

# **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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**بناء الهوية الأنثوية الجديدة في رواية "إلى المنارة" لفيرجينيا وولف وولف وولف  
ورواية "مزحة الله" لماجريت لورانس**

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## 1- Abstract:-

Literature has always been a discrete area for women to express their hopes, desires and fears to gain recognition in patriarchal societies. The female characters have long been associated with the usual strict stereotypes as passive, irrational, weak and compassionate. They have always been seen as the lowest 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 female characters, Rachel and Lily Briscoe, are a good example of the new female who is determined to survive with dignity until she gets free.

The two female protagonists in *To The Lighthouse* and *A Jest of God* undertake a journey from survival to freedom, each in her own way and according to the norms of the society in which they live. In both countries, England and Canada, women were alienated at that time, but many of them were also willing to break the chains. Rachel in *A Jest of God* is struggling to liberate herself, as the same as Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily Briscoe is an artist, and she is unmarried and Rachel is a thirty-four-year-old schoolmistress who lives with her widowed mother. Both initiate the same journey toward freedom. 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 own 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 from survival to freedom to find peace and harmony with that society in 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, emancipation.

## المخلص:-

كان الادب هو احد السبل للنساء للتعبير عن امالهن ورغباتهن ومخاوفهن من اجل الحصول على التقدير في المجتمعات الذكورية. لطالما ارتبطت الشخصيات النسائية بالصور النمطية الصارمة المعتادة على انها سلبية وغير عقلانية وضعيفة وعطوفة. والنظر اليهن على انهن ادنى جنس محتاج الى منقذ، مما يقيد وظيفتهن في الاقتاذ بدلا من اقتاذ الاخرين. تتناول هذه الدراسة روايتين نشرتا في القرن العشرين، رواية "الى المنارة" لفرجينيا ولف (1927) ورواية "مزحة من الله" لمارجريت لورانس (1966)، حيث تعتبر شخصياتهما، راشيل وليلي بريسكو، مثالا جيدا على الاتى القوية المصممة على البقاء بكرامة حتى تتحرر. تخوض البطلتان في روايتي "الى المنارة" و"مزحة من الله" رحلة البحث عن الحرية، كل على طريقتهما الخاصة ووفقا لمعايير المجتمع الذي تعيشان فيه. في كلا البلدين، إنجلترا وكندا، كانت النساء معزولات في ذلك الوقت، لكن العديد منهن على استعداد ايضا لكسر القيود. تكافح راشيل في "مزحة ن الله" لتحرير نفسها، تماما مثل ليلي بريسكو في رواية "الى المنارة". ليلي بريسكو فنانة، وهي غير متزوجة، وراشيل معلمة تبلغ من العمر 34 عاما تعيش مع والدتها الارملة. تبدا كلتاهما نفس الرحلة للبحث عن الحرية. ليلي بريسكو تكافح ضد الشخصيات الذكورية الابوية المهيمنة والشخصيات النسائية الخاضعة، مثل السيدة رامزي، التي لا تزال تنتمي الى العصر الفيكتوري، وتحاول ايجاد طريقها للخروج تماما مثل ليلي بريسكو، تنتقل راشيل في رواية "مزحة من الله" من مرحلة الى اخرى، محاولة تحرير نفسها من السجن الابوي والادوار المتذلللة والجامدة. ومع ذلك على عكسها تشعر راشيل بالشلل بدون رجل، فهي تسعى الى جذب انتباه الرجل لاشباع احتياجاتها الجنسية والعاطفية والاجتماعية. من هنا ستصف هذه الدراسة عزلة المرأتين عن مجتمعهما ورحلتها للبحث عن الحرية لايجاد السلام والوثام مع ذلك المجتمع كما ستعرض في النهاية تقنيات السرد المستخدمة لتصوير عزلة الشخصيات واطهار حالتها الانسانية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** فرجينيا وولف، مارجريت لورانس، الجنس، النظام الأبوي، الزواج، النسوية، الصورة النمطية، الهوية، التحرر.

## 2- Introduction

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 fulfilment, 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 identity and individuality at the end of the novel when she draws a line in the middle of her painting, which started ten years ago. She is living in a patriarchal society that considers her foolish, but she will persevere until she is full of her ideas, her own way of seeing, as she thought in chapter XII. In fact, Tansley's comment is what motivates her ten years later. It is then that she says, "They are happy like that; I'm happy like this" In a certain way, she got free once she understood the necessity to unite the two sides of the painting with the line. She liberated herself from the taboos and the pressures of the society.

A Jest of God, the second novel of Laurence's Manawaka series, presents the case of a woman, Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old 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 that deeply affect her self-identity. Just like Lily Briscoe changed her perception of life at the end of the novel. She gets free when she stops calling herself “My father’s child”(148). It is only when she realizes that she is alienated that she begins her journey towards freedom. She becomes a new woman who looks at life in a different way. She finally takes control of her life and decides to live it the way she should, as any other woman of her age without fear. Both Lily and Rachel 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 identity. At the end, they both get emancipated because they were determined to survive with dignity. In the two works, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Jest of God*, several elements increase the distress of Lily and Rachel, as well as their oppression and self-devaluation before they get free.

### 3- Presentation and justification of the prospective topic

This paper aims to discuss the topic of *The Journey of the Two Women*, Lily Briscoe and Rachel Cameron, 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 with different statuses, backgrounds and situations. Women in the two works are oppressed psychologically and physically. These women have the same problems under the control of 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, the lack of freedom of speech, emotion, choice, and self-fulfillment engenders a complex misery in females, and their isolation and self-devaluation as women still look for identity and personality, but also for freedom. 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 of her and emerges from all these restrictions. The same is true about Rachel Cameron who undertakes a self-discovery journey, a journey from survival to freedom.

This paper 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 a long journey full of obstacles; it demands a lot of perseverance and determination. To get free, both Lily and Rachel should refuse their weakness and face society and its taboos. It is an internal adventure that will lead to the desired transformation and emancipation.

Thus, the two works chosen display several common characteristics, such as the two women’s isolation from their community, their awareness and their consciousness of the necessity of the inner transformation and liberation. 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 in describing the two women’s alienation and their continuous challenge to get free and construct their new identity.

#### **4- 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, one an artist and the other a school teacher, who are intelligent and assertive and who establish themselves as strong feminine figures ready to challenge the societies in which they are living. The two authors portray the life of Lily and Rachel and what these two women resort to free themselves from pain.

In *To the Light House*, Virginia Woolf achieved the breaking of the “norms” of society through her writing. Her fearless approach to gender is provided in *Lily Briscoe* whose distress is caused by cultural and social prescriptions of gender roles which destroy their personalities under men’s compression. Women in the two novels are victims of the different societies in which they lived, and they both represent the psychological actualities of the female characters. They all suffer psychologically because they are oppressed not only by society but also by their families.

Also, *A Jest of God* (1966), reflects various points of women's sufferings in Canadian society, precisely in post-war times. 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. My analysis and examination of this novel specializes in a close examination of the exploitation of the contemporary, such as Canadian post-war women’s history, and their social achievement. Thus, the critical approach adopted for this study is also the feminist approach. Feminism tries to help women express themselves freely and assert their rights and interests rather than being speechless or just a sexual object.

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 before and after World War II from all over the world. 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 the 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 her and Mr. Ramsay. She 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, such as 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. This is where Lily comes. The latter assumes responsibility and takes matters into her own hands; she tries to exert control over her own life, and she reaches her aim at the end of the novel because she is determined to fight and break the chains.

Margaret Laurence in *A Jest of God* is dedicated to enhancing the relationship between Rachel and Nick Kazlik by showing her sexual dreams to point out the tensions 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 later 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 guilt and shame about their sexual fantasies. 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.

## 5- Presentation and importance of the prospective area of stuy and its importance within the framework of scientific research.

The interest of the study is to show that despite the different geographical areas and the different societies of the two novels and the specificities of the two writers' experiences and different identities, and different histories, the male-female relationships are 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 has negatively affected members of their families. Virginia Woolf expressed her point of view in one of her most famous quotes: "I detest the masculine point of view. I am bored by his heroism, virtue, and honour. I think the best these men can do is not talk about themselves anymore". Therefore, literature of the East and the West has always aimed to emphasize the same problems concerning women's roles, and show women in their relationships with their families. Gender boundaries control these women, 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 writers come from different backgrounds, but they suffered the same dilemma. Women writers appeared as proficient artists, especially by the end of the nineteenth century, and took their place alongside male authors as important, developers, visionaries, and innovators. 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 transcend 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 they faced and disagreements in their couples. 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 losing its importance. Women now are living for themselves, not for others. They gained a certain autonomy and got emancipated.

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 who 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 her traditional values. The other woman is Rachel, her daughter, who struggles to unchain herself. 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). Rachel has no voice of her own: "I hear my voice controlled" (59). 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 transcend her previous perspectives towards life to set new plans.

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf is widely recognized as a feminist and a 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 their husbands or their controlled

treatment. In *To the Light House*, Woolf displays how oppressive domestic relationships lead to feminine depression and mental instability, as is 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, like May Cameron, 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 taking 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 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 as society taught women to do.

This is illustrated by many critics like Letha and John Scanzoni, who mentioned in their sociological study related to *Men, Women and Change* that the best wives and mothers know nothing or little of the desire for sexual needs. Love of home and domestic duties and children is the only rage they feel. As a law, most 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, Barbara Powell, in her article “The Conflicting Inner Voices of Rachel Cameron”, asserts that 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 about her sister's and parents’ marriage. Rachel's sexual relationship with Nick outside of marriage reflects the attitudes 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 distress that women who suspected pregnancy outside of marriage had to endure due to the strict 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 proof of her construction as a new woman who defies and triumphs over patriarchal and social doctrines. She now accepts and embraces her femininity.

Lily Briscoe 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 Briggs states that "Virginia Woolf's fiction explores the nature of the human condition: "what makes up our consciousness when we are alone and when we are with others, where 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 realizes 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 her own philosophy about life. She begins 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, and this is what is important. At first, she struggles, fights with her own insecurities, works for the better, welcomes newness and lives a self-reliant life as an artist. She chooses not to marry and to continue to paint.

## 6- 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 continues 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. Their journey to freedom was not smooth nor easy, but their determination to break the chains and challenge society's norms led them both to find themselves and survive.

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