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Victimization and Survival in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle

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Margaret Atwood is one of the prominent poet and novelist of Canada. She has depicted the life of her women protagonists with all complexity, contradictions and ambiguities. Her aim is to present women as human being not merely a collection of either good or bad characteristics. Atwood portrays women with all their vices and virtues. She herself says, "Women both as characters and as people must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like her to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have – hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy without having her pronounced as a monster, a slur or a bad example. I would like her to be cunning intelligent and sly, if necessary for the plot, without having her branded as bitch goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women". (Second Words, 226).

In almost all her novels, Atwood ardently examines sex and gender roles from various aspects and she effectively objects to the patriarchal arrangement of power and supremacy that confiscate any woman's identity. Her novels investigate the theme of Survival given by her. According to this theme first the protagonist feels identity crisis and victimization and they ultimately resolve their crisis. In the end they accept their responsibility for their own victimization and take proper steps to come out of the entire crisis themselves and adopt a new identity. They initially lose themselves in order to achieve a stronger personality, but towards the end, they emerge as new women who can redefine themselves, accept the world on their own terms, and learn to exercise their free will as individuals.

Lady Oracle (1976) is her third novel. Atwood explores the issue of appearance and reality, the self as seen by others and the self as known from within. Atwood shows how the social concept of appearance plays a drastic role in identity crises. It was awarded the 1977 City of Toronto Book Award and the 1977 Canada Booksellers' Association Award.

It is an autobiography narrated by a woman Joan Foster who is a novelist and a poet. The novel is a study of women's problems and how they react to establish their own self in a male dominated society. where they are forced to play predefined roles such as daughter, wife or mother. Joan, like all the other characters in Margaret Atwood novels starts a journey of realization for finding her true identity and during this journey she faces many difficulties but at the end she surfaces as an independent woman.

In this patriarchal society, Joan takes on many identities to survive. She is one character rolled into many, at once as a fat girl in her girlhood, slim and beautiful Joan Delacourt in her youth, Louisa K. Delacourt as a writer of Gothic romance, Joan Foster as a famous poet and as a dead Joan. Joan Foster is a complex woman who has suffered in her life due to relationships. From her childhood and teenage relationship with her mother, to her bond with her husband later in life, Joan's relationships are rarely free of turmoil and drama. These relationships definitely have an influence on Joan, impacting her as a person.

As a young girl Joan accepts her mother's control over her. Her mother controls her at every step. Her mother tries to mould her physically and psychologically according to her own concept of beauty and personality. Joan is taken to a psychiatrist, to whom she says, "I like being fat". He asks her back "Don't you want to get married?" (LO 95) In the patriarchal society slim women are viewed as objects of beauty and pleasure. Joan feels unwanted and unloved by her mother because of her weight problem. Her mother's only dream is to shape her, "Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right thing. But she didn't push all the time; it wasn't that she was aggressive and ambitious, although she was both these things. Perhaps she wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize (LO 67). At first, Joan struggles to fit in her mother's perfect idea of her and tries to fulfill her mother's expectations. When she fails at this, Joan resents her mother's unbearable attitude and becomes against her. Joan's identity then becomes based on the opposite of what her mother expects and wants from her. By doing all this she only wanted to annoy her mother. Her goal was to be her mother's opposition. Actually by opposing her mother she is warning the society that she will not allow anyone to

dominate her. She says, "By this time I am 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." (LO65) 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 opinion, feelings. Her only aim is to create a woman that will be perceived by others in a positive way. Joan wants to be free from her mother's clutches. When Joan's mother inflicts her authority on Joan, pushing her into situations which make her rebel, Joan eats sweets, dresses grotesquely to exhibit her mounds of flesh and goes to work to displease her mother, "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 round 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." (LO 84) Later she also recollects "I was not her puppet" and continues to do everything to disentangle herself from the hold of authority. She runs away from her home to a remote place. Her flight reflects her hatred for authority and her search for another identity. Joan arrives in town and takes on a part-time job to make her own living. During one of her part-time jobs as a cashier in a restaurant, the Italian cook proposes to her. He shows her his bank balance instead of giving her love. He says "I will give you babies", he said, "lots of babies", I see you like the babies you are a good girl..." (LO117). She rejects his proposal and feels sorry for the commoditization of women through the institution of marriage. One evening she hears that her Aunt Lou has died and she has left some money for her, with the condition that she must lose a hundred pounds of weight. She decides to lose her weight. This leads her from her identity as a fat girl to being a slim and beautiful girl and take on the name Joan Delacourt. After that she escapes to England in order to find her lost self. After leaving home, Joan meets Paul. He is a Polish Count, who poses as "Mavis Quilp", the writer of Nurse Novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. 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" (LO146) .He makes decision for her and does not pay attention to her own opinion. Instead of going against Paul's wishes, Joan becomes passive. Her passiveness is easily visible during the beginning of her stay in Paul's home as his mistress. Joan does everything in order to be acceptable in the eye of Paul and tried a lot not to upset him. But the Problems begin when Joan tries to change of this model of behavior. She says, "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 Gothics and going nowhere except with him."(LO158) Paul assaults Joan sexually without her consents and as a result Joan soon becomes depressed. She begins to realize that he is not as wonderful, romantic, and heroic as she had originally believed him to be. The turmoil in her relationship with Paul grew until she left and moved in with Arthur. She meets Arthur by chance, and marries. Arthur is a social worker. She agrees to marry him because she wants to belong to him. And Arthur agrees because according to him, "Marriage itself would settle us down [...] most importantly, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately" (LO 197). Joan do everything to please him but all in vain. She dislikes his attitude, but does not say anything. The only way she reacts is by continuing to write escapist romances, without his knowledge. She sends some of her stories to a publisher who publicizes Joan as a new feminist voice, and publishes the book under the title 'Lady Oracle'. Joan's literary reputation grows quickly when she publishes Lady Oracle. She receives phone calls from all classes of people. She hides her identity as a writer from her husband, "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."(LO215) When she tells Arthur about this he reacts differently to her. Arthur is disgusted by the news of the publication of her work. Her interview on T.V. humiliates him. He behaves as though she has committed an unpardonable sin. Life becomes difficult for Joan. Though Joan tries to be a good wife to Arthur but his suppression of her individuality brings her unhappiness. After sometime Joan meets with Chuck, who is known as the Royal Porcupine. She is first attracted to him because she thinks that he is a romantic character. He wants Joan to leave Arthur and move in with him. Joan wanted to escape from her husband's gloomy behavior and a sexless marriage by having an affair. However she does not leave her husband. Her guilt makes her feel unsafe in the presence of her husband as she continues to lead a double life as wife to Arthur and mistress to Chuck. At first, they were happy with this relationship. But then, like the other men in her life, her lover begins to change. She feels frustrated and unhappy. She didn't know where all this will take her. Joan meets Fraser Buchanan after a T.V interview. She becomes in relationship with him, not realizing that he is planning to blackmail her. He also knows about the private lives and secret identities of Joan. He discovers her past and requests 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 plans an accident by undertaking a journey by boat and got drowned in Lake Ontario, with the help of her friends and fly to Italy. As a result she is declared dead to the public and she disguises herself as a dead person. Joan fakes her death because she feels that she is not really loved by anyone, not by Paul, not Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, not even Arthur. Joan desires to protect her individuality and refuses to walk into the traps that are laid by men hereafter. 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. All through her life she tries to construct her life as if it were a fantastic plot. But at last she recognizes that her problems are all because of the inappropriateness of her separate lives. At the end of the novel she accepts her responsibility and decides to tell her story, truthfully. So the protagonists come to be aware of her selfhood and accept her status as women. By taking flight and narrating her tale, Joan Foster is released from the artificiality of her life. In this flight she realizes her flaw and decides to start a new life. Now she is ready to face the society and accept the reality. Her misadventures have done great harm. And she decides to be realistic, to return and face life, "I should have stayed where I was and faced reality" (LO 372). During one of her rare moments of self-awareness, Joan realizes that all her fantasies have turned into traps and that all through her life she has been moving one bondage to another, "I felt I'd never really loved anyone - not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection enhanced and sparkling". (LO 315) Joan Foster wishes to transform society through her writing. She unveils the myth of womanhood through which victimization and trapping of women has been romanticized by male. Lady Oracle urges women not to run away from reality for artificial security promised by male. It encourages women to be bold enough to face life, and practice interesting and challenging careers.

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