Where I went wrong was in coming back here, once I'd got away" (18); "how much I would like to leave this school" (32). Her dreams have turned into a nightmare, her expectations have proved to be in vain; if she had ever been confident about her future, the fact is she remains lonely and unmarried, she resents her ungainly physical appearance, she is fearful of ageing and is also crippled by a pathological shyness and self-distrust. She has fallen into all the trappings of life in Manawaka and yet she has remained fatally attached to this place.

Berlant has singled out the concept of the "good life" to describe a type post-war infatuation based on the assumption that the state will provide for the individual, who must sacrifice to reach the goal of social welfare and, ultimately, wellbeing. Rachel's failure serves to confirm Berlant's suspicion that the model is flawed and individuals often get waylaid; she points out that people actually become protagonists of "the bad life," described as "life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water" (*Cruel Optimism* 169). When Rachel thinks of where she has gone wrong, she does so in terms of comparison, checking her record against that of other female figures. Nick's sister is married and living in Montreal. Stacey, her own sister, is portrayed as Rachel's opposite; according to Flora Foster Stovel "[Stacey] could not appear more different in personality or situation... broad-beamed, hard-drinking, middle-aging extrovert who has escaped the clutches of the Cameron clan in Manawaka to live in the big bad city of Vancouver with her salesman husband" ("Sisters" 63). Therefore, Rachel mainly identifies her limitations and loneliness with the spatial constrictions of Manawaka. For fourteen years, she has been teaching at the school of her

childhood. Likewise, she has been a customer of the same beauty salon since she was sixteen because, in this small town, shops and enterprises embody the immutability of space and society; occasionally they are rebranded, as happens to *Cameron's Funeral Parlour*, later *Cameron Funeral Home*, then *Japonica Funeral Chapel* and, finally, *Japonica Chapel*; however, no major changes or renovations are involved in the process.

The limited availability of services may affect citizens in more serious ways. When Rachel needs medical or sexual consultation, she is forced to visit Dr Raven, long acquainted with her family, a fact that endangers the confidentiality of the medical check-up. Rachel had previously shown difficulty when dealing with male characters in positions of power such as her headmaster; she is permanently on the alert when she meets him, and some moments are presented as epiphanic: "Although he is short, he looms against the light from the window. His back is hunched, like a picture of a vulture in a geography book" (Laurence, *A Jest* 29), "he is smiling as thinly as a skull" (31). Rachel's description of the director seems to have been modelled on Joyce's priest in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "The director stood in the embrasure of the window, his back to the light,... the waning daylight from behind him touched the deeply grooved temples and the curves of the skull" (139-140).

This connects Rachel not only to Joyce's concept of paralysis but also of *Bildungsroman*. In her process of maturing, she becomes fully aware of the patriarchal arrangements of society, and characters like Willard mostly serve this purpose of denunciation. For example, in the parting scene, when Rachel has already tended her resignation, the headmaster presses her to open her heart and explain her reasons to leave; however, Rachel never bothers since "He doesn't want my answer. He wants me to say 'Of course I have always been as happy as a veritable meadow-lark in this eminently well-run establishment'" (Laurence, *A Jest* 197).

Patriarchal oppression is also associated to the figure of Dr Raven, whose surname carries an obvious symbolism in the Canadian tradition. Penny Petrone describes an anti-social character, rooted in folklore, and known as *Raven*: "[who] relies on cunning deceptions and mean tricks to reach his goals, which are usually food, or the possession of women" (16).³ No doubt, the doctor embodies in Rachel's narrative a position that exacerbates the roles of the oppressor/oppressed, associated to rape, violence or extinction. As a

3. This symbolism is especially abundant in the Canadian context. The oral stories of the First Nations refer to figures such as Old Man, Ojibway, Glooscap or Coyote, as portrayed by Sheila Watson in *The Double Hook* (1959). Atwood mentions the "Wendigo," a bloodshot-eyed giant creature that is eager to eat human flesh (*Strange Things* 81).

patient, Rachel feels so downtrodden that she compares her situation to being at "Death's immigration office" (Laurence, *A Jest* 183). While in the clinic, she feels she no longer enjoys her rights as a respectable citizen of Manawaka, living on the good side of town, as seen in the imagery chosen to describe the waiting room: "all of us waiting with stupefied humbleness to have our fates announced to us, knowing there will never any possibility of argument or appeal" (183). This doctor, impersonated as a "raven" or "trickster" may be the agent for her physical annihilation. In mock Biblical imagery, he is perceived as an angel of death: "allotted to the job of the initial sorting out of sheep and goats, the happy sheep permitted to colonize Heaven, the wayward goats sent to trample their cloven hoofprints all over Hell's acres" (183).

At this critical point, Rachel is burdened with her psychological complexes and the related feelings of physical awkwardness, pathological shyness and ambiguous maturity, and she is suffering from what Berlant would call "slow death": "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (*Cruel Optimism* 96). In this sense, the transition from first into second person narrative remarks her divided, paranoid self (Stovel, *Divining* 207) or simply utter loneliness: "I've drawn together my tallness and loped through the waiting room, sidestepping chairs and outstretched feet, an ostrich walking with extreme care through some formal garden. Rachel, hush. Hush, child. Steady. It's all right. It's going to be all right" (Laurence, *A Jest* 183).

Dr Raven eventually diagnoses a tumour, and it is ironic that this forces Rachel to leave home, as she must go to a big hospital "in the city." Sarah Ahmed has repeatedly refused to give a definition of happiness, but she has certainly related it to the concept of "movement" (137); consequently, one would say that, by setting herself in motion, Rachel is giving herself another chance,

happiness becomes a forward motion: almost like a propeller, happiness is imagined as what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them, where pastness is associated with custom and the customary... To become an individual is to assume an image: becoming free to be happy turns the body in a certain direction. (Ahmed 137)

We have repeatedly watched Rachel mired in paralysis; it is by going out of town that she takes a decisive step. Surgery involves physical healing, but the journey itself proves therapeutic. In fact, Laurence considers that when Rachel comes back she "does succeed in freeing herself from her mother's tyranny and from her own self-doubt and self-hatred" ("Ivory" 24).

4. Conclusion

The topic of offspring asking for freedom, and most notably the conflict mother/daughter, can be found in postcolonial works as diverse as *Lucy*, by Jamaica Kincaid; *A Matter of Time*, by Shashi Deshpande; *An Angel at my Table*, by Janet Frame or *Surfacing*, by Atwood. All of them admit an alternative interpretation as an echo of the struggle for independence that the former colonies underwent. As Cecily Devereux affirms, "Imperial visions of Anglo-Saxon racial hegemony underlie both the transformation of the New Woman into the imperial mother, and the reconstruction in the same period of the most potent image of the Second British Empire" (183-184).

The Manawaka novels, and particularly *A Jest of God*, can similarly be read from a political stance, and be related to issues of national identity (Pinder 403); Laurence herself stated: "Canadian writers, like African writers, have had to find our own voices and write out of what is truly ours, in the face of an overwhelming cultural imperialism" ("Ivory" 17); she confesses that "I was from a land that had been a colony, a land which in some ways was still colonial" (22). Laurence regrets the lack of self-esteem in her fellow citizens, blaming it on "colonial mentalities" (23). However, she sees the need to take a course of action by, as she states: "coming to terms with your own past, with your childhood, with your parents, and getting to the point where you can see yourself as a human individual no longer blaming the past, no longer having even to throw out all the past, but finding a way to live with your own past" (Cameron 98).

Along these lines, Laurence believed in Canada's potential, and advocated political redemption ("Ivory" 23); this points to the larger issue of the severing of historical ties of the Commonwealth realms with British institutions. In Canada, as happened in Australia and New Zealand, this process has run so smoothly that it might seem that, at some point, there has been a certain unwillingness on the part of these countries to cut off their umbilical cord. Berlant might have found this to be another form of "cruel optimism," insofar as these states, rather than enjoying the comfort of their constitutional arrangements, pivoting on British values, have suffered from a lingering sense of uncertainty about their identity. This, in turn, substantiates the fact that gaining independence has not been an easy task. The New Zealand referendum on a new design for the national flag in 2016 resulted in a majority of votes in favour of keeping the traditional ensign, where the Union Jack still features prominently. In Australia, both the 1999 and the 2023 referenda on constitutional reforms resulted in a vote reinforcing the Anglo-Saxon European identity and prolonging the political status quo. It is no wonder that some authors have described these attitudes as "conservative, fearful and obstinate" (Aarons and Pietsch 3).

We can say that Rachel's story of survival has to be interpreted in view of her past ordeal, which is why Berlant is so pertinent in this discussion, as her non-enclature proves instrumental for the analysis of the protagonist, as already seen above. The neoliberal critique delves into the political dimension of this novel. In particular, this paper has addressed *A Jest of God* in terms of how it questions the *Canadian Dream*, a fantasy that is not within reach of certain social groups, be it the rural population of isolated rural environments, or women, whose gender casts a net of paralysis over them. Rachel, through her narrative, betrays her afflictions and the attempt to reconcile the elements in her life that have fulfilled and frustrated her at the same time. Hers is a story of redemption, at least partially. By the end of the story, she will no longer be mired in the past, finding a way to envision a future: "Where I am going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen... I will be different. I will remain the same" (Laurence, *A Jest* 201). While Rachel seems only to be starting a new cycle of cruel optimism, this is always a better option than the pessimism that precludes even thinking about the future.

In this soul-searching narrative, she ends up being empowered, as revealed by the words she utters on waking up from anaesthesia: "I am the mother now" (Laurence, *A Jest* 184). The protagonist of the novel has taken a long time to make up her mind, and so has Canada in its redemption process, from political autonomy into complete sovereignty. Full independence was eventually recognized in 1982 by the British Parliament and proclaimed by the Queen. Given that Berlant has pointed out that accommodating attitudes are self-delusive, we must conclude that it was high time, for a daughter of empire like Canada or, in a parallel reading, for Rachel, to see the demise of the mother figure. After such a long journey, this attests there is a future ahead.

Acknowledgements

I hereby acknowledge the generous support of University of Santiago de Compostela and my research group "Discourse and Identity," (ED431C2023/15, Xunta de Galicia).

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