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The construction of the new female identity in Virginia Woolf's *To the lighthouse* and Margaret Laurence's *A jest of god*

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Abstract

Literature has always been a discrete area for women through which they express their hopes, desires and fears. The female character has long been associated with the usual strict stereotypes as passive, irrational, weak and compassionate. They have always been seen as the weakest sex in need of a savior, restricting their function to being saved rather than rescuing others. This study deals with two novels published in the 20th century, Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* (1966) whose heroines are a good example of the new female who fights to construct her new identity in two different countries, England and Canada. Woolf recognizes that women have been prohibited from society and from writing in their own voice. Thus, *To the Lighthouse* constitutes a feminist analysis of the rejection of women from education and economic independence. At that time, marriage, divorce and child custody were of great importance, which explains the attitude of the male characters towards the artist Lily Briscoe, a spinster.

Similarly, the female protagonist character in *A Jest of God* is a thirty-four-year-old unmarried teacher who lives with her widowed mother in a small Canadian town. Both women try to liberate themselves from the patriarchal prison and rigid gender roles and construct a new identity. Both are given a protest identity instead of the emphasized identity that is normally given to women by male writers. Lily Briscoe struggles against the dominant patriarchal male characters and submissive female characters such as Mrs. Ramsay who still belongs to the Victorian Age, trying to find her way out. Just like Lily Briscoe, Rachel in *A Jest of God* moves from one phase of life to another, trying to liberate herself from the patriarchal prison and rigid gender roles. However, unlike her, Rachel feels crippled without a man; she seeks a man's attention to satisfy her sexual, emotional and social needs. This study will describe the two women's isolation from their society and their journey to find peace and harmony with that society at the end. It will also present the narrative techniques used to portray the characters' isolation and show their human condition.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Margaret Laurence, gender, patriarchy, marriage, feminism, stereotype, identity

Introductions

To the Lighthouse is a 1927 novel by Virginia Woolf that comments on human experience. Virginia Woolf denounces the restrictive roles of women in the 1930s. *A Jest of God* is the second novel in Laurence's Manawaka series, published in 1966. The two works produced by famous female novelists in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf and Margaret Laurence give a new definition of feminism and identity. The search for the two authors is for existential fulfillment, that is for freedom and self-definition. The female protagonists in modern literature are struggling against loneliness and alienation, learning about themselves through hardships and adventures.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf portrays Lily Briscoe as the feminist figure of the novel. She is the New Woman who, like Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God*, is not married. As a painter, Lily Briscoe is aware of the restrictions placed on women who want to pursue a career in art or writing. This is translated in Mr. Tansley's voice early in the novel when he states: "Women can't write, women can't paint (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 48). But Lily perseveres, trying to find her meaning and fighting with these ideas regarding women and art as well as time and being. She rejects the idea that women can't be artists and constructs her own identity and individuality at the end of the novel when she draws a line in

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the middle of her painting started ten years before. *A Jest of God.*" the second novel of Laurence's Manawaka series presents the case of a woman, Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year spinster who lives in a small Canadian city with her widowed mother and tries to liberate herself from the patriarchal prison. In this novel, just like Lily Briscoe, Rachel Cameron moves from one phase of life to another. All the restrictions put on her push her to have an isolated life, thus becoming a victim of her society. She is a school teacher who spends the first part of her life subjected to social and cultural restrictions, restrictions that affect deeply her self-identity. Both of them show the battle against the issues of patriarchal constraints and gender inequality. They represent different models of women victimized by the roles imposed on them and who achieve resurrection and redemption at the end when they construct their new identities. In the two works, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Jest of God*, several elements increase the distress of Lily and Rachel, their oppression and self-devaluation.

Presentation and justification of the prospective topic

This paper aims to discuss the topic of The Construction of the New Female Identity in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* by providing reasons as to why it is important to clarify such a matter. This topic represents not only the personal suffering of the protagonist female characters, but also the suffering of all other women in the novel and worldwide. Women in the two works are oppressed psychologically and physically. These women have the same problems under the controlling men and they attempt to liberate themselves in their own ways.

Regardless of the differences between the two literary works, my study argues that in a patriarchal society, lack of freedom of speech, emotion, choice, and self-fulfillment engenders complex misery in females, and their isolation and self-devaluation as women still look for identity and personality. Therefore, this research examines how *To the Light house* by Virginia Woolf and *A Jest of God* by Margaret Laurence raise the conflicts, and sufferings of women in their societies, before and after World War II. Virginia Woolf in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, portrays "the new woman" who rejects the traditional Victorian roles expected from her and emerges from all these restrictions. The same is true about Rachel Cameron who undertakes a self-discovery journey.

This study aims to prove that Lily's persistence and pride and Rachel's pathological fear are products of social pressures that aim to maintain the patriarchal system. Both of them discover that the process of liberation is only achieved by refusing their weakness and forming a new female identity. To reach these ends, the two protagonists go through an internal adventure to gain the desired transformation. Thus, the two works chosen display several of common characteristics such as the two women's isolation from their community, their awareness and their consciousness of the necessity of the inner transformation.

Just like Woolf presents Lily Briscoe as a reflection of women in England who are striving to control the traditional beliefs that affected the English pre-war society, Laurence, on the other hand, cleverly presents the female protagonist of *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron, as a reflection of women in Canada who are striving to control the traditional beliefs that affected negatively the Canadian post-war society.

Rachel, just like Lily, suffers from marginalization; she has a distorted vision of herself that leads to an identity crisis. She finds difficulty in expressing her emotions and communicating with others until she meets Nick and has a relationship with him. This paper will also try to expose the narrative techniques that serve to describing the two women's alienation and their continuous challenge to construct their new identity.

Presentation and Justification of the approaches to be adopted

This study discusses the terminology of gender and sex and thus, chooses to deal with this topic within the scope of Gender Studies. Gender theory, like feminism, encloses the notion of identity and explains how gender roles and cultural constructs affect people's lives. It explains the historical circumstances related to the life of the writers and their literary works. The two selected works present women who are intelligent and assertive and who establish themselves as strong feminine figures. The two authors portray the life of Lily and Rachel, and what these two women resort to in order to free themselves from pain. In *To the Light House*, the author achieved the breaking of the "norms" of society through her writing. Her fearless approach to gender identity is provided in Lily Briscoe whose distress is caused by cultural and social prescription of gender roles which destroy their personalities under men's compression. All women in the two novels are victims of the different societies in which they live and represent as well the psychological actualities of their female characters. They all suffer psychologically because they are oppressed by their families and society.

Also, *A Jest of God* reflects (1966), various points of women's sufferings in Canadian society precisely in post-war time. Rachel is totally controlled by her mother who imprisons her within the social norms and gender restrictions at the beginning of the novel. She is torn between what she has learned from her mother and what she seeks, between accepting her feminine destiny and rebelling against it at the same time. Thus, the critical approach adopted for this study is the feminist approach.

In addition, there is a clear reflection of the New Historicism theory in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*. The author shows the experiences of those women who immigrated to Canada after and before the war from different countries. It pays more attention to social circumstances and post-war Canadian societies and gender circumstances. So, the current study focuses on the areas of Sociology and Feminism. Considering the events in both novels, the two authors emphasize the concept of freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of humanity regardless of gender, which makes it easy to deal with women's identity and sexuality in a patriarchal world. Existentialist feminists believe that women's hesitation to change is the main point that lies behind women's obedience to boundaries of gender and roles.

The female characters recognize the world as negative and meaningless, and they feel alienated. They are hypersensitive, solitary, and introspective. The narrators are burdened with the responsibility of choosing between two opposite ways, one way is authenticity and the other is the way of bad faith. The narrator in *To the Lighthouse* carefully guards her authentic self with a split identity. She struggles against male thinking, family roles, and social norms as well

as against depression and male dominance, especially inside the family. She reflects the conflicts of her parents through the unhappy relationships between Mr. Ramsay and his wife who was victimized by gender-coded and her husband-controlled behavior. She can't speak and express her ideas, and this is her dilemma because she refuses all the female qualities, kindness and love. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are living together as husband and wife, but they are strangers to each other. Thus, she is driven to emotional instability, insanity, and even depression under the pressures of marital discord and disharmony. Lily, on the other hand, assumes responsibility and takes matters into her own hands; she tries to exert control over her own life.

Margaret Laurence in *A Jest of God* is dedicated to enhancing the relationship between Rachel and Nick Kazlik by showing her sexual dreams in order to point out the stresses that the double standard impacts on women's nature. Nick appears as the main changing event in Rachel's life. It is through him that she finds liberation and courage to free herself from her mother's domination. However, Rachel's imagination shows how the views towards female sexuality at the time often caused women to have feelings of shame and guilt about their sexual fancies. The two novels are concerned with the existential search for the meaning of female identity and an analysis of the challenges and the choices that human beings, specifically women, face in life.

Presentation and importance of the prospective area of study and importance within the framework of scientific research. The interest of the study is to show that despite the different geographical areas and societies of the two novels. Despite the specificities of the two writers' experiences and different identities, and different histories, the male-female relationships issue is still one of the main concerns of writers in their works. Women have been defined since the dawn of time according to their relation to men around them, which affected negatively on members of their families. Therefore, literature of the East and the West has always aimed to emphasize the same problems and roles of women and show women in their relationships with their families. These women are controlled by gender boundaries and they don't understand their position, thus they become miserable. Virginia Woolf is an English writer; Margaret Laurence is a Canadian writer. One explores the predicament of women in Canada in the sixties and the other that of women in England in the 1930s, but women all over the world share the same ordeal the two women writers come from different backgrounds but they suffered the same dilemma. Women writers appeared proficient artists especially by the end of the nineteenth century, and took their place alongside male authors as important, developers, visionaries, and innovative. In the nineteenth century, the question of women's rights started being a serious argument. Very few women had the same opportunities for education as men. They were entirely shut out of political activity and were not even allowed to vote. These women, just like Lily Briscoe and Rachel Cameron later, liberated themselves and found the courage to break all boundaries.

During the twentieth century, women gained more rights after the two World Wars, but this didn't put an end to the many problems and disagreements in the couple. This issue holds the same importance today since it is not limited to one country or one person but reflects the status of women in most countries. Tense and disharmonious male-female relations are a universal problem that is still prevalent and

that will not stop as long as humanity exists. The importance of this study lies in our realization that these problems will always be, whether in Canada or England even if not tackled in the same way due to the small number of women writers before the end of the 19th century as well as due to the history of different countries where these female writers were living. This explains the explosion of these relations in the post-modern and contemporary age where women started having another status and liberating themselves and when the institution of marriage started not having the same importance.

Margaret Laurence brilliantly sketches the female characters in *A Jest of God* referring to the various aspects that affect their position in the work and family life. The two women that concern our study in the novel are in sharp contrast. May Cameron, Rachel's mother is a lonely old, weak and sick widow who cherishes men's superiority over women. Thus, she raises her daughter according to Puritan values controlling her actions and imposing on her traditional values. The other woman is Rachel, her daughter, who struggles to unchain herself. Rachel has no voice of her own, "I hear my voice-controlled" (Laurence, *Jest* 59). Deep inside, her voice reflects a rebel, but she is afraid. Even going to church is a torment to her, but she goes just to satisfy her mother, "those Sundays were a torment as pure as anything I've known since" (Laurence, *Jest* 47). Her journey towards freedom and self-realization begins when she meets Nick, her lover. It is through him that she discovers her power. Rachel constructed a new identity when she became her own master and she gained autonomy. She becomes sure of what she needs and what she deserves. At the end of the novel, Rachel moves away with a new identity that she constructed with Nick. She is now able to face all social taboos and transcends her previous perspectives towards life to set new future plans.

On the one hand, Virginia Woolf is widely recognized as a feminist and gender novelist in English literature. In *To the Lighthouse*, she examines women who realize that their choice of men is not a meaningful one, and their marriage is impossible to secure for them the kind of life they desire. They are never able to find their true identity. Most of the female characters suffered their downfall as a result of either husband or father's-controlled treatment. In *To the Light House*, Woolf displays how oppressive domestic relationships lead to feminine depression and mental instability, as the case with Mrs. Ramsay. Even though many social customs and sexual constraints have disappeared in different societies, they still exist for many women and keep them imprisoned, which renders the man-woman relationships more complex and explains at the same time the increasing number of separations in all societies, Eastern and Western. Mrs. Ramsay too is a lonely woman although she is surrounded by family and guests in the summer house. She is relieved when she is left alone because "she could be herself, by herself" (Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 59). Mrs. Ramsay remains a conventional woman whose role is limited to take care of her family and guests. She is the Victorian housewife, a kind and tolerant woman but also a protector. Lily Briscoe is different; she is "the New Woman" that nobody really understands. First, she is an artist, and she is not married. Accordingly, the two women writers' message is clear in both works; one must stop behaving like society taught women to behave. This is provided by many critics like Letha and John Scanzoni who

mentioned in their sociological study related to *Men, Women and Change* that the greatest wives and mothers know nothing or little of the desire for sexual needs. Domestic duties, love of home and children are the only rage they feel. Just as a law, most of women submit to their husbands, but only to please them (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 431). This statement reflects May Cameron and the way she comprehends women's sexuality as well as her own.

On the other hand, Karen Stein in her article "Speaking in Tongues" discusses the role of the mother, and women's sexuality and position in family and society. Stein alludes to the different means of revolution against patriarchal doctrines represented by the mother in the story. In addition, for Barbara Powell, in her article "The Conflicting Inner Voices of Rachel Cameron", the mother plays a major role in passing the patriarchal restrictions and social norms imposed upon women. *A Jest of God* has to be approached by looking at an essential point that Rachel makes on her sister's and parent's marriage. Rachel's sexual relations with Nick outside of marriage reflect the viewpoints of the change and new society, and the marriage of her parents depicts the traditional attitudes towards sexuality (Owram, 251). However, such outside marriage and sexual relations are still rejected in Canadian society (Pierson 188).

The following excerpts from *A Jest of God* point out the emotional misery that women who guessed pregnancy outside of marriage had to endure due to the harsh attitudes of society. "What will become of me? It [the baby] can't be borne. Not by me. What am I going to do? It does not matter what I feel, or what the truth is". She is blaming herself, but very quickly, she stops punishing herself for being a woman and decides to keep the baby. Her decision to keep the baby is a proof of her construction as a new woman who defies and triumphs over patriarchal and social doctrines. She now accepts and embraces her feminism.

Lily Briscoe as to her is different from Rachel in that she rejects from the beginning the traditional mother-wife role which is imposed by patriarchy on women as the sole role in society. In "The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History" (2010), Julia Brigg states that "Virginia Woolf's fiction travels over the nature of the human condition: "what makes up our consciousness when we are alone and when we are with others, how we live in time and to what extent our natures are determined by the accidents of gender, class and historical moment" (70). Lily changes when she recognizes that everything in this material world is transient and temporary, but the only thing that stays immortal is art. This, she realizes at the end of the novel in Part Three. Lily has got her own philosophy about life. She starts to be more mature and aware of the people around her.

Moreover, Munca Daniela in "Virginia Woolf's Answer to Women Can't Paint, Women Can't Write" (2009) notes; "... Lily comes to realize that Mr. Ramsay, like herself, has doubts about the value of his work. She appreciates what she does" (28). Lily Briscoe throughout the novel, just like Rachel in the previous work, goes through an extreme change of ideology. At first, she struggles, fights with her own lack of self-confidence, welcomes newness and lives a self-reliant life as an artist and works for the better. She chooses not to marry and to continue to paint drop what is in yellow.

Conclusion

To conclude, both novels. *To the Lighthouse* and *A Jest of*

God are studies on women's obsessive fear and anxiety of the conventional norms of society. These norms are constructed within the boundaries of patriarchal and gender restrictions. Lily Briscoe and Rachel Cameron continue their life in peace and reconciliation. They both liberate themselves from traditional gender restrictions, one when she completes the painting and has the vision and Rachel when she becomes the decision-maker. We see them as humans who have the right to speak their minds. Both go through a change and transformation in their character that redefines their growth and development.

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