



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **A Comparative Study of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome***

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### **Abstract**

Feminism is one of the most essential discourses in postcolonial studies. It tries to examine, locate, change and reshape cultural practices that are responsible for suppression of women in the society. Feminism is not always and necessarily “anti-man”; but is definitely against any social system which ushers in female subordination. The aim of feminism is perhaps to create a society requiring both men and women to co-operate rather than confront and overcome their egotistical urge for self-assertion through annihilation of the other. Having the above paradigm in mind, this paper explores the two post-colonial modern feminist writers Margaret Laurence and Rani Dharker. Both of them address the questions relating to ego, sex, love, freedom, identity etc. Two of them grapple with contemporary issues and tried a quest of various themes. They focus motherhood, marriage, individualism, class conflict, and marginalization. In the comparative study one can find in-depth analysis of how the women protagonists

in these two novels *A Jest of God* and *The Virgin Syndrome* come to terms with their identity in the environment in which they survive. Both these novels are thematically interlaced and focus on the psychological complexities of female subjectivity.

### Keywords

Margaret Laurence; *A Jest of God*; Rani Dharker; *The Virgin Syndrome*

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Margaret Laurence's greatest achievement lies in the four Canadian novels dominated by the town of Manawaka. Her chief concern as a novelist is the depiction of character; and at the centre of each novel is a powerfully realized woman. Laurence's works have been published in several languages and in a variety of paperback editions. Laurence's novel *A Jest of God* was filmed as *Rachel, Rachel*. *A Jest of God* is set entirely in Manawaka, the town with its paralyzing, often hypocritical force to be overcome by the protagonists. In the novel Laurence had portrayed Rachel, the unmarried school teacher who endures a sterile, introverted living death. She is finally able to break away from Manawaka after a sexual affair and the traumatic consequences bring her a liberating self-knowledge.

Nominated for the Commonwealth prize for the Euro-Asia region in 1997, Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome* is among the few novels in English by an Indian woman writer that boldly deals with the issues of female sexuality. Dharker's novel explores how middle class Hindu society prescribes gender relations by means of myths that women are told, and in turn rework into their lives, and the lives of other women around them. The text however goes beyond just a statement on repressed sexuality. Dharker shows, in the novel the construction of the middle class Hindu woman's subjectivity vis-à-vis issues of sexuality, chastity, marriage and family, and those strategies that Dharker employs to visit such sites of contestation. Writing over the ages has been replete

with the images of female fertility. Deviating from a neatly worked out pattern of values, Dharker creates a new language by virtue of a new experience.

Laurence's Rachel is the fearful prufrock-like thirty-four year old spinster. She is intelligent, sensitive and fiercely introspective in Laurence's own words "a compulsive pulse-taker". Who constantly magnifies her inadequacies and underestimates her strengths. On closer examinations her hang-up is much concealed because, anyone who is desperately afraid of having human weaknesses is quite diffident. She is a dutiful daughter and a dedicated school teacher as the unnamed protagonists of Rani Dharker.

As Rachel, Dharker's unnamed and unmarried protagonist is in her forties. She lives in an anonymous small town in a joint family where daughters are usually married off in their twenties. She is an exception to the rule, by choice. Several of the incidents in the novel centre around her enormous joint family lorded over by Aima, the great matriarch, and "nine incredible, loving, inquisitive, opinionated aunts." The entire family, except for the narrator and her parents, resides in the ancestral home *Aashiyaana*. The narrator flits through different careers. She is a schoolteacher; a conscientious copywriter working in an advertising agency in the city of Bombay; and a lecturer in an English literature department unhappy with academic politicking. Finally, she evolves into an independent artist/painter. She meets Siddharth at an exhibition of her paintings. Although he is twenty years younger, she is able to find physical and emotional satisfaction with him. Siddharth invites her to join him in England and she fights shy of telling her parents that his offer is not inclusive of marriage. Her parents are killed in car accident, and the narrative concludes with a fire which destroys the ancestral family home *Aashiyaana*, and with it the grand magic realistic tapestry of the world that her grandmother had been embroidering through the narrative. The focal point of the narrative is the sexual awakening of the protagonist, and her failure to enjoy any relationship as a consequence of being a victim of what she defines as the "virgin syndrome."

Rachel is so self-conscious of her image, much to her exasperation. She can neither prevent herself from remembering embarrassing situations in which she was involved, like that with the young couple on the hillside, nor can she stop herself from imagining such situations. She says despairingly:

I honestly do not know why I feel the daft sting of imagined embarrassments. The ones that occur are more than plenty; God knows ... I don't know why I do. Unless to visualize something infinitely worse than anything that could possibly happen, so that whatever happens may seem not so bad in comparison" (*A Jest of God* 61).

During their affair, Nick advises Rachel to steer clear of complications by taking precautions to avoid conception. Rachel, however, cannot do so being known as a decent person she cannot approach Dr. Raven, the Manawaka pharmacist, or anyone else for advice on the matter. Even during sex with Nick, on all occasions but the last, she does not let herself go as she is aware of her awkwardness and lack of poise in this matter and she is worried about her performance in his eyes. After Nick leaves her, she phone him but experiences a certain amount of discomfort for she knows that women are not supposed to phone men. Thinking herself pregnant, she, like her biblical namesake, desperately wants the child but is at the same time afraid of social ostracism.

Like Rachel, the unnamed narrator of the novel, *The Virgin Syndrome* had a dark side in her life. The novel opens with a flashback to the seduction of the narrator at twenty-five by a fellow college student called Raina. Dharker does not mince words to de-romanticise what has been described for heroes and heroines in other works of fiction through time as "... the most beautiful experience imaginable" (*The Virgin Syndrome* 7). Lying on Raina's bed, "spread-eagled, the feminist, horizontal, post-modernist version of the crucifixion" (*The Virgin Syndrome* 6), the narrator reflects on how that much-awaited-for first sexual experience turned out to be most disappointing. Raina, typically, is more focused

on his own sexual satisfaction. In her naivete, Dharker's protagonist becomes pregnant without realising it. She is advised by her grandmother to eat til ladoss (mustard seeds) to induce what is believed to be only a delayed monthly period. A surfeit of til 'successfully' results in a miscarriage, and her parents refuse to believe in her pregnancy even after her curette operation. The narrator lives with the guilt of her unborn child, and suffers nightmares of "til-eaten flesh," which recur throughout the text. A recurrent motif of her guilt is also found in her "paintings of trees like stylised Rajput miniature trees with til leaves" (*The Virgin Syndrome* 36). Dharker deviates from the traditional formula of the popular 'Bollywood' Hindi movie wherein the girl-gone-astray ends up either drastically atoning for her sins, or marrying the man who seduces her. Rather her protagonist goes on to take other lovers without marrying any of them. There is however no equation made between a woman's assertion of her sexual freedom and the actual liberation of the self.

Dharker associates the virgin syndrome with a cultivated non-consciousness of the body of the woman, a cultural inheritance processed over years. In this context, it becomes a kind of muted consciousness. Qualities of sacrifice, self-denial are offshoots of this form of muted consciousness which operates at different levels. C.S. Lakshmi points out that this 'non-awareness' is made into a "beautiful female quality – an asset in young brides to preserve the family system" (236).

Rachel, after having initiated her into sex, when Nick drives her home with an arm around her, she wants to draw closer but feels she must not do so while he is driving. Later in the novel, she thinks of aborting the foetus with knitting needles or a bent coat wire but fears becoming a victim of a bungled abortion. The Manawakans fearfully shut out the world of emotions and wish to deny their bodies and the legitimacy of their passions. George Bowering sees the change in Rachel's consciousness "as a result of her getting in touch with her body, that part of the self the Scottish Christians preferred to cover with rough wool and to

forget.” The part of the town in which she lives is associated with the mind and rationally while the poorer section, disdainfully dismissed as “the other side of the tracks,” is associated with the body. This mind/body or Apollonian/Dionysian split is fully internalized by Rachel. Before she meets Nick, she is seriously displaced from her and her bodily needs. Hector Jonas’ salesman friend and Nick find her and her bodily needs. Hector Jonas’ salesman friend and Nick find her slender but she insists on regarding herself as too thin and feels miserable about it. She sees herself as a “thin giant” (*A Jest of God* 1) and as thin stiff white feather like a goose’s feather” (*A Jest of God* 153). The glass of the display windows reveals “a thin streak of a person, like the stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard” (*A Jest of God* 29). She finds her arms “long and skinny” (*A Jest of God* 3) and her hands in contrast to Willard’s seem too large “and too thin, like empty gloves” (*Jest of God* 8). Her mirror reveals a “narrow angular face” (*A Jest of God* 16) with gray eyes which seem too wide for it. In short, everything about her appearance seems wrong to her. Her torment on nights when she is aroused seems like “Hell on wheels” (*A Jest of God* 18). “The night”, she says, “feels like a gigantic Ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour” (*A Jest of God* 18) and she sees herself as glued or wired to it like paper or better still, like a photograph. “The night’s wheel... turns and turns pointlessly” (*A Jest of God* 58) as she conjures up fantasies of orgies initiated by Antony and Cleopatra. Despite the town’s code, Rachel yearns to touch and be touched.

Reflecting on her own unmarried status, the narrator of *The Virgin Syndrome* confesses that “She had for a while felt like the monster of Ravana ... nightmare of distortion, an Absolute Other, a mutant, a secret self-revealed to an aghast world. Look, I had almost said to my cousins, the sanely married. I am a Freak. You are a Normal” (*The Virgin Syndrome* 178). Before the incident at the Tabernacle and her encounter with Nick, Rachel’s persona or social self,

stands distinctly apart and at a safe distance from her real self which is ruthlessly repressed.

Through him, “She learns to assert herself against the demands made by the town whose narrow-minded moral and social outlook she has made her own.” He helps her accept her body and her sexual needs and see them as a vital part of herself. So strong is her need, that nervous as she is, it is Nick who draws away after the first kiss and not she. Despite the grave-like setting and her awkwardness, Rachel finds a certain amount of peace in the sexual activity and pride in holding him.

Dharker introduces the presence of Siddharth, only after the narrator’s evolution as a creative artist has already taken place. Passages on ‘Memories of Siddharth’ are interspersed through the text. Siddharth is equally non – conformist and he has given up medical school to sculpt (*The Virgin Syndrome* 173). He becomes complementary to the narrator’s existence and she describes him as her “soulmate,” “... he allowed me entry into his mind so that I was able to look at the world through his eyes; free of that lens that society slips on us” (*The Virgin Syndrome* 176).

Both Rachel of *A Jest of God* and the unnamed narrator of *The Virgin Syndrome* reached a stage of potential but incomplete wholeness. In the case of the Dharker’s narrator, she plans to join her lover Siddharth in London. The protagonist’s decision to do so will in effect take her out of her Socio – Cultural milieu, and in doing so will shift the context of her struggle.

Both the protagonist, Rachel and the unnamed narrator are single women and have had men in their lives. Both of them have broken the traditional laws and entered into a world of liberty. The men in their lives help them realize their selves. Both Rachel and the unnamed narrator tried to overcome the walls around them. (Manawaka and Aashiyaana).

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**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

- Indra, J. E. "A Comparative Study of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome*." *Literary Quest* 1.7 (2014): 104-111. Web. DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.