



## **Evolution of the SELF in Lady Oracle by Margaret Atwood**

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Feminism is essentially linked with cultural moorings and social taboos. Every country has its own cultural heritage. As fiction is bound to the mirror of a particular country, feminism has assumed new shapes and name. When it comes to international scenario like British or American or French or Indian, Canadian Feminism has its unique way of presenting the problems of Women. It is not only subject oriented but also responsible for socio-cultural transformation. So for reckoning a social transformation and also economic transfiguration the woman force has to be fully harnessed into creative channels. The Canadian women novelists of the modern milieu have depicted feminism as a life force. They have presented a positive holistic view of the entire scenario. Instead of suppressing women's feminine sensibility, it must be given free vent to develop into a life force. This creative life force is certainly seen in Margaret Atwood's novels.

Canadian Literature, of late has gained prominence in India. The reason for the popularity of Canadian Literature in India is due to many similarities with Indian feminist theories. The reason for choosing Atwood is she has projected the day to day plights of middle class women who occupy the major population of Canada. As a feminist, Atwood is always for an egalitarian society which is shared equally by both the sexes.

This paper focuses on the evolution of the SELF in the novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) by Margaret Atwood. This novel projects the real life situations of women who fight for self-identity and oppose the suppression of man-made society. In spite of their protest, they emerge as a strong willed personalities. They do not succumb to social pressures but fight the social odds and progress towards their individual autonomy. This autonomy leads to their self-evolution and makes their life better. In many of her novels Atwood's women are at the beginning novices and unaware of their rights, treated as inferiors and oppressed by male dominated society. But towards the end they grow as a strong willed individual with maturity. They become ingenuous to insightful.

The rupture in the patriarchal discourse takes place when Joan using autobiographical mode, posits herself as 'I' the subject of the novel she narrates.

"I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing" (*Lady Oracle* 150).

The way she constitutes herself as the subject shows her as an autonomous individual, "possessed of subjectivity or consciousness, which is source of ones beliefs and actions" (595).

The plot moves when Joan is able to distance herself from the immediacy of her predicament and

form a split personality – a split between the 'I' that is ideal and the 'I' that is reflected back from others. So Atwood through Joan Foster explores the division of 'self'. Joan comes to terms with her own self – division, has to accept her multiple numerous selves. So Joan returns home to face the reality. Thus *Lady Oracle* disputes the notion of coherent and unified self. The female self in her is projected as 'never a fully conscious national and secure identity. She becomes the subject, constantly reformed and hence unstable' (Begum 265). Even the notion of life is rejected.

Joan is also the 'other' that equips to have control on her actions and directs her wishes to survive as she wishes and not others want her to. She is now empowered with 'voice' to stand on her views. Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, belongs to the gothic tradition and it is interesting to note that the gothic romance had traditionally been a favourite genre for women writers from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the contemporary fictions of Angela Carter, Beryl Bainbridge, and Alice Munro.

Among other conventions in Gothic tales, the chief sensibility is fear; fear of the dark and ghosts, fear of the hidden and the mysterious, fear of the sinister and unexpected, and in women-centered genres, it is women's intense fear of the men – seeing them even as potential murderers. Joan, who is herself a novelist and a poet, narrates *Lady Oracle* in an autobiographical mode. As Joan blunders through her life, faking her own death, fleeing to an Italian seaside resort, adopting a life of multiple identities and transformations, the primary motivation force is fear – her fears of the unknown drive on from one recourse to another; her fears include fear of the past, fear of blackmail, fear of threats and fear of being found out.

One of the stereotypical assumptions that Joan has to fight back by subtly escaping the noose is what women have always been confined to – the kitchen. When Joan enters the conventional bondage of matrimony with Arthur, she realizes to her dismay that Arthur expected to do her all household works and felt happy to see her being tortured. Joan was shocked to see this attitude in Arthur and grieves:

"It took me a while to realize that Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. When I would emerge sweaty after a hard work, he would greet me with a little smile and a little joke and my frustration and anger were real". (LO 234)

Joan is made into becoming a receptacle for the surfeiting emotions by men. She herself is a non-entity, a thing that can be easily be dispensed with, in their lives. Faced with a sense of severe physical and psychological dislocation with no ideological compatible partners, peers and parents, Joan has no other recourse but to withdraw from her immediate environment in two ways – one is to withdraw into a world of fantasy a 'private world' she creates for herself and when it gets raided she plans her 'death' the other alternative and she decides to plan her death carefully unlike her life.

Joan's willful creation of a world of fantasy, her escape into a segregated 'self' facilitated by her writing of gothic fiction, helps to sustain her and make her survive in a chaotic world, where she is made an eternal armchair providing comfort and solace to all the troubled patriarchs she meets in her 'journey'. Her 'multiple selves' (Vevaina 49) may appear to be her lack of control over the realistic situations she is in but it is this very state that keeps intact her sanity thereby ensuring her survival.

The protagonist's autonomy and control over the multiple selves that creates are achieved when she decides for a holistic unification of herself by clean break with the past, by making a candid confession. She even tries to accommodate her mother who sees

her as the embodiment of her own failure and depression as she decides, “I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this, as my mother would have said” (LO 379).

The novel eventually breaks the patriarchal discourse that seeks to impose on women’s lives. There is no closure, no final transformation as the novel attempts to ‘refuse an ending that is so typical of the male text. Joan has sufficiently established her ability to role-play that has full assurance of her basic survival. She is able to invent identities for herself just as she does for her characters. Joan , through her act of death and resurrection, discovers the fact that any search for ‘secure ‘grounds for achieving a sense of identity is always an abortive mission and that every person is essentially a fractured fragmented personality, containing a divided self.

Thus we see that *Lady Oracle* is a classic text, which centers on the female protagonists who is capable of liberating herself from the society of patriarchal domination and exploitation. She transforms her immanent state by escaping from a series of oppressive situations so much so that the novel can be dubbed as an ‘escape’ novel. Infact Joan calls herself as an escape artist (LO 367). Pollit feels that *Lady Oracle* is for the readers, what Gothics were for Joan: a flight from the demands of her truest most thoughtful self”(Pollit 8).

The novel suggests the opening up of several possibilities and unending chores that lie before

women, alternatives that can substitute life’s priorities for women. Joan’s desire “I wanted to have more than one life”. (LO 157), becomes a reality when she opts to ‘die’ as Joan Foster in the Toronto harbor, to be born new in Italy, where she celebrated the birth of personality (LO 206). She gave a new look by cutting and dying her waist length hair in red. Death here, as a consequence, loses its tragic overtones and in place of its annihilating force, there is a resurrection of life. There e is a revival of the spirit accompanied with an empowered self. Joan now experiences a new lease of life, the cloistering old relationships are shaken off and there is total avoidance of oppressive situations which lead her in total escape, a survival strategy, a life rudder, that would sustain her through the turbulence of life storms. The protagonists find a release through a hysterics change in perspective consequence by “increased self-awareness and self-discovery” (Salat 70).

### Works Cited

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