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Identity Crisis in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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Abstract: *Lady Oracle*, a 1976 novel by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian Novelist, can be said to be shallow and deep both at the same time. Metamorphosis is the theme of this novel. Joan Delacourt Foster, the heroine of the novel is a thoroughly bland character, but still, the novel, a gothic comedy, fascinates the readers. The novel follows the pattern of an unhappy childhood, escape from home, exile, love, marriage, and the slow and very much difficult process of self-discovery through art. Joan's experiences are very much interesting and the self-indulgent passivity of her responses to the various situations turns them into some of the best comic scenes in Canadian fiction.

Keywords: *Metamorphosis, Gothic Romance, Capitalistic power, Patriarchal exploitation, Stereotyped Roles.*

The novel opens in Italy, soon after Joan Foster has faked suicide. She took the course of least resistance, even though the various personae of her life were converging. As a celebrated poet, Joan has left behind a hopelessly radical husband, a far-out lover, and an inept blackmailer. She has also left her two friends, Sam and Marlene, who had to, later on, account for her disappearance to the police. In order to get financial benefits from her tragic death, she left the publishing firm of Morton and Sturgess. The only thing she had brought away with her is the little fat girl she was, from whom she can never escape, and her alter identity, Louisa K. Delacourt. At present Louisa is shown to be at work on *Stalked by Love*, her sixteenth historical romance, very much appropriately entitled. The story of Joan, a writer of Gothic romances and by accident a famous poet, is a parody of the traditional portrait of an artist. Everything about Joan is fake. Even her poetry, under the title *Lady Oracle* is nothing more than automatic



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writing.

Joan runs away because there is no one to accept and acknowledge her identity. As a child and adolescent, Joan is painfully obese, a disgrace to her family and the middle class, her dominating mother, and as Jerome H. Rosenberg has phrased it, her story is “a poignant anatomy of childhood terror and alienation.”¹ Incident and relationships in Joan’s life emerge and disappear. Some have comic effects, others are touching. Throughout the novel, Joan is continuously and constantly on the run. She is running from her mother, her former life, Paul, the Royal Porcupine, and ultimately even from Arthur, her husband. She finds herself lost in a maze of fabrications and self-created impersonations. She suffers an identity crisis, even though too many. In this patriarchal society where women are not supposed to have any identity of their own, Joan Foster is no exception. Since, Arthur, her husband does not like the idea of a woman with a mind of her own, she pretends not to have one. She is Louisa K. Delacourt, the author of Gothic novels. She is also the super poet, who experiments with automatic writing and ends up composing a best-selling volume of poetry entitled *Lady Oracle*. Joan is faced with “the problem of ‘becoming’ and ... none of the options available seems satisfactory.”²

Joan’s identity crisis has its roots in her own will to be dominated, shaped, and subordinated by the imperialistic, capitalist power-structures. The capitalist environment in which women are given fixed roles and identities, makes Joan accept a given identity. She compulsively accepts it and consequently suffers due to it. Her own distinctive identity is lost somewhere. As a young girl, Joan accepts her mother’s strong control over her life. She grew up as a fat girl and in order to please her mother she always had a strong desire to be slim. Her life is in a way, influenced or even controlled primarily by her mother. She is “a kind of stage manager and director intent upon casting her offspring into stardom on the stage and screen.”³ Joan’s relationship with her mother was “professionalized early. She was to be manager, the creator, the agent, I was to be the product.”⁴ Joan is always confused and never comes to realize why she was named Joan by her mother. She never comes to know what were the real intentions of her mother behind it:



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...my mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of the things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men - or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had will power, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? (LO.p 42)

Joan never comes to find the answer. As a fat child, poor Joan is always rebuked and reproached by her mother, who is unhappy with Joan's being fat. Joan is pained to remember her mother's comment about naming her after Joan Crawford:

When I was eight or nine and my mother would look at me and say musingly, "To think that I named you after Joan Crawford," my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome with shame; I knew I was being reproached ...Joan Crawford was thin. I was not and this is one of the many things for which my mother never forgave me (LO.pp.42-43).

Joan always keeps on trying to please her mother but is never successful. She is never allowed to help her mother with household chores, as she feels Joan is not capable of doing anything. She calls her "clumsy" (LO.p.55), which makes Joan cry:

... I didn't help my mother I wasn't allowed to. On the few occasions I'd attempted it, the results had not pleased her. The only way I could have helped her to her satisfaction would have been to change into someone else, but I didn't know this yet. My mother didn't approve of my free-form style of making beds, nor of the crashes and fragments when I dried the dishes. She didn't like scraping charcoal off the bottoms of pots when I tried to cook...She wasn't a very patient woman; she told me quite soon that she would rather do things right herself the first time than have to do them over again for me (LO.p.55)



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It is not that Joan is merely kept away from doing any help to her mother. Time and again she is even ridiculed by her, she is told by her mother, “Sometimes I think you haven’t got a brain in your head” (LO.p.79). Whenever Joan cries she is rebuked by her mother because for her “tears were an evidence of stupidity” (LO.p.79). In fact, she thinks Joan to be a stupid, good-for-nothing child. Joan’s childhood is very much lonely. She does not have anyone to play with, except the dolls. She wished that “they would come alive” (LO.p.79), but that never happens. She has a strong desire to have a sister, but she knows that is not possible: “What I really wanted was a baby sister but this was out of question and even I knew it. I’d heard her say over the phone that one was more than enough. (Why wasn’t she happier? Why could I never make her laugh?” (LO.p.79). This particular question always keeps on disturbing little Joan. She is always unsuccessful in making her mother happy since her mother thinks Joan is useless. According to her, “Nobody who looked like me could ever accomplish anything...” (LO.p.84). Her desire to be a butterfly and not a mothball in the school dance programme highlights Joan’s strong desire to be what she is not. Since society accepts girls and women as butterflies, not as mothballs. Joan tries to get slimmer in order to participate in “The Butterfly Frolic” (LO,p.45), but she is not successful. Her mother is quite impatient because she is unable to prepare a costume in which Joan could fit:

My mother struggled with the costume lengthening it, adding another layer of gauze to conceal the outlines, padding the bodice; but it was no use. Even I was a little taken aback when she finally allowed me to inspect myself in the three-sided mirror over her vanity table. Although I was too young to be much bothered by my size, it wasn’t quite the effect I wanted. I did not look like a butterfly. But I knew the addition of wings would make all the difference. I was hoping for magic transformations, even then. (LO, p 46)

As Joan does not fit in the role of a butterfly, she ends up as a mothball bumping and thumping in the center of the stage. When she is denied the role of a butterfly she feels frustrated. She wants to become the center of attention as she tells, “I had my eye on the chief butterfly



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ISSN: 2583-0201

spot” (LO.p.46). For her, the wings that go with the butterfly costume represent “magic transformations” (LO.p.46). Just like Atwood’s other heroines Joan wants to rise “from mundane reality towards a heightened state of awareness.”⁵ But as we know her wish to become the central butterfly is crushed. She is offered the role of a mothball. She takes it as a “humiliation disguised as a privilege” (LO,p 50). The scene is funny for everyone, but for Joan, it was “a dance of rage and destruction” (LO,p. 50). She cries a lot and tells painfully:

“This isn’t me,” I kept saying to myself, “they’re making me do it,” yet even though I was concealed in the teddy bear suit, which flopped about me and made me sweat, I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it (LO.p.50)

As the dance sequence goes on, to her surprise, she finds the audience applauding her even after the butterflies have left the stage. She is confused at this applause because she can never even think that this patriarchal society and the environment created by it, which prefers the beautiful aspect of women only, can praise the ugly aspect also. She says, “It puzzled me that some of them seemed to like my ugly, bulky suit better than the pretty ones of the others” (LO.pp. 50-51). Even though she is praised a lot by the audience, she is not satisfied. She decides to leave the dancing school which has deprived her of the butterfly wings. She says, “It is true I have received more individual attention than the others, but I wasn’t sure it was a kind I liked” (LO.p.51). Her mother seemed to be pleased with her success initially, but Joan is agonized when she gets a question from her mother later on,” ... who would think of marrying a mothball?” (LO.p.51). Here again, we find Atwood pointing out the hostile environment in which women are liked, admired, and desired only if they fit in the stereotyped roles and models given by society. Joan’s mother, in a way, is representing the hostile society and environment in which women have to adjust.

Another example of the imposition on Joan’s identity is the Aunt Lou’s bequest of two thousand dollars after her death, but on a very strange condition of Joan losing a hundred pounds:



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ISSN: 2583-0201

Aunt Lou had indeed left me some money. Two thousand dollars in fact, which was a lot at that time, for someone of my age. But there was a condition: I could have it only if I reduced, and Aunt Lou had even picked the proper weight. I had to lose a hundred pounds (LO.p.118).

In order to get the money, Joan is supposed to fulfil Aunt Lou's condition. It "requires Joan to be what she is not - a butterfly and not a moth."⁶ It is another attack on Joan's identity. Her mother was quite angry at Aunt Lou's condition and even for this she considered Joan to be responsible. When Joan decides to reduce, she didn't believe her as she didn't think her "capable of it" (LO.p.118). She says, "It's the most idiotic thing I ever heard of. It's a total and complete waste of time, if you ask me" (LO.p.117). Thus, Joan's impressionable years present her with such environment and situations which create an identity crisis for her. It leads her to such passivity that she loses her virginity because she is too timid to say "no" to the Polish count. When the Polish count realizes that he has deprived Joan of her virginity, he feels guilty:

... when he realized he had deprived me of my virginity-the Polish count was filled with remorse. "What have I done?" he said mournfully "My poor child. Why didn't you say something?" But anything I could have said would have been implausible. This was the reason I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing. (LO.p.150)

Joan is not at all upset at the loss of her virginity. She is rather happy: "I was glad it had happened. It proved to me finally that I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was no longer among the untouchables" (LO.p 150). It is Joan's environment that makes her feel so. Throughout her childhood, she suffered due to her being a fat child. She cannot forget her mother always ridiculing her and reminding her that nobody is going to marry her since she is a mothball, not a butterfly. Since she is slim now, she feels that she too can be loved and desired by males. The Polish count, no doubt, feels guilty at the loss of her virginity. He thinks himself responsible for it. He is very much surprised at Joan's passivity about it. He feels that this has ruined her chances of being a wife, as a wife in this male-dominated society is always supposed



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ISSN: 2583-0201

to be a virgin:

... he viewed the loss of my virginity as both totally his fault thus making him responsible for me and a fall from grace which disqualified me from ever being a wife, or his wife at any rate. He thought my lack of guilt was a sign of barbarism. Anyone from across the Atlantic ocean was a kind of savage to him and even the English were questionable, they were too far west. So he ended by being angry with me for my failure to cry, though I told him over and over that this wasn't the sort of thing I cried about.

(LO, p.158)

Her differences with the Polish Count (Paul) grew as they both had different views on love. Joan says, "I believed in true love, he believed in wives and mistresses; I believed in happy endings, he in cataclysmic ones" (LO, p 159). Paul thought Joan to be "a mistress" and according to him "mistresses are unfaithful by nature" (LO, p.159). He began to feel jealous of Joan and started being possessive about her. He started suspecting that Joan had a "secret lover" (LO, p.160). She tells "He began to attack my novels too, calling them cheap and frivolous, and it infuriated him when I agreed with him pleasantly" (LO, p. 160). He started to frighten Joan. She feels making love with Paul "had begun to resemble a shark fight, he was no longer gentle, he was punching and biting ..." (LO, p. 161). Ultimately, she decides to run away from him and she makes it clear to Paul that she is not "a commodity for his use and pleasure."⁷ This is how Atwood shows how a sensitive, aesthetically inclined woman resists patriarchal exploitation. Joan runs away from Paul as she desires freedom-not from one man but from the entire system. As a wife, Joan is again caught in a "maze of incomprehensible, unresponsive and apathetic marriage."⁸ Joan, though, always keeps trying to please her radical husband Arthur is never successful in doing so. Their marriage is not based on love. Arthur marries her just because he feels that this would perhaps settle them down. For him, this sort of arrangement would prove to be very much cheap and convenient for both of them. When proposed by Arthur, Joan said



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ISSN: 2583-0201

nothing, because she “couldn’t think of any reasons why not” (LO, p.197). Even though they had not known each other for a long time, Arthur finds marrying Joan quite practical:

He’d been giving it quite a lot of thought, he said. Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would become better acquainted. If it didn’t work out, well, it would be a learning experience. More importantly, we could live much more cheaply together than we could separately. (LO, p.197)

One can find no talk of love here, but still, Joan agrees to marry Arthur just because she has a strong desire to belong to him. She tries to fit in the patriarchal mould of a good wife, where a wife is supposed to do everything and please her husband. She starts cooking even though she had never cooked earlier in her life. She tells, “Arthur expected me to cook, actually cook, out of raw ingredients such as flour and lard” (LO, p.209). She further says. “But for Arthur’s sake I would try anything, though cooking wasn’t as simple as I’d thought” (LO, p.209). Joan although tries her best to please Arthur, is pained to find his impersonal behaviour. No doubt, she resents his behaviour, his strange way of love but she still does not question it. She “fails to understand Arthur’s way of love, if love it was, for beyond some expectations from Joan, he does not participate at all.”⁹ Arthur makes life very much difficult for Joan. She is very much dismayed at “his over righteous airs, his impersonal demeanour and his ‘You are a nincompoop’ look .”¹⁰ The only way she reacts to his strange behaviour is by writing escapist romances and hiding them from Arthur. Arthur takes pleasure in Joan’s failures. Joan is disappointed when she finds it out:

It took me a while to realize that Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red hot platter on the floor, having forgotten to put on my oven mitt, he liked to hear me swearing in the kitchen... (LO, p.210)

Joan’s failures make Arthur confident and happy. When Arthur’s attitude becomes too indifferent, she gets involved with Chuck Brewer, the Royal Porcupine. When this involvement goes too far and her married life seems to be threatened, she tries to get away from it. She feels



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ISSN: 2583-0201

Arthur was responsible for his affair with Chuck. She feels that she would have been happy, had Arthur loved her and treated her as a human being:

For some complicated and possibly sadistic reason of his own he'd allowed me to become involved with a homicidal maniac, and it was time he knew about it. I didn't ask much, I only wanted to be loved. I only wanted some human consideration. Was that so terrible, was that so impossible, was I some kind of mutation? (LO, p.272)

Arthur is a sadist in the true sense. He takes pleasure in torturing Joan. He is never happy with her success. When she gets *Lady Oracle* published, Arthur is not at all happy. He treats her as if she had committed a sin by writing it. Even though he does not make any comment, he behaves in a strange manner as if he is very much hurt by it:

I gave Arthur a copy of *Lady Oracle*, inscribed in the front. For Arthur, With All My Love, XXXX, Joan. But he didn't say one word about it, and I was afraid to ask him what he thought. His manner became distant, and he began to spend a lot of time at university, or so he said I would catch him giving me hurt looks when he thought I wasn't watching. I couldn't figure it out. I'd been expecting him to tell me the book was bourgeois or tasteless or obscure or a piece of mystification, but instead he was acting as though I'd committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin. (LO, p.235)

Just like any other husband in the patriarchal society, Arthur wants Joan to discuss everything with him before taking any action. Since a wife is not supposed to act according to her own personal will and choice. He even told Joan, "When you write your next book, I'd appreciate if you'd let me see it first" (LO, p.236). Women's creative efforts have been throttled by the male-dominated structures in our society. That's why we have no woman writers of substance till the nineteenth century in England or America. Even when women started writing their stories, they used pen names (often male ones) to hide their identities. Hence the rationale behind the Joan-Arthur – relationship. As a wife, Joan is expected to do everything for Arthur.



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She is not allowed to do something or other just for her own pleasure and satisfaction. Even then, the man she loved so much was always alienated and detached from her. Their marriage is about to collapse as Arthur continuously makes it clear to her through his aloofness, silence and strange acts that she should move away:

He'd been watching me all along, not saying anything; it would be like him not to say anything. But he'd made a decision about me finally, a pronouncement, thumbs down. I was unworthy. I would have to go, and this was his plan to get rid of me. (LO, p.292)

Joan does not have any solution but to go. She plans a fake death and moves to Rome. She has in a way tried to escape from everything. Why has she preferred to escape and not confront reality? Why has she always been victimized? No doubt, Atwood "exposes Joan's own complicity in her will to be a victim, she nonetheless at the same time relates Joan's passivity - "Miss Flegg Syndrome," as Joan terms it (LO, p.149)- to the patriarchal structures of power and dominion that impose fixed sex and gender roles and appropriate woman's identity by persistent idealization and socialization of the woman."¹¹ Throughout her life Joan has tried to fit in with the given role- models of a woman. She has internalized the patriarchal values and codes of conduct that her environment provides her with. As a result, she "acquires a surfeit of identities, all of them fictional, and ends up having no authentic or recognizable identity."¹² She begins to live a life of the Gothic fiction, she herself creates. The fiction in a way becomes the reality for her. However, she becomes prey to a blackmailer who threatens to expose her real identity as Louisa Delacourt. She fakes an accidental drowning, assumes another name, and moves to Italy. She gets yet another identity, that of a dead Joan. She escapes reality because she is basically "naive and gullible."¹³ For her escape was very much essential. Let's listen to her own voice regarding the matter:

I was an artist, an escape artist. I'd sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk, entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else had I ever done? (LO, p. 334)



Literary Horizon

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Vol. 2, Issue 4

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ISSN: 2583-0201

The catchwords here are “bondage” and “slithering out again” which signify a woman’s constant search for freedom from patriarchal systems of domination.

In the end, however, Joan comes to realize her flaws. She no longer tries any further trusts to escape. She feels Aunt Lou was right: “You can’t change the past” (LO, p.10). She decides to accept her past and make a new beginning. She tries to find out new means of improving her past. She decides to be pragmatic and accept life as it is: “I should have stayed where I was and faced reality” (LO, p.338). She feels her fake suicide was wrong and decides therefore to go back to Toronto to save her friends who were charged with her murder: “I’d have to go back and rescue them” (LO, p.338). She is ready to accept the reality that Arthur loved her “under false pretences” and so she “shouldn’t feel too rejected when he stops” (LO, p.345). She feels that she should stay and face the consequences instead of escaping from the reality. There is no doubt that Joan does not give up fantasizing even in the end. She continues to play the role of a nurse to the reporter whom she has attacked and wounded. But one cannot deny the fact that “the process of ‘becoming’ for Joan begins in her decision to take up responsibility for her action and thus symbolically assert her will.”¹⁴ In all the novels of Atwood, “the ending marks the beginning of the process of ‘becoming’ which may eventually lead to ‘being’”.¹⁵ According to Twigg, Atwood herself says “I never make Prince Charming endings because I don’t believe in that. But I do believe that people can change. Maybe not completely but some.”¹⁶ Atwood believes in the progressive evolutions of her protagonists which would lead to “humanization of woman in the socializing and idealizing male world.”¹⁷ According to Struthers, Atwood rightly says at the end of the novel, Joan has “gotten as far as saying I am who I am, take it or leave it...”¹⁸

Atwood in her famous book *Second Words* says that “fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspect.”¹⁹ Atwood, in her narratives, not only reflects the society but also tries to reform it by exposing the effects of an imperialist, capitalistic environment on her women protagonists. In *Lady Oracle* she exposes the damaging and devastating effects of imperialistic powers on Joan, leading her to a



Literary Horizon

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal

Vol. 2, Issue 4

www.literaryhorizon.com

February, 2023

ISSN: 2583-0201

self-destructive passivity but at the same time always searching for an identity. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood critiques the late capitalist “environment” in which women are given labels and identities they can not escape. Thus, the environment victimizes Joan and by extension, thousands of young women by imagining them as nymphs-the objects of beauty. Atwood’s aim is to depict the bleak and dreamy side of modern capitalist society. Through form and content, Atwood tries to portray and expose the shallow and sterile aspect of the modern imperialistic and capitalistic society responsible to reduce women to mere playthings leading them towards a state of an identity crisis.

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- ³ Robert Lecker, The Art of Margaret Atwood:Essays in Criticism, p. 195.
- ⁴Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976). P. 67. All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotation
- ⁵Lecker, p. 198
- ⁶Salat, p. 67.
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Literary Horizon

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Vol. 2, Issue 4

www.literaryhorizon.com

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ISSN: 2583-0201

¹¹Salat, p. 67.

¹²Ibid., p. 67.

¹³Sunaina Singh, p. 163.

¹⁴Salat, p. 68.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁶Quoted in Salat, p. 68.

¹⁷Salat, p. 68.

¹⁸Quoted in Salat, p. 68.

¹⁹Quoted in Salat, p. 68.