

## Trap and Escape : An Analysis of the Twin Themes in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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### ABSTRACT

Margaret Eleanor Atwood the 'Queen Bee' of Canadian literature focuses on the gender roles and problems of women in Canada. Her concern is with the downtrodden and the victimised women. Her novels end with the self assertion and autonomy of the women characters. Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* explores the themes of identity, self-discovery, and the role of women in society. The novel follows the journey of protagonist Joan Foster, a successful author who has been living a double life to escape her past. One of the key motifs in the novel is the idea of trap and escape. Joan feels trapped by her past, her relationships, and societal expectations. She creates a false identity for herself to escape this feeling of confinement. However, she eventually realizes that she cannot escape her past and must confront it in order to move forward.

**Key Words :** Relationships, Expectations, False identity, Trap, Escape.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a novelist, poet, literary critic and a pioneer of Canadian women's writing. She focuses on the gender roles and problems of women. victimisation, survival, oppression, entrapment, frustration, loneliness, assuming false identity, searching for a true self, subjugation of women in a patriarchal society and exploitation of nature in a capitalistic society are the major themes explored by Atwood in her fiction. Her stories deal with the transformation of female characters from innocent women to insightful women. She is more interested in the inner life of the protagonist. Her protagonists are dissatisfied with man-made

values. They are in search of their freedom and liberty. They are victims either of men or of authority or of a particular social setup. Atwood's protagonists do not achieve anything great at the end of her novels. Instead the novels end with the process of self realisation and autonomy of the women characters. They are not solitary weapons but they make decisions and are ready to face the consequences. They are able to rise above their victimised position of insanity to sanity and take charge of their lives.

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood spotlights Canadian society with its patriarchal codes and norms. Survival is made difficult by patriarchy. In the patriarchal society Joan takes on many identities to survive. Her multiple identities reveal her separation or segregation. Joan's mother in *Lady Oracle* is dominating and suppresses her daughter always. As a young girl Joan implicitly accepts her mother's control over her. Her mother keeps her under her cudgel at home, at school, in the neighbourhood and also at the dancing school. When Joan was seven years old, she was pretty fat. Her mother takes every step to make her slim. So her mother enrolled her in a dancing school where Miss Fleg taught tap dancing and ballet." Joan Foster's mother attempts to frame and enclose her daughter's body"( Givner "Mirror"). Joan feels unwanted and unloved by her mother, who treats her coldly because of her weight problem. "Her mother always quarrel with her and the quarrel is on the territory of her body"( Rao 160 ). In the annual spring recital she is supposed to do "The Butterfly Frolic", a graceful number which requires a favourite costume of a butterfly. But this costume bothers her mother. So she is stuffed into a moth ball suit and is forced to dance. Joan recollects :

I threw myself into the part, it was a dance of rage and destruction, tears rolled down my cheeks behind the fur, the butterflies would die ; my feet hurt for days afterwards, "This isn't me", I kept saying to myself, they're making me to 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. (50)

Joan is left at the centre of the stage. Many people have shouted "Bravo mothball". She is confused when some of them seem to like her ugly, bulky suit better than the pretty butterflies." She shed tears when she had to put on the white teddy-bear costume and hung around her neck a

large sign that said "MOTHBALL". She feels naked and exposed in the dance"( Prabhakar 56 ). After the recital Miss Flegg and her mother congratulate and appreciate her. Though she has received more attention than the others she says to herself, "Besides who would think of marrying a mothball? A question my mother put to me often, later, in other forms"(51).

Joan is named after Joan Crawford. The things that always puzzle Joan about her mother are whether she wants her to be like the screen characters or she wants her to be successful in life. According to her mother, Joan Crawford is a hard worker with strong will power and built herself up from nothing. When Joan was eight or nine, her mother looked at her fat daughter and said disappointingly, "To think that I named you after Joan Crawford who was thin"( 42 ). Joan says " I was not, and this is one of the many things for which my mother never quite forgave me" ( 43 ).

Joan's mother buys clothes that would make her less remarkable. But she does not want to hide her body and so she wantonly buys peculiar dresses which her mother detests. She does not care about what other people will think of her, but she only wants to annoy her mother.``Joan resents her mother's unbearable attitude and becomes antagonistic towards her. Joan's identity then becomes based on the opposite of what her mother expects and wants from her "( "identity"). Her mother poses to be the manager, the creator, the agent and she is to be her product. Joan's mother tries to mould her physically and psychologically according to her concept of beauty and personality. She wants Joan to diet but this provokes Joan to behave rebelliously by eating more sweets. When she refuses to stick to her diet schedule she is taken to the psychiatrist whom she tells, "I like being fat and she bursts into tears"(83 ). He smiles benevolently and asks her "Don't you want to get married" ( 83 ).

By these two incidents, Atwood depicts the social consumption of female beauty and the end use of it. Canadian patriarchal society too determines that women must be beautiful, thin and with feminine attributes so that they can ultimately marry a man. Atwood by portraying Joan as a fat girl in the novel brings out the male attitude to woman's body. To the patriarchal society women are viewed as objects of beauty and pleasure. They want women to be beautiful and pleasing to their eyes. When her mother tries to mould her according to her whims and fancies and inflicts her authority on Joan she starts resisting her mother. According to S. Singh:

She eats to defy her, dresses grotesquely to exhibit her mounds of fat, works outside to displease her and is calm and indifferent in the face of storms created by her mother. She declares "I was not her puppet", and continues to do everything to disentangle herself from the stranglehold of authority. When the domestic atmosphere gets charged with this dispressure and oppression, she decides to cast off the trembles. (161)

When Joan visits the Canadian National Exhibition with her Aunt Lou, she is deeply moved by the sight of a freakshow of a fat lady. She says, "it's wrong to laugh at other people's misfortune"( 90 ). Joan thinks "I found this unfair, other people laughed at mine. I should get a chance too. But then, nobody regarded being fat as a misfortune; it was viewed simply as a disgusting failure of will"( 90 ). The show is entertaining to the spectators while the perfect This permanence is painful and mortifying to the fat lady. It reflects how society treats women, and how the good looking women are horribly exploited. The ugly fat woman is grossly abused by the man.

John meets Paul when she falls off a double-Decker bus. Joan is victimised by Paul, a Polish count and a writer of Nurse Novel which deals with the illicit relations between nurses and doctors. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. He asks her whether she likes to stay within his house. He explains, "But you will live with me! He exclaimed I have a nice place, very nice, very charming, with lots of rooms. Of course you must do this"( 149 ). She thinks he is very considerate and kind to her but her innocence is taken advantage of by him. After accepting of his plan, she reflects:

If you ask a woman to move into your apartment and she consents, naturally She is consenting to be your mistress. it's an odd term, "mistress", but that was how he thought of me, there were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged:wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover. ( 149-150 )

He offers her his nurse novels, which are trashy books dealing with illicit relation between doctors and nurses. She appears to him as a goddess in moment of contemplative passion. she detests him because he considers a woman as an empty vessel, and he categorises women as

'wives' and 'mistresses'. He places woman for inferior to a man in respect of intellectual pursuits. Paul represents the conventional male model. Paul consider women as an object of sex and reproduction. Thus the shallowness and hypocrisy of Is the pseudo-radicals among men is exposed. This gives Joan her own complicity as well as her passivity to the patriarchal structure which impose fixed roles to gender. This awareness and his ever increasing possessiveness make her run away from him. Her escape makes it clear to Paul that she is not a commodity for his use and pleasure. "Her brief encounter with Paul, though accidental, awakens her to the fact that he categorised women into either wives or mistresses and nothing else. This awareness and his ever increasing possessiveness makes the runaway from him"( S. Singh 160-61 ).

Joan is an impressive writer who had a face lift when she started with a pain named Louis K. Delacourt which is the name of her aunt. She wants to earn her living by writing about man-woman relationships. She meets Arthur who is associated with the ban-the-bomb movement as a leaflet man. Arthur proposes to her. He is a money-minded man and he wants to marry Joan because they "could live much more cheaply together than we would separately"( 197 ). Joan also wants to marry Arthur, but tells him about her past affair with Paul. She tells Arthur, "marriage is serious. There are few things I think you should know about me, in advance" ( 198 ). He tells her that he already knows about Joan's smudged past and that she has been living with another man when she met him. He says "I already know that. It doesn't bother me in the least ( 198 ).

As Arthur disapproves of religion, he refuses to be married in a City Hall. So they get married in the house of Revered E.P. Reveled. Arthur, like every Indian husband, expects to be a good cook. so Joan tries her hand in cooking. She feels cooking is not as simple as she has thought. She has never cooked in her life. Her mother would not even let her go into the kitchen fearing that she would break something or stick her germ laden finger in a sauce. Arthur does not like eating in restaurants. He prefers home-made food, though inevitable, rather than dining in hotels. The food that John has cooked is described thus:

The Swiss fondue which turns to lymph and balls of chewing gum from too a high heat, the poached eggs which disintegrated like mucous membranes and the roast chickens which bleed when cut; the bread that refused to rise, lying

like quicksand in the bowl; the flashed pancakes with centers of uncooked ooze; the rubbery pies. ( 209 )

Though Arthur criticises her cooking, he always eats the dishes. It is for the sake of love for Arthur that she changes her attitude and obeys him. Arthur wants to turn her into a domestic servant and to serve him for years. Arthur, being a sadist, enjoys her failure as a cook. But it takes time for Joan to realise that Arthur enjoys her defeats. Her faults and defects cheer him up. He enjoys hearing the crash sound as she drops a red hot platter on the floor, when she forgets to put on her oven mitt. She says, "When I would emerge sweaty-faced and dishevelled after one of my battles, he would greet me with a smile and a little joke or perhaps even a kiss, which was as much for the display, the energy I'd wasted, as for the food. My frustration and anger were real... ( 210 ).

After marriage and settling down, Joan returns to her pattern of doing what she thinks Arthur wants and shaping herself in a way that will be more appealing to him. She describes her change, "For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be. He was full of plans for me, ambitions, ways in which I could exercise my intelligence constructively.... By the time I'd adjusted my views to Arthur's, his had already changed" ( 210-22 ). Joan feels that she is happily married. In her opinion, most women make one basic mistake by expecting their husbands to understand them. But Joan does not want Arthur to understand her.

Joan hides her identity as a writer from her husband because husbands have the same mental make-up and they cannot digest their wives' popularity. When she publishes her work *Lady Oracle*, Arthur is shocked by the theme of the work because it deals with man-woman relationship. He acts as though Joan has committed "some unpardonable but unmentionable sin.... He's acting as though it just doesn't exist, but at the same time he's hurt by it" ( 235 ). Joan even thinks, "What could I do to make it up to Arthur. Perhaps I could write a Costume Gothic, just for him, putting his message into a form that the people could understand" ( 246 ). She wants to please her husband in some way or the other.

*Lady Oracle* became very popular. She receives phone calls from various people. New articles appear in magazines every week with titles like "The selling of *Lady Oracle*" and "*Lady*

*Oracle: Hoax or Delusion?*"( 250 ). News about *Lady Oracle* appears in the newspapers everyday. According to Prabhakar, "This new found fame makes her [Joan] more vulnerable to an attack on her life. Like all celebrities she visualises a threat to her life" ( 62 ). Arthur continues to look at her as though she has betrayed him to the Nazis. The only thing he says is, "When you write your next book, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me see it first" ( 236 ). She feels restless because of conjugal conflict and she feels, " I was living in the train station. Arthurr was hardly ever there" ( 249 ). Her husband refuses to respect and accord her equal rights, even after her novels are published,

When Joan is in marital discord, she receives anonymous phone calls, dead animals and threatening notes. She suspects that Arthur has sent all those things because most of the things happen when he is not at home. She thinks she has to get away as quickly as possible. So Joan assumes a fake death to escape to Rome. Escape is essential to Joan because confrontation with Arthur will have no effect. "Once he had made up his mind\_ that was the final judgement. With Arthur there was no trial, and no redress. It is this attitude of Arthur that prompts Joan to escape rather than confront\_ escape from the empowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference. ( S. Singh 163 ).

Joan ponders over the past and evaluates the pros and cons of her mistakes. She realises that moving from place to place is not a solution to her problem. She has to act in the present. She thinks "I should have stayed where I was and faced reality"( 338 ). She wants to see her husband Arthur. She is not looking for all the explanations and the expressions of silent outrage from Arthur. She believes that after the story is let out, Arthur will come to know about the truth. She is ready to accept that Arthur has loved her only under false pretence and she should not feel rejected when he stops loving her. She decides not to write any Costume Gothics because she thinks they are bad for her and wants to try her hand in science fiction. Joan feels "The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you. I keep thinking I should learn some lessons from all of this, as my mother would have said" ( 345 ). When a strange man approaches her home, she hits him on the head with a bottle. The man is innocent of any wrongdoing, but the scene, however perverse, may still be intended to represent an act of female self-assertion and resistance.



Joan in her final escape perceives the futility of it and decides to go back to Toronto. She does not want to lead a life of hypocrisy and so she decides to accept the past and make a new beginning by returning to Toronto. For all along Joan uses escape as a successful defence mechanism. With her final escape she would step into a new life. "Joan is able to tackle all the issues with a sense of pragmatism and wisdom"( S. Singh 170 ). She realizes that she cannot escape her past and must confront it in order to move forward. She is ready to face life assertively.

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