Chapter IV

Multiple Selves and Search for Self-hood in *Lady Oracle*
In the novel, *Lady Oracle*, the protagonist Joan foster, is in search of harmony in life. Joan’s crises concern her growing awareness of the disparity between her outward appearance and her inner sense of identity. She is in quest for an authentic self development, both environmental and psychological, which entails coming to terms with multiple social forces — external as well as internal — that infringe upon the path towards female individuation and an understanding of the individual self. The Aristotelian dictum that the human being is a social animal is central to the novel, as it traces the development of the protagonist as a social being. The protagonist becomes the representative symbolic reflections of different social circumstances and as such her individual existence cannot be distinguished from her social environment, her human significance and her specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which she is created. As George Wood Cock observes: “The novel is an account of a rite de passage, a story “of self-realisation and hence of life realisation.” Joan wishes to transform the society where women are packaged for consumer society.

Throughout the novel, Atwood is explicitly concerned with the complexities of body images and attempts to demystify the female form.

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She shows the treatment of mind/body dualism and analyses the ways in which she responds to and resists, its destructive effects. Atwood deals with the concept of female space, as well as the ‘space’ of the female body, taking into account its relationship to power and identity. She demonstrates how the body ‘feeds’ identity and how woman’s corporeal experience directly influences her societal experience. She tries to dismantle culturally-encoded concepts of feminity and propose a useful corrective to traditional readings of the female body in which the re-embodiment of the ‘self’ is equated to a re-embodiment of ‘culture’. The mind/body duality, it is generally accepted by critics, pervaded western thought for centuries, though it is argued that Descartes’ famous dictum ‘cogito ergo sum’ established this dualism as a distinct philosophy, the tradition dates much back and is deeply rooted in early Christian theology. Cartesian dualism partitions human experience into two separate categories: the spiritual and the bodily, and treats body merely as an external vessel for the rational, objective mind. Susan Bordo is very right in arguing:

What remains the constant element …. is the construction of body as something apart from the true self and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not -body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the
closest to God; and that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.²

Since the woman is inextricably associated with the body, the body is regarded as being inferior to mind — the carnal flesh to which mind is shackled. The concept that woman is inferior and female body is a site of oppression has been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women. The manner in which female bodies are unequally and negatively imbued with meaning has induced a number of feminist authors to decode the female body, both critiquing it and liberating it from traditional patriarchal formulations. According to Maggie Humm:

> It is in feminist fiction, … that new accounts of the female body, and its potential cultural representation, amount to a feminist rewriting of culture.³

Atwood provides an astute and tangible analysis of the female body in *Lady Oracle*, and tries to demystify the female form. She deals with the concept of female space explicating how the body ‘feeds’ identity and how a woman’s corporeal experience directly influences her societal experience. The novel dismantles the socially encoded concept of feminity and proposes a re-reading of female body; women must re-

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embody themselves and consequently re-embody culture. Hence the theme of self/society dualism is central to the life of the protagonist, and heavily influences her embodied experiences.

Joan Foster, the protagonist, lives within a plallocentric society and as is, “torn between unconscious feminist questions and the stereotypical answers which society provides.” She is repeatedly confronted with culturally gendered distinctions that limit their existence to the corporeal. In her conversation with her polish count, Joan questions the binary constraints that dictate women: “have the body of a goddess.”(169) She even rebuts Arthur for telling her “women should become whole people through meaningful work”(38) which implies that women are incomplete, and will remain so until they acquire ‘the mind’. Judging form this standpoint, she alludes to Diana’s statue of Ephesus as a symbol of the essence of feminity; the goddess of fertility and childbirth. Molly Hite calls it “a paradigm of patriarchally controlled female body.” The protagonist’s description of the stature undermines the familial virtues for which the Goddess is traditionally worshipped. Her serene face is perched

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on top of her body rather than being a part of it, emphasizing that the body is prime site in females. Her assertion is a protest against the society which situates females as reproductive machines: women are eaten by society that views the female body as consumable. Women are not inexhaustible bodies and, through the protagonist’s resistance, Atwood is able to defy convention and assert the solution is not to accept and adapt oneself to repressive culturally defined conventions, but to rewrite them.

Society expects slenderness from women: “if Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men’s magazines are always good looking? The effect would be quite different if they were over weight.”(56) When a woman is over weight her excess weight marks her as an undisciplined woman, a woman who occupies more space than her allotted space by patriarchal society. Even the psychiatrist says, “Don’t you want to get married?”(95)

Joan’s mother who is an epitome of repressive social forces, a woman trapped by patriarchal culture, wants Joan to be thin but she has an urge to defy her controlling mother which she values higher than the need to get adapted to a socially acceptable corporeal style. Sarah Seats
rightly argues that. “Atwood brings eating into direct relationship with
gender and cultural politics.” 6 Joan’s mother intends to control Joan by
trying to limit her food consumption, and Joan too uses food to fight her
mother, since it is the only tool of defiance that is available to her.

Her fat self was looked upon as “a beluga whale” who “never
opened her mouth except to put something into it”.(84) and she is
conscious that “my obesity was as an unfortunate handicap like a hump
or a club foot, rather than refutation” and, according to Bouson, Lady
Oracle “depicts the unregulated and undisciplined female body as a
grotesque spectacle.” 7 After she lost weight the society accepted her
normal “I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was no
longer among the untouchables.”(180)

Joan revolts against the ‘social expectation’ which society forces
upon her and through her struggle Atwood points out the stresses and
insufficiencies connected with women living in a community, obsessed
with rigid roles. Initially, Joan manifests her rebellion through her body
but as her mother “imposed on Joan the necessity to follow social rules
and to fulfil society’s expectations” (76) she was virtually attempting:

to deny her daughter any sense of autonomy and tries to control her life and identity. She makes her diet and tries to assert her authority physically by reducing her daughter in size. Joan challenges her mother and takes control of her own life through eating. She retaliates against diets by eating more and more.  

In other words, Joan refuses to become the kind of women that society considers perfect and refuses to become the epitome of feminity which her mother represents. She wanted to gain power and autonomy and wants to take control of her self and expresses it through her body: “I sat at the table with my hot, adding another white ring to the vanish….organize my life.”(25) Sara Seats argues:

Atwood seems to be writing the female body in such a way as to draw together biology and culture, reinvesting the body with the power to determine eating.  

Joan is enraged by the attitude of society towards women; she overacts to “society which pressures her to be beautiful and punishes any deviation”.  

In order to make her look acceptable for society, the mother tries to reduce her daughter’s size both by diet and suitable clothes

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without any consideration of Joan’s feelings and needs. Joan refuses to be changed because she finds her mother’s actions destructive for her personality and identity. Her refusal to be made similar to other girls — to go to a carefully selected private school where pupils wear uniforms — makes her ultimately: “the embodiment of her mother’s failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which her mother could get a prize”.

According to the protagonist, the most destructive thing to her were “the attitudes of society” (120) manifests through the angry mother, cruel and mean schoolmates and the dance teacher, who excluded her from an important performance. The person who has all the characteristics of an ideal woman is Joan Crawford who embodies all the dreams and demands of society. She is beautiful, thin, successful and tragic at the same time. She is an example of a woman who can control her life, but who is also loved and accepted by others. Joan’s mother gave her daughter a name after the actress because she believed that the heroine would become similar to her namesake – strong, smart and, most of all, slim. The protagonist presents her mother’s point of view and her own confusion about being called after an actress: “My mother named me after Joan

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Crawford. This is one of things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters?” (45)

In fact, there was something tragic about Joan Crawford: “She had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her. Perhaps that was it. Or, and this is important: Joan Crawford was thin.”(45) Joan does not consider herself similar to the actress and instead identifies herself with Joan of Arc. The image of the martyr who had to suffer because of her choice to protect her own beliefs and values and because of her courage to act in a way that was unacceptable for society is a metaphor of the protagonist’s fate. Later, Joan wonders whether it is not true that she was given a name after Joan of Arc. This uncertainty is expressed by the narrator in these words: “Maybe my mother didn’t name me after Joan Crawford after all, I thought; she just told me that to cover up. She named me after Joan of Arc, didn’t she know what happened to women like that?” (408) As Joan refuses to be the daughter of her mother’s dreams and rejects the role of a polite, submissive female who is valued for her appearance instead of intellect, the war between her and society begins. Devoid of any weapons, Joan uses her body as an object of resistance and over eats in order to be
grossly fat to defy the pressure put on her and not to play the role that she is expected.

Joan’s resistance to and defying the pressures of the society does not mean that she never aspire for acceptance from society but she wants it in accordance with her ‘self’; she has the simple desire to love and be loved. Once she finds the ‘existing social reality’ against her and she escapes reality and considers the only possible outcome for her was to escape through dreams. The novelist shows Joan’s frustration and her difficulties to cope with the society when she was forced to embody a mothball at a dance recital: “I threw myself into the part, it was a dance of rage and destruction, tears rolled...” they are making me do it: “....I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it.”(55) In such words and statements, Atwood displays her unexpected combination of two separate realms, her inner self rejecting the societal role, and her humiliation as she experiences alienation as a child. She is astonished to see when she acted the part which was not liked by herself though people liked it: “it puzzled me that some of them seemed to be ugly, bulky suit better than the pretty ones of the others.”(55) Although fighting for ‘self’, Joan’s thoughts and feelings indicate that she is desperate to live in accordance with the rules of the
‘society’. Though she wins much applause and more individual attention as mothball than as butterfly in the back row, she hates being a “fool-heroine”, says Linda Sandler, cries out thwarted wings and mourns the fact that no one would think of “marrying” a mothball.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite her proclamation that she liked being fat, she admits that she avoided looking at her body, “in a mirror or in any other way.” (144) Moreover, we find Joan much disturbed when she sees her reflection in the distorting mirrors at the Canadian National exhibition that “stretched you and shrank you” because “I didn’t want to be fatter than I already was, and being thinner was impossible.” (104) Joan remains trapped in an ambivalent position in order to find her place in a society and be what society wishes her to be. The failure of the kind of socially induced behaviour leads her to introspective quest towards her hybrid self. In being a mothball she adopts society’s values and becomes what her mother and dance teacher wants her to be while secretly and unconsciously keep longing to reveal her true self. In this connection, Ronald D. Laing claims:

\textsuperscript{12} Linda Sandler, “Interview with Margaret Atwood” Malahet Review, 41 (Jan., 1997). p. 27.
When faced with the society in which an individual feels estranged and individual’s sane response is madness and the creation of a false-self which aims at making normal self possible. Even as a child Joan develops double personality; at home, she was deliberately quiet and ‘comatose’ while outside her family circle, her enthusiasm made her popular among her friends.¹³

Even at school she plays a peculiar role of a “duplicitous monster”, friendly and outgoing, but full of hatred and jealousy too. She deceives her classmates to believe in her qualities because she wanted social acceptance. Throughout the novel we find Joan using deception a mere sign of her inadequacy to deal with her inner feelings and what society demands from her. She builds labyrinth of paradigms around her real self because she is convinced from experience that nobody loves a fat women. She divides the world into “two kinds of people: fat ones and thin ones” and both her peers and adult acquaintances reinforce her discovery that fat are despised outcasts and thin are beloved ones. Joan very much believes that woman who does not confirm to the ideology of the slender female has to take refuge to different strategies to avoid victimization in society. The women, she asserts have to struggle with stress and insufficiencies connected with living in a community which is obsessed with following rigid roles. In this context, according to Rose Mary

Sullivan, Atwood “examines how the forces of society interact with the individual.\textsuperscript{14}

Through the reaction of these fat women Atwood shows how these women live in a society which considers women’s success dependent on the size of the body and female beauty. But when it comes to sexual abuse there is no indication that ‘attractive’ girls are more likely to be the object of sexual desire than ‘unattractive’ girls. Even Joan believes that plump and unattractive women are as likely to be tortured as thin ones “although men would find it hilarious instead of immortal or sexually titillating.”(50) The fat girl at high school, Theresa, who has “the traditional fat-girl reputation” gets shouted at by boys who propose her: “Hey Theresa, hey fatty! wanta go out behind the field house with me.” (109) This duplicitous view of fat women is shared by Joan, who imagines herself fattened up by Italian landlord, being imprisoned and kept as an over weight sex slave kept “in a cage, as a fat whore, a captive earth mother for whom some body else collected the admission ticket.” (398) Judy kopinka rightly 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,

sweet heart maid and whore”\textsuperscript{15}. Thus through Joan Atwood discovers the socially accepted cruelty inflicted on girls who do not fit into the “sugar-and-spice” image. As Atwood says in conversations:

> The body as a concept has always been a concern of mind … I think people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their own bodies. Which they pick up from their culture and apply to their own.\textsuperscript{16}

Atwood uses women’s body as a timeless and universal metaphor for an instrument of women’s resistance to social repercussions and constraints. The protest to communal pressure is expressed by Joan’s attitude towards food. Thus Joan’s unease towards her obese body speaks about political, social and cultural problems that women encounter during their lives. Moreover, the narrator shows how individuals are put under the pressure of the community to play pre-designated gender roles to adjust themselves to the values, beliefs and ideas that society owns. Marilyn Patton believes that:

\textsuperscript{15} Wayne. Fraser, Judy Kopinka, “Fat is a feminist issue” Quoted from The Dominion of Women, Personal and the Political in Canadian Women’s Literature. New York: Green Wood Press, p. 156.

Margaret Atwood takes on the issue of cultural control of women as represented in literature and prescribed images or roles for women.¹⁷

As Joan rebels against her position within power structures that seek to contain her, she fights with obese body which is her only weapon to fight against social pressure. Madeleine Davies remarks that Atwood in her novels shows

The body is the site on which political power is exercised and the site on which abuse is practiced and in turn rehearsed.²⁸

Joan’s over eating, as already pointed out, and is employed by narrator to express her inner rebellion against her patriarchy and her negation of social rules and expectations. When the protagonist became a writer, Atwood shows how newspapers paid more attention to her physical appearance than to her writing: “hair in the female was regarded as more important than either talent or lack of it”. (11)

Atwood also articulates the difficulties encountered by female writer in assuming an equal place with men in the realm of literary production. Her work is discriminated on the basis of sex which Atwood calls “sexual bias”. Thus Atwood shows the domination of publishing by male editors who are more interested in marketing and not in the quality

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of writing. They decided to publish Joan’s work but Sturgess reduces Joan to a seductive object to decorate the book jacket of *Lady Oracle* and he is typical of his class. Atwood raises voice against such stereotypical roles imposed on women in a society the way such roles interiorize women and thus distort and problematize their self-perception. Atwood shows, how the society which shapes patriarchy institutionalizes sex roles and suggests that “the characteristics of maleness and femaleness are not biologically determined. Rather they are based on cultural definitions”. Even when Joan lost her weight she is unable to shake off her fat body which she has left behind. Consequently, her fat self stays with her as an “invisible twin.”(259) Although she obtains the right shape, she realises she has the ‘wrong past.’ It seems these visitants represent aspects of Joan that exceeds the societal roles trying to confirm. These bodies are symbolic of the female bodies rebelling and Molly Hite rightly points out:

Clearly these visitants represent aspects of Joan that exceed the societal roles to which she is trying to conform. These bodies protest, transgressing boundaries and refusing to stay in their place.19

It reveals that the fat lady has escaped her feminist space and has invaded masculine territory. As Molly Hite asserts:

The fat lady, as Joan conceives her, is the embodiment – literally, of the female potential for excess, of the threat that un-mutilated, unchecked feminity will overflow boundaries, obliterating distinctions and violating proprieties.\(^20\)

The response of the spectators is that they want to punish fat lady for trespass so that she can never again get up for revolt against the societal space given to her. It symbolizes the patriarchal fear of unchecked feminity and the need to cut the female body down to size.

Joan’s former body throughout the novel is a constant embarrassment to her. According to Margery Fee, Joan’s invention of new past lives is the denial of a ‘true self’ and “no one who lives in a human culture can remain without an identity …” Joan’s denial of her obese past also demonstrates her entrapment in a culture where fat women are rendered to the margins of society, since they oppose the ideal image of feminity. When she meets Marline — one of her former tormentors at Brownies — Joan is so afraid of being recognized that she flees into the ladies and cries her eyes out. Joan envisions herself as a fat lady in a pink ballerina costume walking the high wire, preceding inch by inch across Canada. The initial jeers of the audience, transforming into roar of applause when she completes her death defying feat, dramatizes

Joan’s need to exhibit her grandiose self and gain self. It is revealed clearly after Joan turned thin and found that she became sexually desirable which as a fat woman she was not. However, her physical reduction exposes her to sexual attacks, gazes from “strange men, whose gaze had previously slid over” (146) and her response to these gazes is a longing to be fat again because she conceptualizes her fat as a form of sexual protection. It removes her from the category of being a ‘sexual object’ and allows her to function as some ‘one’ rather than some ‘thing’. Her longing to be fat reveals her womanly desire to rebel against her powerlessness.21

Joan’s mother in the novel is, what Bouston calls, “acting as an agent of masculine culture, [and] represents the repressive social forces that have traditionally crippled women.”22 Whereas the mother herself is a victim and defines her plight accurately enough (214) for Joan she personifies the feminine ideal: she is a wife and a mother and maintains an immaculately tidy home and performs a rigorous duty. She seems to be even more victimised by her society and when Joan saw her mother in front of the mirror for a make-up session she notices that “these sessions appeared to make her [mother] sadder, as if she saw behind or within the

mirror some fleeting Image she was unable to capture or duplicate, and when she was finished she was always a little cross.”(75) Consequently, Sherill Grace believes that Atwood uses mirrors as images for alienation:

The images serve as reminders of the destructive way we live by separating ourselves from our environments, our bodies, other people, and finally even ourselves.23

When her mother died Joan understands that she “was not what she seemed”(217) and sits in front of the mirror sadly, succeeding in remaking herself into society’s image of feminine beauty but inwardly she is a failure. Towards the end Joan recognizes that her mother had been Joan’s reflection too long: “She’d never really let go of me because I had never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror.”(399) As Lucy M. Freibert observes:

She was killed by her husband by the roles which society expected her to play, but chiefly by the romantic conditioning which made beauty, wealth and romance supreme. When the beauty and romance disappeared, the wealth did not satisfy.24

Joan’s mother was also victim of the patriarchal society (216) and she was exiled “in the house, this plastic shrouded tomb, from which there

24 Lucy M. Freibert, “The artist as Picaro: The revelation of Margret Atwood’s Lady Oracle”, Canadian Literature 92 (Spring, 1982)
was no exit.”(16) Susane Becker, in very apply suggests that it is “the mother’s paradoxical function almost as another “totalising discourse” in those engendering processes that construct the horrific, the monstrous and thus point to the gap between the ‘ideal feminine’ and women”. 25 In the dreams of Joan, towards the end, she saw that she wanted to console her mother because she wanted freedom and “was a vortex, a dark Vacuum” who collaborates with male power. Hence, it seems that she ‘dutifully enacts the cultural script assigned to women.’ 26

There are other characters also who stick to the socially accepted female roles – such as school girls – and substantiate the claim of Joan’s victimization and trapping of women are romanticized for Centuries. Atwood through Joan shows how writings of women are gendered and classed on the basis of Sex: Women must begin their awakening to maturity by rejecting the notions that their passivity is innocent. Joan finds empowerment in her another ‘self’ when she is “Lady Oracle.” She realizes that this woman, who “Lived under the earth some where, or inside something, a cave or a huge building” (269) is Joan’s inner self

who voices her anger towards the restricted forces of male-domination.

According to Christian Bok:

As a writer Joan plays the part of a metaphorical Sibyl, “an Oracle” for whom writing is visionary experience in The Diviners and “Lady Oracle, the oracle is ‘beyond herself’.  

Commenting on the significance of “Oracle” Coral Ann Howells says:

An Oracle is that it is a voice which comes out of a women’s body and is associated with hidden dangerous knowledge. The voice of the Delphic Oracle was the Voice of the God Apollo, or earlier the voice of the Earth Goddess.

Atwood gives a voice to the silenced “white Goddess” emphasizing her role as “Sibyl” and Joan’s position as the ‘Oracle’. The power of sibyl is like the power of mother, the power of creation and she gives information and prophesies at length. Marilyn Patton says that the purpose of Lady Oracle is to:

re-imagine the Delphic Oracle again under the control of women. This is a figurative way of saying that the novel is attempting to imagine away in which women can take back their rightful place as poets and writers.We

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can think of various modes of writing in Lady Oracle as musing upon the place of gender in the politics of literary production.  

The protagonist, Joan Foster, unfolds her Oracle about politics of gender such as condemning female writers to Kitchen, devaluation of their creative work, prescription of feminine roles, narrow categorization of women as wives and mistresses, deification and glorification of the image of women what Virginia Wolf called as the “Angel of the House.” Joan raises voice against the society’s gender roles because they make women look inferior and a problematize their self-perception. She herself admits that her books “with their Covers featuring gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns” serve to “perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted” they are “trash of lowest order.” (36) But this trash serves a purpose of her audience as she knows what they require. She appears as a “fairy God mother” and offers “a vision of a better world.” Barbara Godard believes:

By and large women feel the need for escape to a greater extent than men.
This is so because ‘the weight of patriarchal tradition educates women into’ nothingness and denies them transcendence of being.  

Throughout the novel we find Joan yearning for magic transformation and we find her obsessed with romantic fantasies as Kathapollit says that “Lady Oracle is for Atwood what Gothic’s were for Joan, a flight from the demands of her truest, most thoughtful self.”\(^{31}\) She confesses that she is lacking in quality, and her inability to cry in a delicate way is one of the features that distinguish her from romantic heroines. Atwood says:

In Canada the artist’s duty is to entertain and divert, nothing more on the whole the audience prefers art not to be a mirror held up to life but a Disney land of the soul containing Romance land, spyland porno land and all other Escape lands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth.\(^{32}\)

Joan’s desire to see herself as a romance heroine is evident even early in her life. While learning dancing at Miss Flegg’s she longs to be a butterfly doing a solo with the only boy Roger.\(^{(49)}\) When her mother was helping her with her dress the costume of butterfly was not befitting her but she believed: “I know the addition of the wings would make all the difference. I was hoping for magic transformations.”\(^{(50)}\) As a child she has craving for romance “like most little girls of that time I idealized ballet dancers, it was something girls could do”\(^{(46)}\) and aspire for “true love … there is magic in love and smiles”.\(^{(344)}\) But Joan’s experiences


\(^{32}\) Margaret Atwood, “Amnesty International: An Address” *Second words*, p. 393.
of her life teach her that love is not a splendid thing: “love was merely a tool, smiles were another tool they were both just tools for accomplishing certain ends.”(345)

It is also important to point out that the novel oscillates between reality and fantasy. When Joan was day-dreaming about her fake suicide, she found all her friends and relatives waiting for her on the other side of water. During her reverie, she comes across a panorama of images, the fantasy which are also shown when protagonist was alone in Italy. These images actually prevent her from accepting reality and allow her to mix up past and present when she is alone. She gets embedded in her fantasies — in her unconscious journeys — and allows her imagination to wander freely, without distinguishing between reality and fantasy.

Towards the end of the book, Joan is obsessed with uselessness of her changing selves, which have accomplished her nothing except ‘obliterating’ her. She turns out to be, as Robert Lecker says, “the confused product of her own fictions.”33 She realizes the futility of her attempts to live a fantasy, and feels her novels were only papers paper castles, paper costumes, paper dolls, as inert and lifeless finally as those unsatisfactory blank-eyed dolls I’d dressed and undressed in my

mother’s house.”(262) Her dreams and her novels are the product of imagination and play a crucial role in the perceptions of her being; enabling her to transcend the limitations of social reality. Joan fails in her efforts to live out plots of art. While walking in Hidepark and rehearsing a scene from her latest novel “Escape from love” Joan imagines herself to be Samantha Deane fleeing from the lustful embrace of Sir Edmund Devere. At a certain point, Joan feels a hand on her arm and thinking it to be that of sir Edmund, she screams and cuts due cheek of an unknown shinny confused-looking young man Arthur. When Joan attempts at automatic writing she mixes reality, literary creation and personal fantasy. Joan descends into her inner self “the room seemed very dark, darker than it had before; the candle was very bright, I was holding it in my hand and walking along a corridor… I gasped and turned around surely there had been a figure, standing behind me.”(266) The words indicate her attitude of submission to rejection of patriarchal values of society. She refuses to face her self, preferring to go on of living in her self-reassuring world of fantasies.

She dreams of a life devoted to artistic endeavours and rejects commonplace prospects but ultimately settles for the conventional life. Throughout the novel we find Joan’s development emerges from her interaction with the world. This interplay between social and
psychological forces confuses her mind and the image of maze which recurs in her fiction, functions as a threatening reminder of her state of mind. It is identified as a place where several women who are the components of Joan’s fragmented self have disappeared. Atwood in an interview has remarked that “the maze in Lady Oracle is a descent into the underworld. There is a passage in Virgil’s Aeneid which I found very useful, where Acnes goes to the under world to learn about his future. He’s guided by the sibyl and he learns what he has to from his dead father, and then returns home.”

The absence of a centre in the maze can be regarded as a metaphor for Joan’s position as an individual. All her Gothic maidens feel irresistibly drawn to the mysterious maze of ‘stalked by love’ as Joan herself becomes aware of the necessity of her quest for knowledge of self. While planning the concluding scenes of her last book, Joan entangles different kinds of realities. When she expresses her sympathies for Felecia, she acknowledges evil existence in her self; she then confronts fat lady as another aspect of her personality which is seared to reveal to the society. Atwood superbly blends reality and fiction, mixes real and imaginary characters to point out, what Boustan calls, how Joan

dramatizes in her work conflicted self-hood and the need for self rescue. For, while her heroin is perpetually “in peril” and “on the run” she is also, of course, always rescued in her work. In progress, stalked by love, Joan fictionalizes her contrasting selves. Charlotte represents her socially complaint, conventional female self, the role she assumed with the possessive, angry powerful Felecia embodies her comauflaged grandiosity. Publicly, Joan plays the role of Arthur’s self effacing, inept, always apologizing wife, in secret she becomes Lousia Delacourt, writer of Gothic novels.35

As her heroine reaches the centre of the maze, Joan becomes aware of the hybrid character of her personality: “A stone bench ran along one side, and on it were seated four women. Two of them looked a lot like her, with red hair and green eyes and small white teeth. The third was middle aged, dressed in a strange garment that ended halfway up her calves, with a ratty piece of her around her neck. The last was enormously fat…”(414) Out of the four women referred here, two resembled Joan, one embodied aspect of her as a writer and the acclaimed poetess. Then she meets a figure representing her Aunt Lou, the last woman, the fat ballerina also represents another aspect of her personality.

Thus Joan realizes that she is not just one of these women because each of them is the part of her personality: of her ‘self’ which she presents before the ‘society’. Like her Gothic novel heroin Felecia, she is “too well bred” and decides to turn to another aspect of her fragmented self—it is indicated that she intends to return to her husband, thus submitting to the roles of society. She mentions that she has decided to become science fiction writer, which once again draws her close to the world of fantasy than to the world of reality. Science fiction, though still fantasy, looks forward and implies at least survival.

Since Atwood is a humanist, urging that human personality is a precious hard-won achievement, she quite often explains woman’s selfhood through relationships and also ‘being in love’. The protagonists of Atwood are conscious of the victimization of women in society, and both as literary characters and as human beings are conscious of their limitations. Atwood once said:

If I created a female character, I would like 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 a monster, a slur or 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.³⁶

She also argued that for a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals and women merely as examples of gender; perhaps, it is time to take the capital W off woman. Hence Atwood portrays women who choose to live like an individual, breaking down the stereotypes of women in society. She holds a mirror and pleads for man-woman relationships based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity and absence of pretence. Joan narrates her relationship with “costumed” men. During one of her past time jobs in Bite-a-Bit restaurant, when an Italian cook proposes to marry her, he opens his bank account to her, which shows his commodization in marriage. He says: “I am serious. I want to meet with your father, and look, I show you my bank account.”¹¹⁶ Joan embodies the alienated female individual, at a loss with patriarchal society when she sends a message to her friend and accomplice Sam, to tell him that their plan succeeded. She feels safer signing the postal card as a couple, and not as a single woman: “post card to Sam”—having a super time. St. Peter’s is wonderful see you soon, love, Mitzi and Fred.”²⁶

At the beginning of the novel, Charlotte, Joan’s heroine foregrounds Joan’s inability to deal with men, as she calls them “liars and hypocrites, all of them.” (31) She tries to steer her protagonist through to a conventional ending: Redmond should rescue the girl and two of them should live happily ever after. But Joan discovers that she cannot conclude the Book with such a romantic cliché: “That was the way it was supposed to go, that was the way it had always gone before, but somehow it longer felt right. I’d taken a wrong turn some where.” (404)

Thus the author, the book, and the characters reverberate with implications, taking wrong turns. These wrong turns are interrelated to Joan, especially as she projects aspects of her own predicament onto her protagonist: “Cunningly, he began his transformations, trying to lure her into his reach. (415) The interaction between Charlotte and Redmond also depict the Joan’s own attempt to escape from the limitations of her life by being “saved” from herself by the men in her life. Redmond finally says “Let me take you away... let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always.” (415) Charlotte almost yielding, “remembers that “once she had wanted these words, she had wanted these words, she had waited all her life for someone to say them.” (415) These words written in past tense are significant in the sense that earlier Joan had
decided: “from now on, I thought, I would dance for no one but myself. May I have this waltz? I whispered.” (405)

When Charlotte in the novel rejects Redmond’s offer to be danced away, the unmasking occurs: “The flesh fells away from his face, revealing the skull behind it.” (415) The narrator who has pretended to die can live, but only after she has rejected his ostensible saviour, who represent the repressive, life denying forces in her own life? The final chapter of the Novel serves as a symbolic fictional manifestation of Joan Foster’s changing views that she must view men differently, and this new awareness was soon illustrated when Joan comes out of the trance-like state in which she writes her novels to hear red foot steps of man who seemed bent on killing her. She assesses her situation— she can disguise herself and flee, or wait and do nothing at all— but instead of being helpless heroine she strikes the intruder over the head with empty cinzano bottle. She now discovers new aspects of her personality which the men in her life previously have not seen. She now decides to return to Canada and not to write anymore costume Gothics which entails the recognition that she need no longer be a victim and she will no longer inflict the myth of the victimized woman onto her self and readers.
Joan functions as an extension of or a sex-partner to various men whom she meets and fulfils their fantasies. For sometime she castes herself as Paul’s mistress and then successively, Arthur’s politically committed wife and the Royal porcupine’s avant-garde affair but each relationship is unequal and soon proves unsatisfying. She tried to find lovable successful self in romantic relationships with men because for a woman selfhood has often been seen as defined primarily through relationships, but the way she interacts with the male characters symbolically illustrates the clash between her own self and patriarchal demands.

When Joan leaves her home and begins her adult life in England she meets a polish hero, who from the very start displays all characteristics of the male chauvinist and regards women as dependent and naive. He treats her as an “unusually inept child” (174) makes decision for her and does not care about her own opinion (175) He gives Joan ‘performance points’ after sex and ‘minus points’ for not feeling upset at being deflowered by him.(180) He also complaints about her disorderly ways and expects her to learn to do a few things well. Joan feels that he intends training her like a pet dog: “a limited number of tricks learned thoroughly.”(182) He writes Nurse Novels under the improbable name of “Mavis Quilp” and when Joan started writing novels
too he starts denigrating her work and resents her earning more money than he does. But Joan does not want to be rescued by him because she knew that Paul does not love her, he wants “the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous communists.” (345) Thus Paul symbolises the typical men who takes delight in victimizing women.

In her second lover and future husband Arthur, she encounters the same overpowering attitude. According to Judith McCombs:

Atwood’s Haunted sequences [is] tempted by male others whose power animates and captivities, whose guises enthral, whose love spells death when she meets Arthur she felt “the right man had come along, complete with a cause. It could devout myself too. My life had significance.”

When Joan meets Arthur, she pretends to be “at least semi-informed” of his political activism. Joan brilliantly feigns political interest to seduce Arthur who changes his theories constantly. He transformed himself from Lord Russell to Mao, and proposed to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. He says “Marriage itself would settle us down, and thorough it, too, we would become better acquainted.” (237) Arthur was “full of plans” (254) and treats Joan as a child like Polish count: “you’re an intelligent women.” (36) Arthur, the so

called “leftist” husband, expects her to cook and also imposes restrictions such as not to wear long fashionable dresses in public. Joan describes Arthur as a man incapable of knowing her personality: “Arthur wouldn’t have liked the picture. It wasn’t the sort of thing he liked, though it was the sort of thing he believed I liked.”(17) He seemed to bend on changing her, transforming her into his own likeness. In spite of the oddities she plays role of a dutiful wife and hopes to win his love because she is “an optimist, with a lust for happy endings.”(254) When she takes refuge in Italy, she longs to let Arthur know how she cleverly deceived him: “It was a good plan, I thought; I was pleased with myself for having arranged it.”(28) Joan acts as an accomplice, accepting the role of a feeble female: “I wanted Arthur to be happy ... his depressions made me miserable ... therefore I was not a good woman.”(257) Fearing that Arthur will find her unworthy, she protects her fragile self-esteem by keeping secret her childhood obesity and she goes on lying to Arthur about her family: “I invented a mother for his benefit, a kind, placid women who died of a rare disease – Lupus, I think it was shortly after I met him. Luckily he was never very curious about my past he was too busy telling me about his.”(43) When Arthur discovers a picture of Joan as a teenager she dismisses herself as an imaginary aunt, because she was afraid of her past: “For a moment I hesitate, on the verge of telling the truth ‘That’s
my other Aunt’ I said ‘My Aunt Deirdre. Aunt Lou was wonderful, but Aunt Deirdre was a bitch’... She was always trying to tell me how to run my life.’(105) It epitomizes the social constraints imposed on Joan by telling her how to run her life.

Joan adopts the image of a self-effacing supportive wife and desires to preserve the security that marriage provides. Joan is trapped in the comprehensive “unresponsive” and “apathetic” marriage as Arthur is nothing but always “coldly dialectical.” (236) When Joan proposes that it is time for them “to settle down somewhere, a little more permanently and have children”.(258) Arthur deplores her suggestion and festoons their bedroom with every known form of birth-control device and urges her to take the pill. Soon Joan found that no matter what she does, Arthur is “bound to despise” her and that she can never be what he wants. When Joan gets her book Lady Oracle on “Male-Female roles in Society”(275) published, he is bewildered and feels embarrassed by the theme of her book and behaves as if she has committed “some unpardonable but unmentionable Sin.” (285)When Joan is interviewed on T.V. he feels it is a humiliation to him as it assails his misogynist mentality. He feels that Joan has betrayed him and he assumes the male character in her book is based either on himself or on a lover; and he is unhappy with either alternative. Joan defines him as a “cloaked sinuous and faintly menacing
stranger” (261); his godamned theories and ideologies make her Puke and she feels anguished by these state of affairs. At home, it is his indifference which hurts her, though the main reason of his indifference is his “complicated and possibly Sadistic reason.” (331) Sunaina Singh aptly states that it is this attitude of Arthur that “prompts Joan to escape rather than confront – escape from the overpowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference.”

Joan escapes her husband’s sullen socialism which led him quite often to change and re-think about common place prospects. She feels that for lover Reality and fantasy can merge “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 were no fantasy, and therefore no escape.” (329) He behaved more and more like chuck but what Joan seeked from men in her life was the mirroring attention but she is disappointed and asks “was every Heath cliff a Linton in disguise.” (328)

Thus all men in her life try, at one point or another, to make her endorse the role of woman. Polish count resents her success as writer, Arthur never gives her opportunity to express opinion different from his, and the Royal porcupine after indulging in all kinds of fantasies, finally

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turned out to be an ordinary man — another symbol of social constraint. Joan initially believed that men are romantic figures — Paul, the polish count seemed “a liar as compulsive and romantic.”(177) Arthur a “melancholy fighter... like Lord Byron”(198) and Royal porcupine had “something Byronic about him”(309) — but when romantic mask of these men become “Gray and multi-dimensional and complicated like everyone else”(328) she fabricates prisons of romantic self-deception with each men and wants protection, though she can never reach it. She needs a change of perception to move beyond passivity and self imposed victimization but her real need to see men as heroes and as Ann Mc Millian points out:

“escape into them”, results from her desire to escape the unglamorous or another men is heightenened by her fear that will learn the truth about her.39

Her different selves haunt her “I wanted to forget the past, but it refuses to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me”.(259)

Again, it is to be conceded that Joan in the novel has the habit of deception which is a form of self-destruction. She has entered the maze and trapped herself by creating different selves in which she is caught because her way of escape is her way to another man as the “only way

out”. She has to free herself from this pattern and freeing herself will come by facing reality without segmenting mankind into villains and victims. She relies upon men by changing herself from one to another but all these transformations become more and more frustrating than satisfying. She has to take responsibility of her own life but instead of that she projected hope and blame on men she loved. However, her activities finally take her to freely respond to a person without suppressing her ‘one’ or ‘more’ selves as she has learned to make a mistake and to forgive herself: she is not a victim now and believes men are also human and vulnerable. Towards the end of the novel she is very clear when she remarks about the reporter: “there is something about the man in a bandage.” (419) She is hopeful but ambiguous, as Bok points out:

She transcends an interiority complex, induced in part by the dismissive attitudes of males who subscribe, something unwittingly, to the social expectations of Patriarchy.⁴⁰

Thus Atwood exhorts that women should no longer barter reality for a pseudo security promised by male and wavering between two visions of life — the self as seen by others and the self as known from within— Joan

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believes that the only way to fit into society is to pretend to adopt its values.

In her essay “Reconstructing Margaret Atwood’s Protagonists” Patricia Goldblatt rightly believes:

> The protagonists of Margaret Atwood’s novels are women who begin with trust in socially established paths, such as marriage, family and friendship, but they become disillusioned and turn their happiness inward, regarding themselves as unworthy and as failures.  

Deception for Joan Foster, as we know, had not become a matter of self-defence; she seemed to consider it initially an entry point in the world and took pride on her ability to deceive others. Honesty seemed to her disastrous because she could not cope with the societal demands: she had no other choice than to become even more entangled in her numerous selves. Joan calls her own passivity to yield to pressures and her ability to concoct things as “Miss Flegg syndrome”. Joan acquires one more identity after her “automatic writing” and felt that publishing her lady oracle poems would yield her the recognition she craved for, but even this appeared to be “hollow, a hoax, a delusion” (305) expressing her subjective emptiness. These and Multiple other identical experiences led her to conclude that she should leave behind her fanciful imagination and

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turn to real life. It features the inversion of the role of hero and villain implying that one should integrate the evil part of our ‘self’ to reach self completion. Parson very rightly states that:

Joan does not recognize, but we do, the half-likeness of all this to her own life, the masks; the flights into fantasy and deception; the love affair with the fantastically self-creating Royal porcupine; the imprisonment in insecurity; the looming death.\(^{42}\)

The important point about this tripled identity and its paralleled experiences is that Joan’s writing is created out of the same feelings and experiences that also produce her fantasies and subterfuge. She desired to escape from the unglamorous facts of herself but “But hadn’t my life always been double? (298) When Joan became entangled and her situation became totally uncontrollable she once again wanted to escape her labyrinth of deceptions: “Now I wanted to be acknowledged, but I feared it. If I brought the separate parts of my life together (Like Uranium, like Plutonium, harmless to the naked eye, but charged with lethal energies) surely there would be an explosion.”(262) As J. Brooks Bouson:

When all convoluted plots of Joan’s life converge-her current lover, the Royal porcupine wants her to marry him; Paul her former lover traces her

and wants her back, a black mailer hounds her, she imagines Arthur is the persecutor sending her death threats.\textsuperscript{43}

She believes that once again she should escape her life which has become “a snarl, a rat’s nest of dangling threads and loose ends.”\textsuperscript{(357)} Thus she fakes her death by drowning and sheds her past identity and tries to exert control over her life and wishes to remain unknown and unrecognized in her new life. Roberta Rubestein has noted the protagonist’s “Plunge” into the lake represents “the true beginning of her plunge into purifying elements the unknown and the unconscious.”\textsuperscript{44} She completely wants to free herself from her former self “but fails to create a truly effective disguise.”\textsuperscript{(11)} Jerome Rosenberg states:

Atwood is portraying...something like multiple personality disorder, in which traumatic episodes initiate in early childhood trigger the formation of separate personality which constitute distinct parts of the victim’s psyche and exist side by side. An identity can in real life be many-faceted; a unity can find its reality in diversity.\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{44} Roberta Rubenstein, “Surfacing: Margaret Atwood’s Journey to the interior”, \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 22 (Autumn, 1976). p. 392.

\textsuperscript{45} Qouted from Barbara Hill Rigney, \textit{The Escape Artist, Women Writers: Margaret Atwood} Macmillian: Education Board, 1987. p. 72.
Joan has to integrate and “absorb” all her identities before resuming her ordinary life and she has to recognize the uselessness of her deception strategies which have accomplished her nothing except ‘obliterating’ her:

The different identities ultimately begin to intermingle; and she decides that the only way to survive is to become one, undivided self again. Indeed, she begins to wonder, “Who did I think I was?” followed by the echo in her head: who do you think you are? My mother used to ask me…. (271) Joan is in fact lost and can’t decide anything about her present but is quite sure that she can never accept her past self: “you can’t change the past, Aunt Lou used to say: “you can’t change the past, Aunt Lou used to say. Oh but I wanted to; that was the one thing I really wanted to do. Nostalgia convulsed me.”(7)