

Quest for Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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Lady Oracle is Margaret Atwood's third novel which was written in the 1970s and it deals with the woman's role and condition in a society which is dominated by men. The novel can be called a feminist study of how women have problem with self-definition in a male dominated society. Therefore, the novel discusses the problem of individuals and specially women who are forced to play predefined and fixed gender roles such as daughter, wife or mother and it shows the result of such oppression. So the effect of this problem is woman's rebellion to beliefs, values and ideas dominating in society. Joan, like all the other characters in Margaret Atwood novels starts a journey of realization for finding her true identity and during this quest she faces many difficulties but at the end of her journey she emerges as a autonomous woman. As Charles Correa in her essay named "Quest for Identity" says "We develop our identity by tackling what we perceive to be our real problem...we find our identity by understanding ourselves, and our environment. (10)"

The narrator of the novel is a woman who struggles with anxiety and problems in a male dominated society. The protagonist of the novel, Joan, is so isolated and alienated that she sees her friends, parents, husband, as total strangers. She is overwhelmed by the problems and dangers that she sees around her and she wants to cut off from any relationship with the human world. The novel discusses problems in family relationships and the influence of childhood on adulthood. It also tells us that how a female feminist writer might adopt to challenge the male-centric literary tradition. According to Rosemary Sullivan, Atwood examines how the forces of society interact with the individual (129).

The protagonist lives in a community which thinks that woman's success is only dependent on the size of the body and on female beauty. And because Joan, the protagonist of the novel, is fat and does not have the characteristic of an ideal woman and refuses to become a perfect daughter, wife and a perfect woman in her society, she feels rejected and marginalized. Most of the characters whom she contacts, force Joan to adjust to the pre-fixed social roles but she revolts against them. Through the novel she describes step by step the development of her inner rebellion against social expectations.

Throughout the novel, Joan describes the memories and the anxieties of her childhood and adolescence. In life she had a desire for love and to find acceptance. But like many women in her time, she sees herself like an object. So Joan learns to use her body as a weapon to stand against her society and specially her mother: "By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body" (65). The male dominated society expects women to fit into the norms of the society. But Joan cannot accept this idea so she rebels against what a woman should

be and try to be herself. But unfortunately, the more she rebelled against the gender norm for her society the more she was disliked and ridiculed.

At the beginning of the novel, Joan has just faked her own death and is living in a suburb of Rome, where she decides to start a new life. Then she narrates the sad story of how she has ended up here. Lady Oracle's protagonist, like the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*, creates a fictional past. She never tells her husband about her past, and her childhood, that she was a fat girl and what kind of relationship she had with her mother. But she tells the truth of her past and her most private memories to her readers. She tells the reader about the things that she was afraid to tell her husband and friends.

In her narration she starts from her childhood memory, when she was a fat, unattractive and ignored child, and because of her body she was rejected by her thin, beautiful, and cruel mother. Her father worked as a sort of legitimate contract killer during the war. He was a stranger to Joan, and they didn't have much relationship with each other. Her mother was an anxious and possessive woman. She rules the home so one can find little life or joy within the house. Because of all these unbearable behavior, Joan escapes to her aunt's house where she is taken to a church and she is encouraged by her aunt to see dead people and starts writing through. And after the death of her aunt, who leaves her some money, she goes to England, and starting a new life under the name of her beloved aunt. Frank Davey argues that "Atwood gives us a large view of Joan Foster's early life and makes it clear that most of Joan's difficulties with adult relationships are caused by the transferences and projections from childhood experiences" (56).

Most of women accept the ideal image which is attractive for men and for society and in this way they become an object for men. And in order to achieve this desirable self they stop eating to be thin because thinness is an ideal image for women. So becoming fat is a plan that women use to react to the inequality of the sexes. Women get fat to avoid being seen as sexual object. In this novel also, Atwood talks about the use of the body as a protest. Joan's weight gain can be seen as a source of rebellion by the use of war metaphors: "I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated" (70). When her mother wants her to wear some clothes that make her thin, Joan deliberately wears clothes that make her fatter. In this way Joan has used her body and her clothing to resist her mother: "I had defeated her: I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful" (88).

But after Joan's weight loss and when she is thinner, men begins to look at her in a different way, as a sex object, "like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant" (123). For example in the bus she is faced by men who put their hands on her thigh, and she does not know how to react. Because of all these experiences, Joan wants her old body back. She desires to be fat again: "There was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective" (139)

The relationships that we have with different people in our lives effect on us and to some extent change our personality. Our relationships with other people around us can define who we are. Indeed Joan is a woman who had many problematic relationships during her life. She has a depressing relationship with her mother, husband and many other people around her. These relationships definitely have an influence on Joan, impacting her as a person. The narrator's quest for self discovery consists in an analysis of her past and also a decision to become more active in the future.

So the first part of her quest starts at the beginning of the novel when Joan decides to fake her death and leave her family and friends. Part one tells the reader that what happened to Joan that she faked her death. And it is through this chapter that we come to know about Arthur, the protagonist's husband. Indeed, he shows a paternalistic attitude towards the heroine, deciding what she should do. During this part we come to know that she is a writer and she likes writing because she can get multiple identity and personality by it.

In the second part of the novel there is a long flash back of the heroine's past. The shocking mother-daughter relationship in the heroine's childhood is one of the most important parts of the novel's plot. The most important relationship in Joan's life is the one with her mother. Joan feels rejected, unwanted and unloved by her mother, who treats her coldly because she is a fat girl. At first, Joan struggles to adapt herself with her mother's ideal vision of her and tries please her mother's expectations. Joan's description of her childhood, the abusive mother and the absent father suggests that he was not mentally satisfied so she sought satisfaction in eating and food. Her mother wants Joan to be thin but she objects:

This was one of the many things for which my mother never quite forgave me. At first I was merely plump; in the earliest snapshots (...) I was trying to get something into my mouth: a toy, a hand, a bottle. (...) I failed to lose what is usually referred to as baby fat. When I reached the age of six the picture stopped abruptly. This must have been when my mother gave up on me (...) she had decided I would not do. I become aware of this fairly soon (43).

When she fails to satisfy her mother, Joan resents her mother's unbearable attitude and becomes antagonistic toward her. After that she tried to go against her mother's wish and did exactly opposite of what her mother expects and wants from her. Her mother tries to decrease Joan's size both by diet and suitable clothes, in order to make Joan look acceptable for society. She does not care about Joan's opinions, feelings and needs, her only aim is to create a woman that will be an embodiment of her own success as a mother and which would be perceived by others in a positive way. The mother's attempts to change the heroine's appearance to the shape acceptable for society are described by the protagonist in the following passage:

At this time my mother gave me a clothing allowance, as an incentive to reduce. She thought I should buy clothes that would make me less conspicuous, the dark dresses with tiny polka-dots and vertical stripes favored by designers for the fat. Instead I sought out clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped. Some of them I got in maternity shops, others at cut-rate discount stores; I was especially pleased with a red felt skirt, cut in a circle with a black telephone appliquéd onto it. The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack. (84)

Joan decided to buy clothes that she knew her mother would hate and in this way she started a war with her mother. It was not important for her what other people thought of her, because she only wanted to annoy her mother. Joan overeats herself on food, gaining weight in the process, because she knew that her mother didn't like it. She really wanted to be her mother's exact opposite, and she did everything in this way. So Joan fails to match to her mother's and society's definition of a beautiful little girl.

The protagonist of the novel is annoyed by the memories of her mother's cruelty. Joan hates her mother because of her cruelty and emotional and mental abuse. The conflict between Joan and her mother begins in her early childhood. According to Emma Parker, "Joan's mother

attempts to deny her daughter any sense of autonomy and tries to control her life and identity. She makes her diet and tries to assert her authority physically by reducing her daughter in size. Joan challenges her mother and takes control of her own life through eating. She retaliates against diets by eating more and more.” (2)

During her childhood she was not able to make decision for herself and the feeling of inability to make decisions remained with Joan during her adulthood and become the reason for her rebellion against her mother, who is presented as a dictator and ruler. Moreover, the Joan's mother sees life's success with good clothes and furniture. And because of these behaviors of her mother, Joan hates and disgusts her mother, so she refuses to become a woman like her and that she even tries to go against her – a fat person. In this way Joan rejects the role of the woman who is the head of a family, who behaves like a dictator and ruler and who decides for the other people's lives according to her own expectations and needs. In the other word she refuses to become a woman at all.

Moreover, Joan rejects the ideal of femininity and refuses to become the kind of woman that her mother and society consider as ideal and perfect. It is repeated many times in the novel that Joan does not fit the description of an ideal female which the male-dominated society has created. At the same time, she also expresses her rebellion against being treated as an object. In the eyes of her mother, the person who has all the characteristics of an ideal woman is Joan Crawford. She is what society dreams and demands. She is a beautiful, thin, successful woman who is loved and accepted by others. Joan's mother gave her daughter a name after the actress because she thought that her daughter would become similar to her namesake – strong, smart and, most of all, slim. As Joan rejects to be a submissive daughter and a polite female who is respected only for her appearance instead of intellect, the war between her and her mother begins. Joan uses her body as weapon to show her resistance. While she feels helplessness and dependency on her parents, Joan eats too much in order to make her mother worried and angry. Joan refuses to be changed because she finds her mother's actions destructive for her personality and identity.

In order to stay in her childhood and not entering into adulthood, Joan eats too much. She understands that as long as she remains plump and fat and childish, she is not attractive to men and, therefore, not endangered by them and she will be safe. That is the reason why Joan is not afraid of her father, even though he is presented in the novel as dangerous. Although Joan has a difficult relationship with her mother and no relationship with her absent father, she unconsciously wants to stay a child and not to leave home.

Her relationship with Aunt Lou is another step in her quest to self discovery. Aunt Lou is a surrogate mother for Joan, a person who embodies everything that her mother is not. Women have been forced by society to play the roles of a good daughter, wife and mother for centuries. Yet, as they became more self-aware and independent, they started to rebel against the traditional roles and fight for their rights, which they thought should be equal to those which men had. It is not only Joan who is a woman who does not accept her own fate and social position. Aunt Lou is also another woman who is different from the other women. In her relationship with Aunt Lou, Joan does not transform her identity to please another person. Aunt Lou is not demanding and a difficult person like her mother, and in spite of her mother, she gives Joan the opportunity to be herself. She actually seemed interested in what I had to say, and she didn't laugh when I told her I wanted to be an opera singer (81).

Aunt Lou's acceptance of Joan made her self-confident and gave her the chance to state what she felt and thought, without worrying about what other people thought. Aunt Lou was the

only person that Joan showed her true identity to. Because of her closeness to Aunt Lou Joan decides to take her Aunt Lou's full name, Louisa K. Delacourt, as her pen name. And with her name, Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan was able to be herself after Aunt Lou's death. As her Aunt Lou had earlier warned her, "you can't change the past." However, the niece had then insisted, "Oh, but I wanted to; that was the one thing I really wanted to do" (p 10), and till the end of the novel she is certain that if she had a governess and had finished school, her life would have progressed more smoothly. Aunt Lou helps Joan to grow up. She slowly leads the heroine into adulthood through adult movies and newspapers. She also makes the protagonist lose weight and break free from her mother's influence. Aunt Lou is the first person who notices the heroine's refusal to become a woman and rightly understands Joan's eating disorder. In the light of Freudian psychology, overeating in *Lady Oracle* is definitely the protagonist's refusal to enter adulthood, which she is expected to do by society, peers and family.

Part three her quest focuses on her encounter with a polish Count. After the death of Aunt Lou she escape to England in order to find her lost Self. After leaving home, Joan meets a Paul. Paul treats her as a child. He has a superior attitude toward her. "His manner was warm but patronizing, as if I were an unusually inept child" (146) .he makes decision for her and does not pay attention to her own opinion. After meeting Paul, or the Polish Count, in London, Joan dose everything in order to be acceptable in the eye of Paul and tried a lot not to upset him. This is a direct opposition of the identity Joan assumed when dealing with her mother. Instead of going against Paul's wishes, Joan is submissive and passive. Her passiveness is easily visible during the beginning of her stay in Paul's home as his mistress when she allows him to take her virginity without saying a word.

She always lets him have the final word in their discussion and decisions. Her identity at this point is based on Paul. She is nothing more than an extension of Paul. But the Problems begin when Joan tries to change of this model of behavior. she begins to realize that he is not as wonderful, romantic, and heroic as she had originally believed him to be. When Joan started to do more things for herself, instead of doing things that pleased him Paul went crazy, he was not satisfied with this situation because he wanted a passive and submissive mistress with him. Paul's attitude towards her gradually changes to reveal his mimicked paternalistic attitude: he didn't like her earning more money than he does. [Paul] began to have fits of jealousy. It was all right as long as I did nothing but loll around the flat, reading and typing out my Costume Gothic and going nowhere except with him (158).

The fourth part of her quest for self discovery shapes with her relationship with Arthur and their wedding. Joan's relationship with Arthur is similar to her relationship with Paul. After a walk in Hyde Park one day, she bumps into a fellow Canadian, political activist Arthur, who is an undemonstrative cold fish only interested in the latest fashionable crisis affecting humanity. Joan falls in love with him, despite his indifference to her, and they marry, with ne'er a romantic demonstration from Arthur, who knows nothing of Joan's former life as a fat child nor that she writes trashy novels. In fact, Joan doesn't tell him hardly anything about herself, but Arthur is far too interested in himself and his campaigns to notice that Joan is even there. Starved of romance and affection, Joan can't write, and to help her find her way back into a creative mind sight, she tries 'automatic' writing again. To her surprise she finds that when she falls into a trance she manages to create absurd and fantastical poems; she sends these to a publisher who raves about Joan as a new feminist voice, and publishes the book under the title 'Lady Oracle'. After their marriage, again she loose her female self and starts doing what she thinks Arthur will like and shaping herself in a way that will be more attractive to him. In her relationship with Arthur, Joan

encounters the same dominating attitude. She describes Arthur as a man who knows her personality and feeling. He always tries to influence her choice of clothes and like her former lover, treated her as a child. His behavior was that of a father with his little kid. She lies to Arthur about her past. She never tells him of her problematic relationship with her mother or her battles with her weight, these are all an effort to become the type of wife that she thinks Arthur wants:

“Though I was tempted sometimes, I resisted the impulse to confess. Arthur’s tastes were Spartan, and my early life and innermost self would have appalled him. It would be like asking for a steak and getting a slaughtered cow. I think he suspected this; he certainly headed off my few tentative attempts at self-revelation. (215)

Joan is not satisfied with her real identity, so she creates another one. In her marriage with Arthur, her main goal is to be an ideal wife for Arthur and making sure that he is satisfied and pleased with her. “Then discovered to my dismay that Arthur expected me to cook, actually cook, out of raw ingredients such as flour and lard. I’d never cooked in my life....But for Arthur’s sake I would try anything” (208). Joan’s attempts to cook fail, but she keeps cooking because she thinks that Arthur enjoyed watching her mistake: “My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. His applause kept me going (Atwood 209).

Another relationship which affects Joan’s life and identity is her relationship with the Royal Porcupine. When Joan meets this character at a press party, she is first attracted to him precisely because she thinks that he is a romantic character, a character from her novels. With his top hat, cape, and cane, he could have stepped right out of one of her novels. In this way, Joan wants to escape from her husband's gloomy behavior and a sexless marriage by having an affair. At first, they were happy with this relationship. They had a fine time and they arranged to meet at literary gatherings and she even took him along on her book-promoting tours.

But then, like the other men in her life, her lover begins to change the rules of the game.. So while she is evading one marriage, he proposes another and evolves his own fantasy of settling into a regular existence replete with wife, children, job, house, mortgage .The Royal Porcupine changed his appearance, shaved, in jeans and a T-shirt but Joan was disgusted with this change. "He'd thought that by transforming himself into something more like Arthur he could have Arthur's place; but by doing this he'd murdered the part of him that I loved. I scarcely knew how to console the part that remained. Without his beard, he had the chin of a junior accountant" (271).

Joan is not very happy with the success of her book of poetry, “Lady Oracle”, because she fears that someone may discover her other selves, her costume Gothic writer self and her former fat self: Now that I was a public figure I was terrified that sooner or later someone would find out about me, trace down my former self, unearth me” (251). As she was afraid, Fraser Buchanan, discovers her past and request some money to be silent about her past. She is afraid that the people around him would come to know about her past identities. So she pretends that she got drowned in Lake Ontario, with the help of her friends and fly to Italy. In this way Joan want to put an end to her multiple identities.

Indeed the novel focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. So the novel can be called a Bildungsroman. At the end of the novel, Joan finds that she must return to Canada, admit that her "death" was all an act, and confess the reasons for the pretense in order to save the two friends who await trial for her murder. That

failure, however, is also a fortunate fall. Inadvertently, her feigned death finally forces her to repudiate various false identities.

Joan has finally begun to see the uselessness of escaping into fantasy world. So she decides not to continue to work on Costume Gothics because she recognizes that she need no longer be a victim and that she will no longer impose the myth of the victimized woman onto herself and her readers. She has begun to confront her present only in her life, not in her art. Ultimately, Joan's attempts at creating multiple selves appear doomed to failure. And at the end she admits "I've always been terrified of being found out." All through her life she tries to construct her life as if it were a fictional plot. But at last she recognizes that her problems are all because of the incompatibility of her separate lives: "If I brought the separate parts of my life together surely there would be an explosion. Instead I floated, marking time," she notes. Eventually Joan appears to find some resolution to her duplicitous problems.

At the end of the novel and after her encounter with a reporter and hitting him with a bottle, she decides to tell her story, truthfully, to him. She feels that she has never been truly loved in the past. Her partners could only love a constructed version of Joan. She also admits that Arthur "loved me under false pretenses" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, p. 345). So the novel suggests that you have to look within your own self to find a more secure and heightened place in the world.

So at the beginning the protagonist finds herself alone among exploitative and abusive people and in an unequal situation. The female protagonist realizes that these people and their way of life are a threat to her true self. She attempts flight, she forbids certain activities in order to save herself and in order to survive in a male dominated society. In this novel when the young woman became conscious about herself and her situation, she can give up her usurped powers to a somewhat reintegrated being. So the protagonist comes to be aware of her selfhood and accept her status as a woman.

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