Chapter IV

Lady Oracle

While *Surfacing* is the story of the unnamed narrator, *Lady Oracle* deals with a multinamed narrator, Joan Foster. The narrator-protagonist finds herself lost in the self-created maze of impersonations and fabrications and suffered an identity crisis because she has one too many. Joan Delacourt is Joan Foster when she marries Arthur and pretends not to have a mind of her own; she is Louisa K. Delacourt, the author of Gothic fiction and she is also the super-poet and overnight celebrity who wrote "The runaway best-seller *Lady Oracle*" (LO, p. 237). In private life, she is Arthur's wife, the Royal Porcupine's lover and the Polish Count's mistress.

The duplicity-multiplicity in Joan is so internalized that the line that divides the true from the false is not only blurred but obviated too. The fabricated fictions assume a reality of their own and Joan begins to live the Gothic fictions she creates. Her romantic identification with the Gothic heroines of her own inventions leads her to expect a romantic rescue by a heroic figure until the blackmailing reporter threatens to take away her fictional identities and expose her real identity. That compels her to adopt yet another fabricated identity that of a dead Joan.
Thus she acquires a surfeit of identities, all of them fictional and ends up having no authentic or recognizable identity. Since Joan is always poised for change, some critics consider "metamorphosis"¹ as the theme of the novel. The nationalist and the feminist critics find *Lady Oracle* not "compatible with our contemporary mood of urgent and self-conscious literary nationalism."² Another scholar is of the view that this comic novel does contribute to the subject of national and feminine identity quest through "the protagonist’s search for integration in her sense of self and also in her style of writing."³ Joan is a writer/artist and art is viewed as slow and difficult process of self-discovery. According to Erich Fromm an "artist can be defined as an individual who can express himself spontaneously."⁴ However, in Joan’s case, art does not succeed in integrating the multifacets of her fragmented being.

Joan doesn’t find her "true" self through her art but instead acquires an increasing number of identities, one completely different from the other. Contrary to what most critics say that "the novel’s central theme is the resolution of multiple personalities,"⁵ Joan does not succeed in forming an integrated adult self. My contention is that she fails to solve her conflict too. It will not be out of place here to compare and contrast Joan with Morag
Gunn, the heroine of Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*. Morag develops a definite literary voice and establishes her independence by striving to “reach out her arms and hold people” (p. 150). Unlike Morag, Joan tries to escape the tangled web of her relationship with men from several different backgrounds. She does not develop Morag’s wise "passiveness," therefore, her "whole life was a tangent" (*LO*, p. 311). That is why one critic calls Atwood’s "heroine" as a "failed version of Laurence." 7

From the study of the novel and critical analysis of the scholars, it transpires that Joan is basically a compliant character with strong and prominent withdrawal tendencies. She uses different strategies of compliance, aggression, withdrawal interchangeably to cope with the situation. The key to understand Joan lies in making sense of her vacillating, inconsistent and often bizarre behaviour and in exploring if she distorts, if she rationalizes and if she blocks awareness. No critic has approached the work with a psychological theory which is congruent with it and adequate to its complexities. Joan functions, of course, as an interpreter of her own experience but we have no reason to believe that her interpretations are trustworthy or that they are affirmed by the work. But by using Horneyan tenets we can make sense of Joan’s multiplicity and her psychological tensions. This will help us to know why the
narrator of *Lady Oracle* fragments her personality by multiplication while narrator of *Surfacing* fragments hers by division. When we have understood the logic of that psyche, we have understood why the work is as it is.

Two forces affect Joan’s psyche and cause the identity crisis. First is her mother’s attempt to shape Joan into her own notion of female identity and her refusal to let Joan develop on her own. Her highest ambition is that her daughter be "acceptable, the same as every body else’s.” Joan does everything to fit in the identity her mother chooses for her. Her mother is a dominating woman whose constant nagging makes Joan feel that she is not the master of her own life. These thoughts are well-expressed in her outbursts "I didn’t like her. She was always trying to tell me how to run my life" (*LO*, p. 91). To give some scope to the mother’s behaviour, we have to consider the mother’s life. She is a woman unfulfilled. The roles of wife and mother, the desires for upward social mobility for which she forces her husband to a career of an anaesthetist, have not been able to give her identity or satisfy the demand of her psyche. Mother "urges" her husband to pursue his career relentlessly. Later, she wants to be the manager of Joan’s life and take credit for her success (if any) in life. Recalling her relationship with her mother, Joan remarks:
Our relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product. I suppose one of the most important things she wanted from me was gratitude. She wanted me to do well but she wanted to be responsible for it (LO, p. 67).

In fact, Joan’s confusion and the traumatic sense of having no identity begin in getting a borrowed name from American silver screen. Joan contends, "Did she give me someone else’s name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?" (LO, p. 42). The choice of this name symbolizes an alien identity, the identity of an actress who is, "ambitious, ruthless and successful" and contains a blend of multiple personality. One scholar points out that "Joan’s name introduces not only the themes of multiple personality and cultural imperialism, but also the models of female identity implicit in the conflict between mother and daughter."\(^8\) This alien name not only problematizes her relationship with her mother but also sets in the forces of alienation in her ensuing life. Cude in her psychological assessment of Joan, attributes her unhappiness in childhood to "the cruelty of the Miss Flegg School of Dance and to her ensuing conflict with her mother."\(^9\) Joan believes that "The only way I could have helped her to her satisfaction would have been to change into some one else." Joan equates her mother with dance school teacher. She remarks that Miss
Flegg was "almost as slender and disapproving as my mother" (LO, p. 43) and she is afraid of both.

Joan cannot openly display her sentiments but silently resents her mother's efforts to "make her over in her image, thin and beautiful." She appears to Joan as a "monster" because the mother who perceives her daughter as "a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure... which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize" (LO, p. 67) is sure to give her daughter Joan a sense of inadequacy and lack of worth which are very damaging. Her mother further saps her of her self-esteem when she asserts that a person who looked like Joan could ever accomplish anything. Joan seethes with anger and rejects her mother's demand that she should be slim and beautiful. In order to assert herself she enjoys overeating. She refuses to be shaped in her image. It would not be out of place here to refer to an Indian English novelist who shows similar, if not identical, crisis of psyche. Shashi Deshpande's Saru resents her mother and resolves "If you are a woman, I refuse to be one." Saru is flippant with her mother and takes secret pleasure in going against her wishes. In Atwood's novel, Joan enjoys being fat just to show a flagrant disregard for her mother.
It is interesting to note that in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, Marian denies herself food, in *Lady Oracle* Joan resorts to overeating. In both the cases these are their responses to the value system which, in the case of Marian wants to reduce her to the status of commodity and in Joan’s, wants to shape her in the model of a suitable bride in the "packaged" society. According to Erich Fromm "It is impossible to understand man and his emotional and mental disturbances without understanding the nature of value and moral conflict." An analysis of the value system in which Joan lives will enable us to reach the root of the conflict.

Interpreting her actions, Joan admits that she ate to defy her mother, but she also ate from panic. Sometimes she was afraid that she was not a real being, that she was "an accident" because her mother had often called her "an accident" (*LO*, p. 78). The result of overeating was that she "rose like dough," she says. Fatness gave her a feeling of victory. A scholar views this over-indulgence in food as a mean of "defiance and escape," Judy Kopinka in her essay "Fat is a Feminist Issue" asserts "that being fat represents an attempt to break free of society’s sex stereotypes. For many women, being fat says ‘screw you’ to all who want me to be the perfect mom, sweetheart, maid and whore." Feminist critics discern cruelty of society inflicted on these girls
[like Joan] who are enrolled at the age of seven in dance
classes and who do not fit into "sugar and spice" image.
One scholar sees the "crippling emphasis the society places
on the female image as a consumer item." While Marian in
The Edible Woman, conforms to "thin and beautiful
prescription through her anorexia, Joan's rebellious obesity
is a "refutation" of her mother, a "victory." Thomas
points out that, Joan "wins all the battles" with her
mother, including the one over what clothing to buy, but it
is "at the price of total alienation from self." From
Horneyan's point of view, Joan appears to be overeating to
pose as an independent entity. This helps her build her
ideal image of an all-powerful person.

In a compliant character the aggressive tendencies are
kept in check so that the character stays true to his/her
ideal image. He cannot defy the dictates of his strategy
otherwise his solution of handling his problems will crumble
down. In case of Joan, her conflicting shoulds of different
strategies create conflicting demands on her and she
acquires multiple personalities. It is necessary to point
out that Marian in The Edible Woman, the narrator in
Surfacing and Morag in the Diviners all discover the extent
to which they inculcate their society's image of femininity
but the difference between them and the heroine of Lady
Oracle is that Joan never breaks out of her repressed state,
Joan would rather "dance as a ballerina, though, faultily, than as a flawless clown" (LO, p. 286). Despite her adolescent rebellion against the ballerina image, she harbours the desire to conform to the feminine qualities of slim gracefulness. Atwood does not allow Joan to view herself as a victim of social conditioning. She sees Joan's complicity in this process. It is made clear when Joan remarks "I wanted those things, that fluffy skirt, that glittering tiara. I liked them" (LO, p. 103).

As a result she compulsively assumes a given identity and suffers in consequence, thereof, a loss of her own distinctive identity. For instance, Joan grew up a fat girl and developed an innate desire to be slim. Her desire to be a butterfly and not a mothball in "the school dance sequence metaphorically reinforces Joan's insistent desire to be what she is not and like all Atwood's heroines she hopes for "magic transformation" (LO, p. 43). Throughout her life she was waiting for something to happen, the next turn of events. She was also seeking something she lacked.

Aunt Lou's bequest of a thousand dollars is subject to Joan's losing a hundred pounds and is, therefore, yet another imposition on Joan's identity. The necessary fulfilment of Aunt Lou's condition requires Joan to be what she is not. Joan remarks:
Did it mean she hadn't really accepted me for what I was, as I thought she had—that she too found me grotesque, that for her also I would not do?... she'd offered me money to get away, to escape from my mother, as she knew I wished to; but on terms that would force me to capitulate, or so it seemed (LO, p. 121).

This leads Joan to grow up under a very strong pressure to distinguish herself.

Joan's impressionable years create an identity crisis for her. For example, the oddness of being a fat girl made her an object of scorn and derision of her peers. This eroded her always shaky self-confidence and led her to hide her true identity. Her school fellows in Brownie met her with spiteful and merciless jibes. They played practical jokes because she was not like them. She found herself tied to ropes and behind open door knobs. "I called out to my mother who could have saved me... But she didn't do this, she went on with" her life. Her father, a victim of his wife's assault "verbal and caustic," "brought nothing and did nothing." Joan's dreams are the reflections of the strain she suffers. In dreams she feels, "she is shut out of her mother's life; this was her mother's way of punishing her." She craves for love but "I could always recall what my mother looked like but not what she felt like," (LO, p. 89). She desires small gestures of love like holding her hands but her mother did not hold her by the hand, "there were her gloves to think of" (LO, p. 89). Her outbursts
that she is alone, did not bring any show of love and intimacy from her mother. "I don't have anyone to play with" (LO, p. 79), speaks for her alienation. Feeling alone and helpless in an atmosphere where her mother was always "disapproving" she tried to cope with her anxiety by withdrawing.

Under these circumstances Joan cannot open herself to others and entrust herself to them. She moves not only away from but also against and towards her fellows. She tries to insulate herself from her school fellows' contempt by keeping aloof. They had discovered how easy it was to make her cry but later Joan decides not to cry at all; "I'd decided I was through crying in public, though of course I wasn't" (LO, Pp. 63). To escape their derision, she began to make all progress with her emotional goodies. At school, "I was doggedly friendly and outgoing... I played kindly aunt and wise woman" (LO, p. 93). She attempts to get on friendly terms but intimacy with them was always strained and one-sided. They confided in her but she suppressed herself. She even suppressed her interest in sex and other activities which characterize a normal girl. This initiated a process of alienation not only from others but also from self. We begin to see now the way in which Joan's contradictory trends result in inconsistency in her behaviour and lead to her alienation. A critic aptly
calls this story of Joan Foster "a poignant anatomy of childhood terror and alienation." She represses her need for love and seeks to fulfil other needs which have been distorted in neurotic ways. Joan terms it "Miss Flegg’s Syndrome"-- which means "If you’re going to be made to look ridiculous and there’s no way out of it, you may as well pretend you meant to. I didn’t learn this rule till much later, not consciously. I was wounded, desolated in fact" (Lo , p. 48). Joan becomes a passive on-looker on life. This passivity entails the loss of virginity because she is too timid to say "no" to the Polish Count.

As is often the case with self-effacing people, Joan is drawn to self-assured people who have mission in life and allow her to participate in their glory. Fromm terms it "masochistic strivings" in which an individual, in order to overcome the panic resulting from loss of identity, seeks his "identity by continuous approval and recognition by others" (The Fear of Freedom, pp. 177-78). Joan too moves towards the Polish Count, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine.

The Polish Count is good, 'gentle and harmless,’ the Last of Mohicans. She is attracted to him because he fulfils the demands of her idealised-self. She invests him with qualities such as "daring," "having a mission in life" and so on. Physical intimacy with such a man raises her
worth in her own eyes, "I was flattered by the attention he was paying to me and grateful for it, and especially I was pleased to be thought wise" (LO, p. 148). She feels normal as a woman. "It proved to me finally that I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was not longer among the untouchables" (LO, p. 150). When he becomes jealous and possessive, and love begins to "resemble shark fight," she feels a "little like Eva Braun in the bunker." The Royal Porcupine loses his appeal for Joan when she discovers a conventional Edgar Linton beneath his Heathcliff pose. She leaves him and becomes involved with Arthur who feeds her pride by showing respect for her intelligence.

That Arthur is important in her life, is reflected in her confession "Arthur, I said was very important to me and I didn’t want to do anything that would hurt him" (LO, p. 254). Winning the love of a man like Arthur, with a cause, raises her image in her own eyes. It gives her life a sense of purpose and meaning, "The right man has come along, complete with a cause I could devote myself to. My life had significance" (LO, p. 171). She is happy to belong to such a man; she describes herself as "bliss-filled" and "limpid eyed" (LO, p. 171). She is ready to devote all her life to Arthur because she needs love and security in marriage. Observing her inner processes during her sojourn in ITALY it
becomes clear that she needs Arthur’s love. She admits, "I didn’t ask much. I only wanted to be loved." She "loved his deliberate threadbareness, his earnest idealism, his ridiculous (to me) economies... his farsightedness" (LO, p. 168). To please Arthur is of paramount importance in her life. This is her neurotic need and she makes all efforts to fit in a new image of a loving and dutiful wife. Her earnestness to please Arthur is visible in her remarks: "I retreated behind the camouflage of myself as Arthur perceived me... He wanted me to be inept and vulnerable. ... I could permit myself to be inept and vulnerable only because I had a core of strength, a reservoir of support and warmth that could be drawn on when needed" (LO, p. 92). To this end, she serves inedible food because "Arthur enjoyed my defects... My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. His applause kept me going" (LO, p. 210).

Arthur’s expectations were not confined to cooking only. With every change in Arthur’s social concern, Joan has to adjust her views. She even adopts the posture of a kind sympathetic human being. Arthur appreciates her empathy with suffering human beings and calls it "naive humanism." She confesses, "For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be" (LO, p. 210). To preserve this idealised image, she fits into femininity which she otherwise resents doing. "This role is forcing me
into a mold of femininity that I could never fit" (LO, p. 103). But she willingly enacts this role because she lacks strong sense of identity necessary for assuming responsibility for the direction of her own life. Unlike the liberated Morag in The Diviners who finds both independence and relatedness, Joan is constricted by her need for dependence on someone to hold her. She is afraid of Arthur’s adverse judgement of her being unworthy of his love because she cannot stand losing him. Erich Fromm calls this relationship "masochistic dependence" in which both are means to an end, "both are instrumental to each other... the most important and the most devastating instance of this spirit of instrumentality and alienation is the individual’s relationship to his own self... he sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity." Thus, the self-confidence, the ‘feeling of self,’ is merely an indication of what others think of the person. It is not he who is convinced of his value regardless of popularity and his success on the market. "If he is sought after, he is somebody; if he is not popular, he is simply nobody."

Joan’s sense of self-significance dwindles at times when she feels that she is a non-entity for him. But her self-image rises whenever she feels that their marriage was happier than most. She confesses "I even became a little smug about it (LO, p. 215). When Arthur’s friends envy him
to have such an understanding wife or when Arthur admires her, she feels gratified because Arthur's admiration always raises her idealized image. This wish to get his praise remains with her even after she physically leaves him and crosses over to Italy. In a compliant character the inclination to please the partner is very prominent. "I would love him to know I'd done something complicated and dangerous without making a single mistake. I'd always wanted to do something he would admire" (LO, p. 27). She wants to be a woman whose mind he could respect.

By the time of Joan-Arthur episode, Joan's basic character structure has been formed, it changes little from thereon. Along with compliance, she has strong withdrawal trends which are rather evenly balanced. They exist mainly as attitudes. Her life-style is determined by compliant trends: she is willing to ignore her needs to cope with Arthur's moods and anxiety but not without giving up the independence and integrity of her individual self. This show involves enormous pain to the performer/Joan. Nevertheless, for many years, Joan does not permit herself to entertain consciously the notion that her marriage is anything other than a success. As a part of this denial, she compartmentalizes and suppresses a great deal of anger, resentment and frustration.
The violence of Joan's inner conflict is evident when she speaks of the absolutely opposite elements (impulses towards independence) which have been swarming her and the shoulds created by her compliant trends make it impossible for her to admit her duplicity. "It was the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me by that name and I had authentic documents to prove. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt" (LO, p. 213)--a writer of Gothic romances. These remarks make it clear that like Morag, Joan's chief personality crisis concerns her growing awareness of the disparity between her outward appearance and her inner sense of identity. Although she feels uncertain and unhappy at her multiple identities, she derives courage from the fact that some of the persons she has known all her life have had double identities. Her father, for example, was a "healer and a killer," even the Royal Porcupine had a sinister side to his personality. Such duality is a common factor with all human beings, she contends that she is not weird. These thoughts elevate her and help her gain confidence in her work. Her gothic romances give meaning to her life. In her search for glory she is definitely making a big leap. Her happiness is
expressed by such lines as these: "I just drifted around, singing vaguely, like the little Mermaid in the Andersen fairy tale" (LO, p. 216). She finds her work meaningful, "Well, this is my work and I find it meaningful. . ." (LO, p. 36). She feels she is providing escape to people because she knows all about escape, she was brought up on it. Joan's justification resembles the remarks made by Janice Radway that "romance fiction offers an escape from and a means of coping with the demands of their roles as wives and mothers."15

In the early stages of her relationship with Arthur she enjoyed being a Gothic romancer. "I'd always felt sly about it, as if I was getting away with something and nobody had found me out; but now it became important" (LO, p. 213). Joan's work at current costume gothic provides a fantasy release to her. When she could spend sometime as Louisa K. Delacourt, she was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if she could not work at current costume Gothic, she would become irritable, she would drink too much and start to cry. Her compliant trends make neurotic demands on her and prevent her from enjoying her triumphs. Her oscillations and confusions are reflections of her inner conflicts. It is because the moment she becomes a celebrity as the writer of Lady Oracle, she recoils from success. "I feel visible," she says and takes care to
deflate public attention. This characteristic fits in with the description Horney gives of a neurotic. A neurotic, Horney says cannot experience his success directly. Joan wallows in self-doubt and self-pity. "What was the use of being Princess for a day if you still felt like a toad?" (LO, p. 238), she cries, and is scared that Arthur would be humiliated by her success.

Her glorified self cannot let her admit that she is a celebrity. She also avoids the issue of having led a double life. In order to rationalize her behaviour she takes a visible pride in both her lives. This satisfies her neurotic need to live in fantasy:

The difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time. When I was with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine seemed like a daydream from one of my less credible romances, with an absurdity about him that I tried to exclude from my fictions. But when I was with the Royal Porcupine, he seemed plausible and solid. Everything he did and said made sense in his own terms, whereas it was Arthur who became unreal; he faded to an insubstantial ghost, a washed out photo on some mantel piece. I'd long ago abandoned. Was I hurting him, was I being unfaithful? How could you hurt a photograph? (LO, p. 259)

She defends herself against her inner conflicts by adopting the strategy of compartmentalization. "I'd always tried to keep my two names and identities as separate as possible" (LO, p. 33). This also saves her from the onslaught of
self-hate and self-contempt. This intellectualizing is a form of pride-restoring device but it is also a defense against disintegration.

Behind these rationalizations lies her self-consciousness of multiplicity. "I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, they were many. The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension, cleverly disguised as a freight elevator and one of my selves plunged recklessly through" (LO, p. 246). Her problem is how to "live practically with" these dualities/multiplicities that she contains. "What Lady Oracle implies," says Grace, "is . . . that we are all double, perhaps multiple. . . . It is learning how to live practically with this knowledge that is difficult." She feels she is nothing and it results in making her a nervous wreck. She is self-alienated and the neurotic character structure which has replaced her real self has not achieved even a spurious integration. She confesses:

I was a nervous wreck, I realized and I'd been one for sometime. . . . Arthur was never there, for which I didn't blame him; I'd been unfaithful to him but I didn't have the courage either to tell him or to do it again, as I wished to. It wasn't will power that was keeping me away from the Royal Porcupine, it was cowardice. I was inept, I was slovenly and hollow, a hoax, a delusion (LO, p. 251).

Thus it is clear that Joan has tried to "learn how to live
with this knowledge" but at the price of losing her real self. It is important to point out here that Joan is not true to herself. When Orwell quotes Shakespeare's maxim "To thine ownself be true" (CRJ, I, II, p. 134), he supports the idea of a central self which exists despite the duality or plurality of impulses, and despite the ambiguity of responses. It is akin to the inviolate inner self which Winston Smith seeks to preserve in 1984. In case of Joan, she is alienated from this central self; this has intensified her neurosis.

However, none of her actions, impulses, values is an authentic expression of her real self. Everyone is subject to immediate repudiation by the conflicting components of her defense system. She experiences a feeling of being unreal. "It was true I had two lives, but on off days I felt merely playing house, I wasn't really working at it. And my Costume Gothics were only paper; paper castles, paper costumes" (LO, p. 216). Her self-alienation gains physical and psychological dimensions when she becomes a celebrity, as the writer of Lady Oracle. That her alienation is at its highest is reflected in her remarks: "I feel very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-
mirror reflection" (LO, p. 250-51). Such thoughts show her fragmentation. She is also conscious that if she brought the separate parts of her life together, there should be an explosion. So she floats, marking time, creating uncertainty which is reflected in the pattern of her relationships.

In her relationship with Arthur and Royal Porcupine, Joan displays the many sidedness of her character. She is motivated not only by her need for love and rapport with Arthur but she also craves for self-expression which fulfils her fantasies. Julie Fenwick sees risk in these choices and views them as incompatible with a successful relationship.

While analysing Lady Oracle and Anne of Green Gables, she points out that these stories share the "underlying theme of the risk to women of certain choices--to seek forbidden knowledge, to exercise creativity, to desire, to speak, to dance." In Lady Oracle, "dancing becomes a recurring motif for female creative freedom, and it is depicted as incompatible with a successful heterosexual relationship; 'you could dance or you could have the love of a good man'." Joan undergoes tension because she is unable to choose between the two images she has of herself--the self image of good wife and that of a creative writer. Tension generates conflict as she tries to hide her past and live a present which is a product of that past. Cude's psychological assessment in "Bravo Mothball! An Essay on
Lady Oracle' that "because [Joan] takes her past to be ugly, she lies constantly to conceal what she cannot contemplate." Thus it becomes clear that Joan's fragmentation arose largely from her need to conceal from others, particularly men, those aspects of her personality that she believed they would find unacceptable. She sees the same multiplicity in Arthur. His character structure has certain similarities to her own. Like her, he is also aloof and detached, he is not single-minded as she once thought him to be. Mentioning their similarities Joan records "once I'd thought of Arthur as single-minded, single-hearted, single-bodied; . . . But I soon discovered there were as many of Arthur as there were of me. The difference was that I was simultaneous, whereas Arthur was a sequence" (LO, p. 211).

Both Joan and Arthur display marked tendencies to withdraw when there is breakdown of posture of self-effacement. When Joan publishes Lady Oracle, her friends and the literary community find her work "a very angry book" and read it as an attack on marriage. Arthur is angered and insulted by the readers' assumption that the ambiguous lover in this book is the "unflattering portrait of himself". Arthur responds by being indifferent. Joan becomes panic stricken. She resents his lack of interest and his overwhelming reactions. "It's not like him at all. He's
acting as though it just doesn’t exist but at the same time he’s hurt by it." She does not see any justification in his hostility as her claim is that she is happy in her marriage. One critic views this as Joan’s failure to rebel: "Joan’s refusal to act upon or even recognise her growing impatience with Arthur is indicative of her failure to rebel against male domination."\(^{20}\) As a self-effacing person, Joan cannot bear when Arthur withdraws. His decision tentamounts to rejection and a compliant person who depends on love, cannot accept rejection. "But he’d made a decision about me finally, a pronouncement, thumbs down. I was unworthy, I would have to go, and this was his plan to get rid of me" (LO, p. 292). When all her selves threaten to overlap, escape is her ultimate resort. "I had to get away as quickly as possible." It is important to mention that escape is the salient feature of her character structure.

When she has messed up her life, escape is the only solution to her life of falsity, hypocrisy, arrogance and authority. According to Erich Fromm, an instinctive human reaction is to flee when the "vital interests" of the individual are 'threatened.'\(^{21}\) Brought up in an environment of obedience and weakness, a really individualistic woman would feel threatened if she is reduced to a submissive and passive partner. "Escape," says Sunaina Singh, "in this sense is used by both Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood as a
defense mechanism. Joan is constantly on the run, getting away from mother, her former self, Paul, domestic life, the Royal Porcupine and in the end from Arthur her husband. She admits "the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bandage slithering out again. What else had I ever done?" (LP, p. 334). It would be appropriate here to compare this tendency of Joan with Saru in Shashi Deshpande’s novel, The Dark Holds No Terror. Shashi Deshpande’s Saru runs away when she confronts the question of identity. First, she leaves her parents in defiance and anger, later when her husband seems to deny her due identity, she runs back to her maiden home. Her identity is realised only after her neighbours flock to her, recognize her as a doctor. The question of identity here is as much feminist as psychological. That Joan runs away because no one seems to accept and acknowledge her identity is clear in her remarks "How much better for me if I’d been accepted for what I was and had learned to accept myself too" (LO, p. 103). She extricates herself not because of her impulse to change but because of her failure to make people accept her with her failings.

Confrontation and sorting out of emotional differences are difficult tasks for a compliant character. In addition Joan realises that confrontation with some people, her
mother, for example, has no effect. Her mother, a hysterical and self-righteous person could never believe that anyone else, especially, Joan could be right. In case of Arthur, there was no trial and no redress. Once he has made up his mind, it was his final judgement. Joan remarks about Arthur, "He never had fights with people, he never talked things out with them. He would simply decide, by some dark, complicated process of evaluation, that these people were unworthy" (LO, p. 212). It is this attitude that prompts Joan to escape rather than confront. Frank Davey, analyzing Joan's difficulties in male-female relationships, remarks that she "relives her parents' drama of the unfulfilled, isolated and dependent woman linked to an aloof and undemonstrative man." She chooses to escape from the overpowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference of this "undemonstrative man." Whatever may be her rationalization the fact is that she is frightened and escape is the only defense mechanism to restore her pride and provide a semblance of order in life. "My life was a snarl, a rat's nest of dangling threads and loose ends. I could not possibility have a happy ending, but I wanted a neat one. Something terminal, like scissors. I would have to die" (LO, p. 293).

Joan is beset with feelings of fear, rage, remorse and desire but her predominant feeling is anxiety that Arthur
might discover her fake suicide and her multiple lives. If he does, than her triumph (of mastering such situation) will be lost, she will be humiliated and proved finally unworthy. If he comes as she wishes him to (that romantic hero will come to save her from her trouble-her fantasy), it will bring reality into her retreat where she is marooned in the realm of her dreams. But then, he will bring with him emotional demands that threaten her basic defense—withdrawal, into fantasy life. When in Italy, she is again prompted to run because she is feeling lost, disillusioned. She is optimistic, "This time I really would disappear, without a trace. No one at all would know where I was, not even Sam, not even Arthur. This time I would be free completely; no shreds of the past would cling to me, no clutching fingers. I could do anything I wanted" (LO, pp. 333-34).

Barbara Godard, in her critical analysis of Elizabeth Tassy of Herbert and Joan Delacourt, remarks that both these heroines "must accept the multiplicity of their being in order to find themselves." Joan is aware of this multiplicity. She sees herself playing the roles of many wives of Redmond, she knows that she has peopled her personal and fictional world with projections of her intolerable repressed selves. She shows this awareness in the final episode of the gothic romance Stalked by Love when
Joan takes her heroine into the centre of maze that is occupied by four women—all manifestations of other phases of her own life. Thus "she [Joan] found herself in the central plot" (LO, p. 341). To Goddard "all the female characters are the fragments of her multiple self. . . So too are the male characters alter egos." It is important to mention here that Joan would have moved towards unity of her being by recognizing her multiplicity, she reacts to this situation in a different way. She prefers escape to any such acceptance. One scholar remarks that Joan "prefers escape into fictional versions of life (that is art) to any acceptance of the limitations of living in the reality of it." Escape and fantasy are two devices Joan makes full use of. Some intrapsychic forces behind this behaviour are suggested by Horney’s description of withdrawal as a way of protecting pride. "In the long run this makes necessary for him to withdraw farther from others. . . In order to endure life he must now entrench himself more firmly in his private fantasy world" (NHG., p. 107).

For her, without fantasy there is no escape. It becomes clear in relationship with Royal Porcupine. He was a welcome escape. When he becomes real she wants to leave him. For her where there is no fantasy, there is no escape. "From this soggy domestic atmosphere, the Royal Porcupine was a welcome escape. He didn’t make demands; with him it was easy come,
easy go" (LO, p. 257). Talking of the Royal Porcupine she says, "For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for me it would mean there was no fantasy and therefore no escape" (LO, p. 270). In The Edible Woman, Marian finds escape in Duncan; in case of Joan, Royal Porcupine serves the same purpose. In her sojourn in Italy she confesses "I was an artist, an escape artist" (LO, p. 334). But these created intrapsychic and interpersonal problems for Joan. It initiated the fragmentation of Joan’s identity in mosaic of roles which threaten to tear her apart and it intensifies her neurosis.

Perhaps, the most striking indication of the severity of Joan’s neurosis is the intensity of her self-hate. From the beginning to end, the narration of events is filled with incidence of extreme self-hate. Horney lists "six modes of operation in or expression of self-hate": "relentless demands on self, merciless self-accusation, self-contempt, self-frustration, self-tormenting, and self-destructive" (NHG, p. 117). All these modes are powerfully at work in Joan’s life. The affair with Arthur and later with Royal Porcupine leaves Joan overwhelmed by remorse and tortured by self-hate. She externalizes her self-hate and is angry with Arthur. She blames Arthur for driving her towards Chuck.
Why had Arthur driven me to it, what did he propose to do about it, shouldn’t we discuss our relationship to find out what had gone wrong? For some complicated and possibly sadistic reason of his own he’d allowed me to become involved with a homicidal maniac, and it was time he knew about it (LO, p. 272).

There are times when she blames herself for her treatment of Arthur. "Some days I felt his unhappiness was all my fault, I was neglecting him. But more often I tried to dismiss it. Perhaps he simply had a talent for unhappiness, as others had a talent for making money. Or perhaps he was trying to destroy himself in order to prove to me that I was destructive. He was beginning to accuse me of not taking enough interest in his work" (LO, p. 257). She hates herself because she desperately longs for love. But she knows that she will always be cut off from it by her own nature. In her self-berating, she judges herself harshly: "I was not a good woman" (LO, p. 212) "I was deficient" (LO', p. 269). She is angry with herself, her anger is mixed with fear. It is expressed in her outburst:

I was furious, but I was also frightened. He’d discovered at least two of my secret identities... I couldn’t stand the thought of Arthur knowing about my previous life as Pneumatic Woman. And if he told the media people the truth about Louisa K. Delacourt, my brief interlude of being taken seriously would be over. Unpleasant as it had been, I’d discovered it was much better than not being taken seriously (LO, p. 286).
She is overcome by self-loathing and feels that she is worthless. Except escaping she has done nothing worthwhile. She berates herself as "Mongoloid idiot," "a fraud, liar and imposter." "hollow, a hoax, a delusion," "I hated myself for thinking this. I felt like a monster, a large blundering monster, irredeemably shallow" (LO, p. 271). She indulges in self-accusation when she says she is an "assemblage of lies and alibis." "I'd lied to him, that I'd never been a cheerleader, that I myself was the fat lady in the picture" (LO, p. 197). She accuses herself of using love for serving her ends. "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, p. 282).

Though Joan has some understanding of her self-hate, there are aspects of it which puzzle her. She is puzzled by the disparity between her ideals and her actions. She not only fails to live up to her ideals but she seems compelled to violate them. Her spell of affair with Royal Porcupine begins at the moment when she feels capable of intellectual superiority, she oscillates between "I should" and "I won't." At first she struggles in agony against her multiple life. "I would repent, I would turn a new leaf, I wouldn't call the Royal Porcupine, although I was longing to" (LO, p.
246), then she comes to feel that it is her normal condition and finally she takes pleasure in it. The more conscious she becomes of her position, the more anxious she becomes. Cude argues that Joan uses Arthur as an excuse for her failings, a reason for not trying to improve herself as a person in her own right (p. 161). Her escapade with the Royal Porcupine is a defense against failure. It is at the same time, a punishment for failure. She cannot be aware of her ideals without also being aware of her failure to live up to them and this is bound to generate self-hate and need for relief through self-flagellation.

In The Adolescent Girl in Conflict, Gisella Konopka observes that "the gap between the feminine ideal and her own reality can motivate her to seek an outlet for aggression that is linked to her feelings of acceptance as a woman. Sexual misconduct is the logical result." Yet another motive for Joan's dissipation is her need to rebel against her shoulds. Being a withdrawn person, she cannot stand any form of coercion and nothing is more coercive than the tyrannical shoulds. Such people, says Horney, "may go through alternating phases of self-castigating 'goodness' and a wild protest against any shoulds. There, may be a constant shuttling between and "I should" and "no, I won't," . . . often these people give the impression of spontaneity and mistake their contradictory attitudes towards their
shoulds for "freedom" (NHG, pp. 77-78). As we have seen Joan's consciousness of ideals fills her with a sense of failure and activates her self-hate. "By wallowing in self-accusation and feeling of unworthiness," Horney observes, "The masochistic person may derive satisfaction from an orgy of self-degradation." This pain gives way to self-pity; pity for herself because she cannot enjoy triumph. She also wallows in hopelessness, feeling that she can never change. She is one of those "who despairing of ever being able to measure up to [their] standards have consciously or unconsciously resolved to be as "bad" as possible." Such a person wallows in his badness "with a kind of desperate delight" (QIC, p. 204). Joan feels hopeless about resolving her problems and about living up to her shoulds. Consequently, she indulges in endless self-reproaches. Even her escape to Italy under false identity provides her no relief. "Where was the new life I'd intended to step into," she wonders, "easily as crossing a river? It hadn't materialized and the old life went on without me. I was caged on my balcony waiting to change" (LO, p. 310).

The compliant person finds the meaning of life in love, the aggressive man finds it in mastery, for the detached person the highest value of all is freedom, independence. This can be a healthy value but as Horney points out, "the fallacy here is that he looks upon independence as an end in
itself and ignores the fact that its value depends ultimately upon what he does with it. His independence, like the whole phenomenon of detachment of which it is a part, has a negative orientation; it is aimed at not being influenced, coerced, tied, obligated" (OIC, p. 77). For Joan, freedom is the goal of life, the highest fulfilment, she is ready to undergo fake suicide, suffer alone in order to have it. One reason why she wants freedom so much is that she possesses so little of it because of her compulsions. Her hatred for reality is in part a hatred of her own compulsions which she longs to escape. There are times when she mistakes her contradictory attitudes towards her shoulds for freedom but her rebelliousness and vacillations are themselves compulsive. She glorifies escape as an evidence of free will. Her capricious and incomprehensive behaviour is thoroughly explicable in terms of her neurosis. She prizes freedom, will, caprice, individuality and intellectual superiority; and above all she has a profound aversion towards conformity to law, ordinariness or stupidity. When her privacy is invaded or emotional demands are made of her, she walks out of this life because it preserves for her what is most precious for her individuality. But when she fails to find the desired freedom in her escape to Italy, she contemplates one more flight; this time, it is fleeing back home.
The novel is open-ended and chances are that Joan may go back to save her friends from embarrassment, or she may stay in Italy and live under constant dread of being detected as a fake. In sum, Joan has not been able to resolve her conflicts. She appears to be going round in circles as if caught in a whirlpool. The steps taken by the earlier two heroines towards affirmation are forestalled by Joan Foster. It remains to be seen what Atwood's protagonists, Elizabeth and Lesje, discussed in the next chapter, do to resolve their crisis.
Notes and References


3. Wayne Fraser, "Still Fighting the Same Bloody Battles As Always: The Diviners and Lady Oracle," *The Dominion of Women*, p. 150.


5. Wayne Fraser, *The Dominion of Women*, pp. 149-150.


7. Wayne Fraser, *The Dominion of Women*, p. 149.

8. Wayne Fraser, p. 156.


10. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, p. 27


12. Quoted by Wayne Fraser, *The Dominion of Women*, p. 156.

Perspectives on Canadian Fiction, ed. Sudhakar Pandey, p. 114.


22. Sunaina Singh, "Escape as Evolution in Lady Oracle and Where Shall We Go This Summer?" in Ambivalence, p. 160.


