

Survival Strategies in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle

M. Muthulakshmi, Dr. S. Ganesan

Ph.D., Research Scholar in English, H. H. The Rajah's College
(Autonomous), Pudukkottai - 622 001(Affiliated to Bharathidasan
University, Tiruchirappalli– 24)

Research Advisor & Associate Professor of English, H. H. The Rajah's
College (Autonomous), Pudukkottai - 622 001(Affiliated to
Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli– 24)

Corresponding author: M. Muthulakshmi

Ph.D., Research Scholar in English, H. H. The Rajah's College
(Autonomous), Pudukkottai - 622 001(Affiliated to Bharathidasan
University, Tiruchirappalli– 24)

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Abstract

In her novel *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood explores the issue of appearance and reality, the self as seen by others and the self as known from within. In this third novel, Atwood extends the concept of doubling inner and outer selves, appearances and realities. Through *Lady Oracle*, the fictional autobiography of Joan Foster, Atwood proclaims that both men and women are equal as they have the same human capabilities. Therefore gender-based injustices should be fought against in society. *Lady Oracle* exhorts women not to barter reality for a pseudo-security promised by the male. It also reveals that women no longer wish to be scapegoats in the mazes, thickets, and brambles of life. It exhorts them to exercise autonomy and opt for challenging careers. The novel comments on women like Joan, who is trapped by the mundanity of life where she remains unfulfilled..

Keywords: Barter, Scapegoats, Pseudo-security, Mazes, Thickets, Brambles of life, Mundanity.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood occupies a prominent place in the modern fictional world in Canada and worldwide. Atwood has written eighteen critically acclaimed and award-winning novels; she has brought out many collections of thought-provoking poetry of contemporary relevance; she has brought out short story collections; she has published critical works like *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, *Negotiating with the Dead* etc., She has written feminist, speculative and eco-fiction. Her authorial concerns are many, and as such, it is not easy to pigeonhole this versatile genius.

Atwood is noted for addressing the problem of freedom concerning women and the place of women as secondary citizens in a patriarchal society. She also deals with the female quest for identity and self-realization. While her first two novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, which employ a quest motif, came out quickly and fluently, Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle*, had to be written and rewritten. When *Lady Oracle* appeared in 1976, admirers warmly received it for its readability and satire. It was awarded the 1977 City of Toronto Book Award and the 1977 Canada Book Sellers' Association Award.

This article aims to highlight the main aspects of the survival of women in the novels of Margaret Atwood and to establish that Atwood's women are different as they refuse to be victims and survive their predicament.

2. Survival Strategies:

The 'Theme of Survival' is crucial in almost all of Atwood's novels. In her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she pointed out 'Survival' at multiple levels as the staple theme of Canadian Literature. For Atwood, Survival refers to survival from the hostile climate, survival of the French culture, survival from the Americanization of Canada and the survival of women in a hostile, challenging patriarchal society.

In Atwood's fiction, survival becomes more than a physical one. It becomes something of an inner awakening, a miraculous realization that one is not a victim and perhaps has never been one.

While *Lady Oracle* follows the life of a multi-named woman protagonist, Joan Foster, who is caught in a self-created confusion of impersonations and fabrications and has an identity crisis as a result of having numerous identities within herself, *Surfacing* is the narrative of the unidentified woman protagonist. In her private life, Joan Foster is the mistress of the Polish Count, the beloved of the Royal Porcupine, and the wife of Arthur. The protagonist and narrator of the story, Joan Delacourt, also goes by the names Louisa K. Delacourt and Joan Foster after marrying Arthur.

The heroine starts to live the gothic fictions she creates as the invented stories take on a life of their own. She sees herself in the female protagonists of her gothic stories. She ends up having no true identity as a result of being a lady with several fictitious identities. The protagonist acquires numerous identities, each of which is wholly distinct from the others, rather than discovering her actual identity via her work. Commenting on these multiple personalities of Joan Foster, Wayne

Fraser writes: "The novel's central theme is the resolution of multiple personalities" (150). The novel deals with a feminine identity quest through "the Woman Protagonist's search for integration in her sense of self and also in her style of writing" (151). Joan searches for her integrated self throughout the novel.

Joan Foster mostly sees herself as Louisa K. Delacourt, and all the other Joan Fosters are afraid of the world's finding the truth about them. What would her husband Arthur, the radical standard-bearer in anyone's hopeless causes, think of his wife exploiting the people?

What would her love, Chuck, the way-out master of the con-create poem' think of his culture's piece reveal as just another hustler? What would the reputable publishing firm of Morton and Sturgess, the establishment organization that had catapulted the unknown Ms. Foster to instant fame as the poet of the season, think of their discovery being exposed as a notorious literary hack?

Arthur is appalled by the news of the publication of "*Lady Oracle*". He is bewildered by the sudden emergence of Joan as a writer. He feels embarrassed by the theme of her book. Her interview on TV is a terrible humiliation to him. He behaves as though she has committed "some unpardonable and unmentionable sin" (LO 262) by giving an interview on TV" He feels as though the book just does not exist but at the same time is hurt by it because it assails his misogynist mentality (LO 263). He begins to look at her as a betrayer. He involves himself entirely in the activities of *Resurgence*, a Loco-Oriented magazine.

The novel begins with an individual confusion in the continuity of identity, as Joan is confused by her own multiple and contrived identities, increasing alienation and loneliness. Under the pressure of reality, she seeks to escape into a fantasy world where danger and adventure resolve themselves into simple categories, and all conclusions prove to be happy. She declares: "I planned my death carefully, unlike my life which meandered from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life tended to spread to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror (LO 3). The drowning image parallels the plot to drown oneself to escape and start a new life again under a new disguise.

As the novel begins with death, the death so encountered must be worked away from, thrown off, conquered or recovered right from the novel's beginning. This is so even in novels that finish with the protagonist's death; the encounter with death provides the means for a rebirth. Joan's writing finds its ultimate expression in a collection of feminist poetry that becomes the country's hit. In a different continent, Joan uses her pseudonymous romance novel writing business to discover her voice. She conceals her work from Arthur, her manic-depressive and revolution-minded husband. The unexpected influx of attention and fame overwhelms her. Because she is unable to manage her failing marriage, her irrational relationships with unreliable literary artists and other men, and her fight with a cunning celebrity blackmailer, Joan fakes her own death and leaves for Italy, where she plans to start over undercover. The invisibility that formerly tormented Joan, who has spent her whole life concealing, is quickly shown to be difficult to reclaim. She fluctuates between extremes; she might be incredibly joyful or suicidal, at ease or miserable, or smart, native, or intentional.

The escapist motif involves moving to different places and assuming different identities to escape punishment and start a new life. Sam Bluefarb has singled out the escape motif in the American

Novel. He explains the prevalence of this motif in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. While Huck's escape is treated in an optimistic spirit, escape of Thomas does not lead him to safety or prosperity. Bharathi Mukherjee's Jasmine, a protean-protagonist undergoes many traumatic, unpleasant experiences; she moves to places, changes her name and identity and reinvents herself.

In Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky was Here*, Solomon feigns his death in an engineered-air crash in the Canadian North. Later, he reemerges as Sir. Hymen Kaplansky, a Jewish financier in fashionable London. There also, when the Gurskiologist finds out his true identity, Moses Berger, Sir. Hymen arranges for his death; this time, by drowning in water. Later, he takes a leading part in the historic raid at Enebbe by the Israeli forces.

True, Solomon is not a nobleman; he is a con man, an anti-hero; but the important thing is he is a survivor; in the same way, Joan has to embark on numerous escapades from her eccentric husband, disturbing publicity, blackmailers; rue, she has to change places, change jobs and identities; but she survives.

3. Conclusion:

Margaret Atwood argues that since both sexes have similar human qualities, they need to be treated similarly in *Lady Oracle*. The author believes that both sexes should have equal opportunity to develop and thrive and is opposed to gender-based discrimination. The book makes the claim that society will not treat women similarly to men unless it abolishes the gender-based roles that are forced on them. Atwood aspires to change society through her fiction by revealing, like in *Lady Oracle*, the negative impacts of women who give in to patriarchal forces' deception.

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