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“Unveiling The Patriarchal Veil: Margaret Atwood's Interrogation Of Gender Norms In Lady Oracle”

Karen Jeyashree S.P.¹, Dr. P. Jeyappriya²

¹Research Scholar, Mother Teresa Women’s University, Kodaikanal-624102 E-Mail ID: percis.karen@gmail.com

²Professor and Head, Mother Teresa Women’s University, Kodaikanal

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Introduction

In the male dominated world women are conditioned to be victims, the objects of the male self’s power. Simon de Beauvoire says in The Second Sex, “for him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is incidental, as opposed to the essential... He is the Absolute she is the other” (164).

Margaret Atwood Lady Oracle deals with the role of women and their condition in a society which is dominated by men. The novel discusses the problems of women who are forced to play predefined and fixed gender roles. Joan Foster, the protagonist of the novel, starts a journey of realization for finding her true identity and during this journey she faces many difficulties.

In the first part of Lady Oracle Joan Foster has just fled to Terre moto in Italy, having contrived most intricately, her own death. As the story unravels, it brings to the culmination of a series of role playing, of separate identities, of deception that Joan has been practicing for long. Joan’s flight from the Canadian society to Italy may be seen to be an unacknowledged attempt to flee the ego-identity that has been discursively constructed for her.

Joan’s emotional and psychological strain can be traced to the alienation that comes from having neither a loving mother nor a true home. Lack of familial and deep ties make her feel isolated with nothing to hang on to in times of crisis. As a child she was excessively fat and lacked the feminine physical attributes as demanded by patriarchal ideology. Joan’s problems spring from there.

In the eyes of her beautifully thin mother, whose values are those of the bourgeoisie, the image of the protuberant, fat, disproportionate body is disgusting and beyond the pale of decency. From the perspective of her mother, Joan violates the limits of proper physical and moral conduct. Sarah Seats rightly argues that, “Atwood brings eating into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics” (95).

E-Mail ID: percis.karen@gmail.com

During one of Joan's part time jobs at Bite-a-Bit restaurant, Joan is wooed by an Italian cook who sees her as a perfect mate for his aspiration to own a restaurant. The Italian cook proposed to Joan with a selfish motive, "I am serious, I want to meet with your father, and look, I show you my bank account" (116). He pushes her a little bank book towards her and says, "I will give you babies, lot of babies, I see you like the babies. You are a good girl." (99). This kind of de-humanization is simply an attack on the roles assigned to women by patriarchy. John reacts in the following manner, "What a shame, how destructive to me were the attitudes of society, forcing me into a mold of femininity that I could never fit. How much better for me if I would have been accepted for what I was and had learned to accept myself, too" (103).

The novel gives evidence to many cultures other than Canadian culture. The protagonist Joan Foster's alienation, her journey from one country to the other and her meeting with the people of various cultures clearly reveals the patriarchal problems in the other cultures. Joan passes through some of the European cultures like the Roman culture, British culture and Polish culture.

Joan escapes to England in order to find her lost self. The first stirring offer creative impulse could be traced to the Royal York Hotel with its bogus fairy land of nineteenth century delights, red carpeting and chandeliers, floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She feels disappointed by what she has seen of England, "Instead of the castles and ladies, though, there was only a lot of traffic and a large number of squat-people with bad teeth" (143).

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A common contemporary issue facing every country is the question of woman. Atwood refuses women as belonging to different species assigned with different roles. Reading Canadian novels from the western cultural perspective, Northrop Frye says, "...Many Canadian cultural phenomena are not particularly Canadian at all, but are typical of their wider North American and Western Contexts" (214). It is for this reason that Atwood's protagonists are seen as an outgrowth of a culture which is much influenced by the western way of life. Atwood traces the cause of woman's suffering, their escapades and finally their compromise in terms of their survival. When the man at the Royal York Hotel asks Joan, whether there is anyone with her, and looks around the glided lobby to make sure she is telling the truth, it doesn't strike her at the time that, "he might have suspected "I was a prostitute" (135). Joan attributes her success no to the fact that the lobby is empty, but to the white gloves she has worn as a symbol of adulthood and social status. Joan remembers the words of her mother, "a lady never goes out of the house without putting her gloves" (135).

Joan meets her first lover Paul or the Polish Count during her six weeks stay in England. He is slightly shorter than Joan with wispy light – brown hair and greenish gray eyes. She misunderstands him to be an English, "Aren't you English? I asked, "No", he said "But in these days, one must adapt. You, of course, are American" (146). While bringing her tea and a black currant, he makes a scathing comment on the strangeness of English people. "This tea is the English remedy of everything. They are a strange people" (146).

His hatred towards the English is reflected when he says, "They are a small minded people, the English", he said. "A nation of shopkeepers" (147). His first name was Tadeo but her preferred to be called

Paul, his third name, after Saint Paul. He tell Joan that once he wished to be like Tolstoy, “but now I am exiled from my own language, and this one is fit for nothing but to make hoardings with. It has no music, it does not sing, it is always trying to tell you something … I am the last of a dying race. The last of the Mohicans” (148). In fact he had a daughter back in Poland, as well as a mother, but he had no son, and this weighed on him.

During the nineteenth century, Poland experienced a turbulent historical evolution punctuated by wars and uprisings in an attempt to free Poland from foreign occupation and reunite the partitioned lands. Each uprising and insurrection produced a wave of Polish political exiles who sought refuge in Western Europe and the United States. A few of these individuals found refuge in Canada. These immigrants settled in the industrial cities of Eastern Canada where the small developing Polish community assisted the new immigrants in adjusting to Canadian life. The large majority of Polish immigrants supported the various social and cultural institutions sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. When the Polish Count first arrived in England he washed the dishes in Soha restaurants to make a living but once he had learned enough English, he obtained a position as a clerk in a bank and foreign exchange department. His family had belonged to the upper class, before the war, he wasn’t a Count exactly, “… he showed me a signet ring her wore on his little figure. It was a mythical bird, a griffin or a phoenix… the family had scrabbled along under the Germans, but when the Russians invaded he knew he had to get out or be shot” (147).

From the very start he displays all characteristics of the male chauvinist and regards women as dependent and naïve. Joan says, “His manner was warm but patronizing as if I were an unusually inept child” (146). He makes decisions for her and does not pay attention to her own opinion. Instead of going against his wishes, Joan is submissive and passive. She even allows him to take her virginity without saying a word. Joan says:

“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 a barbarism. Anyone from across the Atlantic Ocean was 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.” (158)

The protagonist differentiates between a given ideality and a given reality. Life is either ideal and right or real and wrong. Joan derives her ideals from popular romances, that is, conventionalized images of love, passion, happiness, femininity and masculinity. The failure to materialize an ideal pattern in reality throws her into fits of “doom and gloom”. Joan projects her dualistic world view on the various men she lives with. She relegates their individual voices and the individual contexts to the background and reduces them to impersonal shapes.

Atwood gives her protagonists the means to reconstruct tradition by giving her “the power of pen”. She parodies Lacanian psychoanalytic theory by saying “Pen is envy” in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Authorship or the “power of the Pen” is customarily male, for a woman to write represents a challenge to patriarchal culture. This explains why many feminist writers make their protagonists authors. Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* becomes a successful writer of Costume Gothics. Here Atwood parodies gothic literature because gothic fantasy has for centuries romanticized the victimization of women.

The Polish Count, who introduces Joan to this line of work, cannot distinguish “between Americans and Canadians. He says, “you Americans are so naïve, you have no history” (159). Paul symbolizes the typical man who take delight in victimizing women. He begins to attack her novels by calling them cheap and frivolous. Paul writes nurse novels under the assumed name of Mavis Quilp. Joan says, “He had chosen his pseudonym because he found the name Mavis to be archetypally English. As for Quilp … This is a character from Dickens … This is what I see myself, to be in this country; I have been deprived of my stature, and I am filled with bitter thoughts” (155). Paul’s attitude towards her gradually changes and he

doesn't like her earning more money than he does. Joan remarks, "It was all right as long as I did nothing but loll around the flat, reading and typing out costume Gothic and going nowhere except with him" (158).

Relationship with Arthur, a Canadian. Arthur, who is also a political activist, is interested only in the latest fashionable crisis affecting humanity. He propose to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. He says, "Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would become better acquainted" (237). He knows nothing of Joan's former life as a fat child or her trashy novels. At times, she visualizes him as a domineering, aggressive male with a provincial bourgeois and Calvinistic mentality.

From Arthur she conceals her relationship with Paul and creates fictitious and "more agreeable" stories. She feels that her real identity is not good, so creates new selves in response to each new situation and each new man she meets. She fears that Arthur would not approve of her costume gothic and so she choose to play the role of a devoted wife for him. She is torn between her love for Arthur and her literary aspiration. Her desire for economic independence and sexual fantasies creates confusion in her mind and she is at a loss to define her own path. She says, "For me there were no paths at all. Thickets, ditches, ponds, labyrinths, morasses, but not paths" (169). According to Simon de Beauvoir, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (Beauvoir 95). With the security of the marriage, the powerful domination of the husband, a woman leads a confined and obedient existence. The family in Canada, Atwood says is, "a trap in which you are caught" (131). Arthur expects her to cook and also impose restrictions such as not to wear long fashionable dresses in public. Joan feels, "Arthur had a strange relationship with my clothes ... he said they clashed with my hair ... at last he made me so self-conscious that I found it hard to wear my long dresses in public" (18). Joan describes Arthur as a man incapable of knowing her personality. She says:

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. (89)

Joan adopts the image of a self-effacing supportive wife and desires to preserve the security that marriage provides. When Joan proposes that it is time for them, "to settle down somewhere, a little more permanently and have children" (258). Arthur deplores her suggestion and festooned their bedroom with every known form of birth – control device and, "urged me to take the pill ... silently reproached for not having any ... groused when it made me throw up, and turned guacamole-green every time my period was late" (23).

Atwood through Joan shows how writing of women are gendered and classed on the basis of sex. Joan finds empowerment in her another 'self' when she is "Lady Oracle". She realizes that this woman, "who lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building" (269) is Joan's inner self who voices her anger towards the restricted forces of male domination. The spiritualist group, whom she visited as a child with her aunt prompts her to try her hand at automatic writing.

Atwood shows, how the society which shapes patriarchy institutionalizes sex roles and suggests that the characteristics of maleness and femaleness are not biologically determined, but they are based on cultural definitions. 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. She thinks, "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). When Joan giver Arthur a copy of Lady Oracle, he felt they diminished him ... not only that, none of them had any talent really ..." (291). Atwood questions, gender roles designated by society and challenges patriarchal power structures that have subsumed women's identity through ages.

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