**Autonomy through Creativity**

Patriarchy crushes women by diminishing the female form. Female body is a site of oppression by which patriarchy exerts control over women. In a society that expects slenderness, the fat body is an exaggeration of patriarchal demands. The ‘fat lady’ is an undisciplined woman, non-conformist who occupies more than her allotted space. This suppression is reflected also in evaluating the works of women writers. The prejudice about the gynotext is that it is filled with women’s experience within the enclosed domestic space. The male writers’ experience with culture and reason undervalues women’s perception with nature and emotion. At this juncture, Feminism is held responsible for putting the body as well as the writing on the intellectual map. For women, body is the key to liberty. If only she owns and controls her own body, she can realize her ‘self’. Feminists like Margaret Sanger, Helene Cixous argued that patriarchy denied the autonomy for women writers to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them. Cixous suggested women “to escape androtexts and write their realized ‘self’” (Prabhakar *Feminism/Postmodernism* 51).

Atwood attempts to demystify the female form. She believes in affirming self identity not through external body but through inner self realization. Her writings dismantle culturally encoded concepts of femininity and propose useful corrective to traditional reading of the female body. Through her fiction, Atwood urges women to empower themselves through positive re-embodiment. Women need to re-embody culture by first re-embodying themselves. Atwood’s female protagonists have gone through the journey into their deep selves and discovered their authentic identity.
Through the adventure of self exploration, they seek self definition and become the female heroes.

Margaret Atwood as a feminist writer believes in an existential crisis. Existential psychology concerns with the human search for meaning in life. Every individual must strive to add meaning and purpose to his/her life and this existential crisis is expressed in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*. It is a very highly complex piece of realistic fiction. George Woodcock has described it as a “novel about emotional Cannibalism” (237). Atwood attempts to assert in the novel that financial independence is not independence at all because even an economically independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as second sex and hence the novel is considered as the influence of “Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*” (Prabhakar, *Canadian Studies* 38). *Lady Oracle* is an indictment of male consumption of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, consumerist society. Atwood suggests that the awareness of how they are subjugated and victimized has to come from within the ‘self’ of an individual.

In the phallocentric culture, women are characterized as irrational, passive and dependent in contrast to men, who are considered rational, active and independent. The characteristics of maleness and femaleness are “not biologically determined, rather they are based on cultural definitions” of a male, chauvinistic and sexist society (Weitzman 106). In her third novel, *Lady Oracle* (1976), Atwood shows how the socialization process of patriarchy suggests the characteristics of male and female. The novel questions sex-role stereotypes and challenges the current male bias of the social values, which prescribes roles to women. It elucidates that women cannot be equal to men
without the abolition of sex roles. Hence, the novel pleads for the destruction of those male-female sex roles which are parasitic in nature.

*Lady Oracle* is a comic masterpiece in its parodies of literary forms and subversion of literary expectations. The protagonist Joan Foster has spent her life on the run. Her adolescent obesity and the constant criticisms of her disapproving mother inspire her to flee from Canada to England. A continent away, Joan begins to find her own voice through her pseudonymous career as a romance novelist, an undertaking she hides from Arthur, her manic-depressive, revolution-hungry husband. When Joan’s writing finds its ultimate expression in a collection of feminist poetry that becomes the sleeper hit of the country, she is overwhelmed by the sudden rush of publicity and notoriety. Unable to juggle her crumbling marriage, her madcap affair with an unpredictable performance artist, Peter, and her feud with an insidious celebrity blackmailer, Fraser, Joan feigns her own death and flees to Italy. Thereafter, instead of trying to hold an ‘ideal feminine’ identity, she decides to become a serious automatic writer, “a fairy God mother” (*LO* 37).

*Lady Oracle* is an autobiography of Joan Foster in which she records her growth from a girl to a mature writer. It is structured like a journey of the protagonist in which through her romance with the costumed men, she realizes and assesses different male strategies of the exploitation and oppression of women in the mask of costumes. Ultimately, she depicts in her book, *Lady Oracle*, the deteriorating relationships between men and women in the society. She attacks male ego mercilessly without any compromise. She deconstructs the roles assigned to women by means of the power of her pen. The authorship of Joan represents a challenge to patriarchal culture. Joan emerges
as a serious writer, who tends to concentrate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is, as the writer feels it, experiences it. She has written fifteen pieces on the economic independence of women. When she becomes aware of the consuming attitude of men she musters up her courage to oppose men like Paul and Fraser. Joan thus refuses to be a consumer product any more and endeavours to identify her true self. Atwood explicates the progression of Joan from a meek, docile woman to a strong individualistic and active feminist. The novel pleads for the radical changes in the gender relations in the society and carries the message that women are not mere objects of beauty meant for carnal consumption of men.

Feminist writing reverses the roles of the characters and gives rise to Female Hero. Atwood talks about Joan Foster and her men in *Lady Oracle*, and not a hero and his women. The stock image of a heroine in Romantic fiction – beautiful, slim, and tender – is shattered by Atwood in *Lady Oracle*. The protagonist Joan, a fat girl with 245 pounds is asked to do a teddy bear dance, not the beautiful butterfly dance. Unlike the Romantic heroines, Joan never lets herself be diminished, neutralized. She is not willing to choose a navy-blue polka-dot sack, designed for the fat and suggested by her mother. Instead she buys peculiar, offensive and violently coloured dresses. Always there is a quarrel between Joan and her mother on the territory of her body.

Though related in same blood and gender, the tie between mother and daughter is mysterious and unpredictable. The child believes that it and its mother is one person. But its growing desire for autonomy and to overcome the state of powerlessness requires separation from its mother. Even after separation, “the daughter will not be really free, since as a female she can never completely enter the world of men” (Flax 4). There
arises the conflict about being female. The difficulties faced by the daughter in the patriarchal world result in rage at the mother. The daughter is angry with the mother for not possessing the sort of power that could free both of them from dependency. She also feels that she does not get “both primary nurturance and encouragement, and strength for autonomy” (4). Very soon, the daughter realizes that the male devaluation of and contemptuous attitude for the female is the reason for powerlessness of women, and in particular, of mother. So the rage at the mother turns to pity towards her. Still the conflict revolves round in her psyche whether to remain tied to the mother, or to be autonomous and successful. One who wins the psychic pain will emerge as an ‘individual’ woman.

Joan’s mother named her after Joan Crawford, a beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, thin actress. But Joan is a plump and healthy baby and trying to get something into her mouth. For being fat, her mother never quite forgave her. When she reaches the age of six, her mother gives up taking photographs. She no longer wants her growth recorded. In her school days, during one of the stage shows, Joan wants to be a butterfly with coloured cellophane wings in the ‘Butterfly frolic’ dance. But being a fat girl, she is compelled to be a ‘mothball’ amidst the colourful butterflies. She shed tears when she has to put on the white teddy-bear costume and hangs around her neck a large sign that said, MOTHBALL. She feels naked and exposed in the dance. More than the dance, the greatest loss for her is not wearing the wings: “Can I wear my wings?” (LO 49). She is desolate and inconsolable, when she is aware of the fact that her mother and teacher play wicked witches and transform her into moth ball. She feels, “This isn’t me, they’re making me do it” (55). Her mother betrays her to wear wings and insults her femininity
by asking, “Who would think of marrying a mothball?” (55). Joan’s psyche is deeply affected and according to Padma Srinivasan, “all the later trashes created by her can be associated to this psychic nodule” (75). Joan’s desire to see herself as a romance heroine manifests in her early life itself. She wants to dance as a butterfly instead of mothball. Joan’s thoughts and feelings clearly indicate that not only has she imbibed sexist stereotypes by the age of seven, but also that she is desperate to live in accordance with them.

Food and eating are situated as integral features of feminist discourse. Joan won’t ever let her mother make her over the thin, beautiful girl image. She weighed 182 pounds at the age of 13. But she is eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything she can get. For the eating habit and fat body only, there is a war between Joan and her mother. The mother’s version is that “nobody who looked like Joan could ever accomplish anything” (LO 97). If she were Joan she’d be ashamed to show her face outside the house. She has been worried sick all her life because of Joan’s fatness. Joan, as a compulsive eater eats to triumph over her mother. Her act is the embodiment of patriarchal social norms and to guarantee her existence” (Singh 160). Joan wants to be substantial; to be bigger than society will let her; to take up as much space as the other sex. She uses food as a device to secure her space and evade reduction. Thus, the concept of female space and the consumption of food are vitally connected.

The relationship between Joan and her mother is “professionalized” (LO 76). Joan never calls her, ‘Mother’, and has no childish diminutives with her. Joan’s mother is a monster for her. She wants Joan to do well, but wants herself to be responsible for it. She is to be the manager, the creator, the agent; and Joan is to be the product. She wants
gratitude from Joan but never appreciates her. She often uses the word ‘clumsy’, whenever Joan tries to make her bed, to cook, and to dry the dishes. She doesn’t approve Joan’s free-form style of making beds. She also comments on the crashes and fragments when Joan dries the dishes; and on the scraping charcoal off the bottoms of pots when she tries to cook.

Atwood symbolizes the gifts to picture the mind set of Joan. Joan never thinks of giving gifts to her mother, as she never uses them. Joan complemented her a Christmas gift – a bubble bath, enclosed in a lovely pink squeezable swan. But her mother never uses it. In fact, her mother also never complements her anything, whatever she needs/desires. She needs a baby sister, but her mother offers her doll, and dog. When she asks for a fish in a bowl with coloured pebbles and a miniature castle, her mother refuses and says, “It will die” (81).

Joan’s early life was in Toronto. She is the daughter of an insensitive and irresponsible man who is an anesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. As a doctor, he has two sets of costumes both as a healer and a killer. He goes to war leaving his wife pregnant and does not return home until Joan is five years old. He is a heartless wreck who has abandoned his wife and little daughter to cope with everything all by them. Joan’ mother took a couple of jobs – a travel agent and an assistant to an interior decorator. But, the jobs are not enough for her. She gets discouraged and quits the job. She desperately tells her husband:

You don’t know what it was like, all alone with her to bring up while you were over there enjoying yourself. It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you…I had to make the best of a bad job… (89)
Thus, she is trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and be stranded in domesticity, a plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit for her.

Joan’s father and the female roles expected of her by the male dominated society are responsible for her death. Joan’s father suspects that his wife was pregnant before their marriage. Consequently, she remains a silent victim at his hands. She never talks about her family or early life. She begins to see Joan as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression. Joan realizes that she is an “accident”, the unwanted daughter of an insecure, unhappy woman and carries her sad story around her neck like the story of “a rotting albatross” (258). According to Joan, her mother is not aggressive or ambitious enough. Ultimately, Joan feels so much about her mother’s dull oppressive environment which confronted her for so long a time and that prompts her to commit suicide later.

Atwood portrays her protagonist a victim of social pressure. In school, work place and society, Joan is marginalized. She is a big and fat girl, weighing 245 pounds at the age of 19. In high school, she plays kindly aunt and wise woman characters because of her obese appearance. Slim girls in her class feel that she is neither envious nor flirts. But Joan suppresses her feelings and interests as there is no role for her. It leads her to an alienated, frustrated, and pathetic state of mind. She is an alien at the Brownies, the club where she tried and failed to mingle with her classmates. Her question “If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her?” (56), shows her frustrated attitude towards fatness.

In her childhood, Joan was practised to sing and dance by Miss. Flegg. Miss Flegg taught tap dancing and ballet in the dance school. She organized the recital into
age groups: 1. Teenies, 2. Tallers, 3. Tensies, 4. Tweeners, 5. Teeners. Joan was a Teenie. Joan composes and sings her own song:

Here you see the laughing Gnomes,
Helping mothers in our homes. (60)

But, that’s also not true as she is not allowed to help her mother. As an adolescent spectator of the city, London, she reminds of the song, which she studied in Grade Nine.

She expects castles and princesses, the Lady of Shalott floating down a winding river in a boat, as in “Narrative Poems for Juniors”:

I am half-sick of shadows, said
The Lady of Small Onion.
The curse is come upon me, cried
The Lady of Shalott. (170)

Instead of the castles and ladies, there is only a lot of traffic and a large number of squat people with bad teeth. Leda Sprott, and Mr. Stewart, the spiritualists in the Jordan chapel teach Joan the optimistic note through songs. Mr. Stewart quotes a few lines from “Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth,” by Arthur Hugh Clough:

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars. (126)

He also tells the story of two caterpillars, walking side by side down a road. The pessimistic caterpillar stops moving and be silent, as the road seems to be a dark narrow place. But the optimistic caterpillar is filled with trust and hope, and looks forward to the higher life. It says:

That dark place is only a cocoon; we will rest there for a time, and after that we will emerge with beautiful wings; we will be butterflies, and fly up toward the sun. (126)
Joan progresses in her journey along with these maxims, songs, and stories.

    Joan worshipped the club, ‘Brownies’, more than she had worshipped Dance class. In the dance school, they were supposed to try to be better than everyone else, but at Brownies, they were supposed to try to be the same as others. Joan happily wears the baggy uniform with its odd military beret, and tie, learning the same ritual rhymes, handshakes and salutes, and chanting in unison with the others,

        A Brownie gives into the older folk;
        A Brownie does NOT give in to herself! (59)

The three girls, with whom she crossed the ravine each Brownie day, were: Elizabeth, Marlene and Lynne. Joan admired Elizabeth, a sixer, and feared of Marlene, a Pixie. She never remembered about Lynne. The most pleasant woman, besides Lou in Joan’s life is Brown Owl at the Brownies. She advised Joan to learn to control herself:

    Frowns and scowls make ugly things,
    Smiling gives them fairy wings. (64)

To join in the Brownie, there is a ritual, in which they led across cardboard stepping stones that read, “Cheerfulness, obedience, Good Turns and Smiles” (68). Then they had to close eyes and turned around three times, while the pack chanted,

        Twist me and turn me and show me the elf,
        I looked in the water and there saw… (68)

At this line, they open their eyes and look in the mirror and say ‘Myself’, a magic word.

    In school also, Joan is tortured of her fatness. She is called by many nicknames in her school, because of her fatness: “Our happy-go-lucky gal with the terrific personality!!!, or A great pal!!!!, or Joanie’s a laugh a minute!!, or A swell kid who never seems to get excited” (107). On hearing these epigrams, she weeps with Aunt Lou at
home, but is doggedly friendly at school. Other fat girls in her school are: Monica and Theresa. Monica was accepted by the boys, as another boy. But the boys would shout at Theresa from the other side of the street, “Hey Theresa, hey fatty! Wanta go out behind the field house with me?” (109).

Not only Joan, but also other characters have their own desire, which never happened in their life. Joan’s lover Paul wished to be like Leo Tolstoy, but he exiled from his own language. Joan’s husband wished to take trip to northern British Columbia to work in asbestos mine, whereas his parents compelled him to take University job at Toronto. When Joan was with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine seemed to be a daydream. When she was with the Royal Porcupine, he seemed plausible and solid. Everything he made had sense, and Arthur became unreal. He faded to be an insubstantial ghost, a washed-out photo on some mantelpiece, she’d long ago abandoned. Once when, Joan realized that she loved the feeling of love, but not Arthur or Paul or Porcupine, she remembers the maxim told by Brown Owl: “There’s magic in love and smiles. Use it every day in all you do, and see what wonderful things happen” (344). She believed in that slogan.

Joan comes into contact with Aunt Lou, the Chief Public Relations Officer in Toronto, whom she regards as her saviour and dreams as if she is her real mother. Aunt Lou, a fat woman understands the psychology of obesity and gives Joan all the warmth, affection and attention which she needs as a teenager. Aunt Lou is tall, heavy built like an Eaton’s Catalog Corset advertisement for the mature figure. She piles her graying yellowish hair onto the top of her head, and stacks extravagant hats with feathers and
bows onto the mound with pearl hatpins. She wears bulky fur coats and heavy tweeds. She doesn’t seem to mind her height and fat.

Though Joan’s mother is not a religious woman, she goes to Church with white gloves and round navy blue felt hats, only for social reasons. But Joan goes with Aunt Lou to Jordan chapel on Sunday nights, regularly. In the Church, Leda Sprott, a preacher could see the astral body of Joan’s mother wearing navy-blue suit with a white collar and a pair of white gloves, at Joan’s back. Leda informs Joan that her mother is very unhappy about something. Joan doubts whether her mother can come as an astral body before her death. Leda explains that everyone has an astral body as well as a material one, and that the astral body can float around by itself. She thinks that her mother is very much concerned about Joan, and so visits there. The mother through her astral body expresses her desire that Joan has great gifts and great powers of Automatic Writing on Wednesday. Until then nobody has told like that. Joan also thinks, “What if you turn into a butterfly?”, but next moment she thinks, “Butterflies die too” (135).

Joan feels better with Aunt than with her mother. Both go to Church, cinemas, circus, and exhibition by holding hands together. Lou advises Joan not to laugh at other’s misfortunes, when everybody at the exhibition has fun with a fat lady. She leaves Joan two thousand dollars after her death, with a condition to lose a hundred pounds. Aunt Lou’s will has its impact on Joan’s assessment of fatness and her thinking on social outlook.

Joan researches into the details of Aunt Lou’s unhappy marriage. At the age of 19, Aunt Lou was married to a “compulsive gambler” (96). She tried in vain to reform
her husband by resisting his gambling habits. Her gambler-husband was also a great liar.

Aunt Lou says:

Then he’d come back and if he’d lost he’d tell me how much he loved me, if he’d won he’d complain about being tied down. It was very sad, really. One day he just never came back. May be they shot him for not paying. I wonder if he’s still alive; if he is, I suppose I’m still married to him (96).

After her frustrations with her husband, Aunt Lou is settled as the Head of Department of Public Relations in Canada. The sad tale of victimization of Aunt Lou illuminates Joan’s thinking of man-woman relationships and she begins to assess social relations from a fresh perspective.

Joan used to have bad dreams and it reveals her insecure feelings. In a dream, she would be walking across the bridge and her mother would be standing in the sunlight on the other side of it, talking to someone else, a man, whose face she couldn’t see. When she was halfway across, the bridge would start to collapse. Though she would try to run, it would be too late. She would throw herself down and grab onto the far edge as it rose up, trying to slide her off. She called out her mother, who could have saved her. But her mother didn’t do this, and she went on with her conversation. She didn’t even hear her.

In another dream, she would be sitting in a corner of her mother’s bedroom, watching her mother’s makeup. In real life, Joan was refused by her mother to watch it. In one of her daydreams, she sees Aunt Lou as her real mother. Her mother’s hands are delicate and long-fingered, with red nails, her hair carefully arranged, and no nests for her among those stiff immaculate curls. But Aunt Lou is soft, billowy, woolly, furred, and her face is covered with tiny hairs, like a bee. She holds Joan by the arm or the back of the collar.
Joan regrets to be an opera singer, as they could wear extravagant costumes and nobody laughs at them. Unfortunately, she couldn’t sing. It always appeals to her to be able to stand up there in front of everyone and shriek as loud as she can. She imagines a Fat Lady sitting on a chair, knitting a scarf for one of her relatives, who had known her from a child and didn’t find her strange at all. She made her living from their curiosity, but one day she would rebel. She thought how much better for her if she’d been accepted for what she was and had learned to accept herself too. Her mother wished her to go to the prestigious Trinity College at the University of Toronto, and to study archaeology or history. But Joan couldn’t bear four years of acute concealed misery. So, she starts taking part-time jobs and opens a bank account. At that time itself, she has thorough knowledge of real life – those who got married too young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands.

Joan is enraged by the attitude of the society, when she is aware of the ideal femininity imposed by Patriarchal society on women. Once, Joan visits the Canadian National Exhibition along with Aunt Lou. It seems to be a melancholy pilgrimage for Joan. She is deeply moved by the sight of a freak show of a Fat lady on a tiny platform. After the death defying feat on the high wire, the Fat Lady has to return to the freak show to sit in her oversized chair with her knitting and gaped at by the ticket buyers. That is her real life. The sensitive Joan feels very much humiliated at the sight of the costumed Fat Lady in the exhibition. Joan analyses this fantasy in the light of her mothball dance at school. She is ashamed that the society is destructive by forcing her into a mold of femininity, to which she could never fit. From this pathetic experience she learns to be
very true, very right, and very pious in her intentions to write about the forced female roles in society.

All through her life Joan seems to have been more in love with the idea of love rather than the men she was involved with. Joan frequents movies with Aunt Lou, read *True Love* comics and sponges up the romance and melodrama in them. As a result of it, she grows up to be “a sentimentalist… of the sloppiest kind” and a “sucker for ads, especially those that promised happiness” (92). Like Moira Shearer in her favourite film, *The Red Shoes*, Joan says she too wanted to dance and marry a handsome orchestra conductor but did not want to commit suicide like Moira. The phallocentric message of the movie is – A married woman must choose between her career and the love of good man for she cannot enjoy both. Joan’s experiences with her friends, movies teach her that “Love was merely a tool, smiles were another tool, and they were both just tools for accomplishing certain ends. No magic, merely chemicals” (92). However, Joan cannot act upon this realization as her desire for true love is more deep-rooted than she thinks it to be.

Joan takes part-time jobs to stand on her feet. But she cannot stand permanent in one job as they are hard, disagreeable jobs like washing dishes. In job market employers don’t want to hire the fat ladies and so she can get only unpleasant and unskilled jobs. Her overweight doesn’t cause the disruption among male employers and customers. Exceeding her allocated female space, she exceeds the cultural definitions of her gender and is thus not viewed as a woman. Though her oversized body is desexualized, she also has the same desires, wishes, and expectations as other slim women have: “Though
immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true” (109).

Atwood challenges the customary positions of women as mother, wives and mistresses and tries to liberate them from their usual associations in a discourse inscribing hierarchy and possession. In the Romantic fiction, somebody falls in love, but Joan falls off a double Decker bus near Trafalgar Square. In such situations in Romantic fiction, the heroine falls beautifully on the steps of a beautiful mansion to be lifted by a young, energetic hero who looks into her eyes passionately. Atwood makes a parody of this romantic cliché by introducing an Old Polish Count to lift her when she falls off from the bus.

Adultery is a metaphor for feminist writing in which female protagonists find their salvation. The newly-discovered sexuality is seen as a source of an alternative discourse, which has subversive implications. Feminists like Luce Irigaray sees “woman’s experience of pleasure more specifically the physical pleasures of sexuality is repressed by phallocentric culture as revolutionary” and Cixous opines that “polymorphous female sexuality subverts hierarchies and challenges patriarchal structure” (Nageswara Rao 115). In Lady Oracle, Atwood portrays Joan’s adultery as a step towards her self identity. As a fat girl, Joan also has the same desires and feelings as the slim girls. Joan has the first sexual experience in her adolescent age with a unknown boy, the second sexual experience during her part-time job with an Italian cook in Bite-a-Bit restaurant, and the third sexual experience with her co-worker Rob during her part-time job at the Sportsmen’s show.
During her part-time jobs as a cashier working in Bite-a-Bit restaurant, the Italian cook proposes to marry her. He opens his bank account book to her instead of opening his heart which is so humiliating to her. He pushes a little blue bank book towards her and shows his bank balance. He says, “I will give you babies, lots of babies, I see you like the babies” (115). She rejects his commercial proposal. She feels sorry for the dehumanization of women in marriage, and shame and destructive attitudes of society. She can’t fit into a mould of femininity imposed by the society. Thus, she resolves to become independent through the meaningful work of writing pieces.

Joan wants to collect Aunt’s money and refuses to have anything more to do with her mother. She fasts and reduces 82 pounds. While fasting, she feels very lonely and longs to be fat again. When Joan grows thinner, Joan’s mother herself becomes distraught and uncertain, and considers Joan going extreme with everything. Despite the relapses, she is now a different person and feels like being born fully grown with right shape. She wants to get rid of the wrong past and to construct a more agreeable ‘self’. With all her triumphs she at last reduces a hundred pounds, collects aunt’s money, and flees to England. There she starts her adult life as a versatile writer. Her identity crisis starts with her name. She now chooses ‘Louise K.Delacourt’, her Aunt Lou’s as her pen name as well as official name. She affirms the change of name, “the formal beginning of her second self” (163).

The changing food habit of Joan reveals change in her attitude towards body control and common manners. In her childhood days, when a party was arranged at her home, her mother served a grand menu – chicken breasts in cream sauce, with wild rice and mushrooms, individual jellied salads with cranberries and celery, topped with
mayonnaise, Duchess potatoes, and a complex dessert with mandarin oranges, ginger sauce and some kind of sherbet. But Joan never joined the party as it would show off her desire to food. After reducing her weight and facing the outer world, she eats as she wishes. At London, the landlord never allows her to cook in her room, as if they conspire to set his house on fire. She can only boil a kettle. Aside the tea and biscuits, she eats in cheap restaurants. She avoids the things, which she ordinarily has eaten. Everything is different there. Hot Dog is simply a reddish, thin object fried in lamb fat, Hamburger is a square, saw dusty-beige thing between two halves of a hard bun, and Milk Shakes taste like chalk. She begins to eat fish and chips, or eggs, peas and chips, or sausages and mash. When she goes out with Royal Porcupine, they go to the Kentucky Fried Chicken corner and order a bucket and two cokes. Out of his love towards Joan, he wants to save the chicken bones, boil them, glue them, and wire them into a sculpture and call, ‘Joan Foster Kentucky Fried’. When she gets married to Arthur, she cooks his favourite foods – fried eggs, chips and peas, to win his heart. In their honeymoon, Joan offers Family Bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken to Arthur. Though he asks, “How can you eat that American Crop?”, he also tastes it (332). At last when Joan flees to Terremoto, her food is simply spinach and bottle of Cinzano.

Joan’s longing for meaningful life forces her to become a meaningful writer. She researches into facts before she begins to write anything. Joan’s encounter with costumed men continues even after becoming an adult versatile writer in England. Paul, the Polish Count, who poses to be ‘Mavis Quilp’, the writer of Nurse Novels, helps her when she falls off a Double Decker bus in London. He is a compulsive romantic liar. He offers her Nurse novels dealing with illicit relations between doctors and nurses. He uses
‘pancakes’ instead of ‘hotcakes’, and ‘trombled’ instead of ‘trembled’. After reading these books, Joan calls them “trashy books” (184). He tells Joan, “You have the body of a goddess” (169). Joan explores the personality of Paul as a manipulator. She reasons out that he charges women as an empty vessel, and categorizes women as wives and mistresses. He prescribes the roles of child-bearing and sewing to women, and “for him there was no such thing as a female lover” (179). He believes in cataclysmic relationship, and claims man as superior to woman in intellectual pursuits. He declares, “The mystery of man is of the mind, whereas that of the woman is of the body” (200). She realizes that he is a threat to her identity as a writer and leaves him. She composes Escape from Love by which she hopes to escape from Paul.

Joan also faces the difficulties in assuming an equal place with man in the realm of literary production. Her work is discriminated against on the basis of sex, which Atwood calls ‘sexual bias’:

A man’s work is reviewed for its style and ideas, but all too often a woman’s is reviewed for the supposed personality of the author as based on the jacket photograph. When a man is attacked in print, it’s usually for saying what he says; when a woman is attacked in print, its often for being who she is. (Atwood, Second Words 130)

The male editors – John Morton, Doug Sturgess and Colin Harper – dominate publishing and are interested in marketing but not in quality of writing. The publishers Morton and Sturgess choose the title, ‘Lady Oracle’, out of what Joan has written in section Five:

She sits on the iron throne  
She is one and three  
The dark lady the redgold lady  
the blank lady oracle  
of blood, she who must be  
Obeyed forever
Her glass wings are gone
She floats down the river
singing her last song. (LO 274)

They reduce Joan to a seductive object to decorate the book jacket of *Lady Oracle*. For a book reviewer, “hair in the female was regarded more important than either talent or the lack of it” (14). Lot of space is allotted in newspaper to describe the length and colour of Joan’s hair. The readers do not prefer their ‘fairy God mother’ to be overblown and slightly frowsy, with slip straps that showed and necklines that gaped. The women writers are not supposed to squint into the sun, displaying both rows of teeth and holding a cone of spun sugar. Joan thus begins to concentrate on her slim appearance, dress and hair style to fulfill the demands of readers and publishers whose focus is more on her photograph than on her work. Her hair is praised in *The Toronto Star* as “looking like a lush Rossetti Portrait”, and in *The Globe and Mail*, “Prose-poetess Joan Foster looked impressively Junoesque in her flowing red hair” (11).

After the sale of *Lady Oracle*, she becomes the popular figure and imagines a woman, who is more beautiful than her:

She’d be walking across her tightrope, in her pink tutu, and she’d fall, in slow motion, turning over and over on the way down.
She’d be dancing on a stage in her harem costume and her red slippers. But it wouldn’t be a dance at all, it would be a striptease, she’d start taking off her clothes. She’d wobble her hips, removing her veils, one after another, but no one would whistle, no one would yell “Take it off baby”. (304)

Though Joan tried to turn off the out-of-control fantasies, she had to watch them through to the end. She is powerless to stop her.

Very soon, her identity as a writer is distorted. The consequence of her popularity affects her both positively and negatively. Joan’s literary reputation snowballs and she
receives phone calls from all sorts of people. Some of them even want her to prophecy their future. Every week new articles on her book appears with titles as “The Selling of Lady Oracle” and “Lady Oracle; Hoax or Delusion?” (153). At the same time the newspapers publish things which she has never said and for which she has to face the consequences. She is terrified that some one else will kill her and take her place because she has become a public figure.

The concept of alienation accommodates the basic premises of radical, liberal, psychoanalytic feminism, and archetypal critical theory. In Atwood’s fiction, Unconsciousness-raising is as vital to the growth of an individual as is consciousness-raising. It helps the quester understand the transpersonal dimensions of the human psyche, overcome alienation from others, and arrive at the phenomenological realization that ‘self’ is indeed a ‘place’. Though successful or not, Atwood respects, and wants us to respect and regard her protagonists, “unique and irreplaceable” (Laurence 197). Joan’s alienation is caused by the clash between her multicoloured fantasies and dull gray reality. Her overwhelming desire to see herself as a heroine, perfect in every way and utterly desirable is thwarted again. At the rational level, Joan knows that popular art does not mirror real life at all. But at the emotional level, she is a victim of its trappings and as a result of which, she gazes almost mesmerized into the crafty mirror which distorts.

Human beings are a fascinating mixture of reality and fantasy. Popular art, radio, television, movies and advertising fill our minds with standardized images which force us to live narrow, limited lives. Popular art includes fairy tales, romances, gothic, westerns and science fiction. They repeat rigid patterns endlessly.
Joan, a writer of Costume Gothic is both a creator and a victim of popular art which may well be regarded as the opium of the masses as it reduces life and language to cliché. Joan and all the characters in the novel “dream and think in the language of symbols but speak in cliché and trivialize their inner lives in order to live a life of conventional fiction” (Davey 13). Atwood bemoans the popularity of popular art when she says, “The audience prefers art not to be a mirror helps up to life but a Disneyland of the soul containing Romanceland, spyland, pornoland and all other escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth” (Atwood Second Words 393).

The mother’s death makes Joan deserted and miserable. She misses her mother’s funeral though her father telegrams for her arrival. He informs her that her mother’s death is accidental as she fell down the stairs. She suspects him as if he killed her mother. Her father is both healer and killer. He heals patients as a doctor and slowly kills his wife as a suspicious husband. Being a doctor he knows how to break her neck and make it look like an accident. After her mother’s death, he marries a nice legal secretary and moves to another house.

After her mother’s death, she gets out the photograph album to refresh her memory. The expressions of the faces will give a clue about the person. In all the pictures of the white-flannelled man, the face has been cut out, neatly as with a razor blade. The faces of her father are missing. There is only her mother, young and pretty, laughing gaily at the camera, and clutching arms of her headless men. Unfortunately, fate strands her with Joan’s father, “the plastic-shrouded tomb from which there is no exit” (LO 216).
Joan feels guilty as if she’d killed her mother. For the first time in her life, she begins to feel that her mother has been too intense to be likable. Nobody appreciated her mother, even though she’d done the right thing. Both she and her father failed to justify her life. She realizes that she has been wrong to take her life in her own hands and walk out the door. Though there was conflict between Joan’s parents, her father treated her more like a colleague than a daughter, more like an accomplice. When Joan leaves her home and flees to London, he assumes that Joan is competent, solvent, and sensible girl, and that’s why he never sends her money thereafter. She wants to know about her mother’s life and also about her death. Her mother must have once treated her as a child. She tries to write a social realistic novel, *Storm over Castleford*. She can’t write and is not interested in anything or anyone.

The astral body of Joan’s mother uses code word, during the visit to Joan. After the departure of the astral body, Joan can view a word, ‘BOW’ in a scrawly handwriting, which is not her own. To get the meaning of the word, she refers Roget’s Thesaurus. There are many synonyms for ‘bow’ as noun and verb, all of which gives the meaning of submissiveness:

\[
\text{Bow – n. curtsey, obeisance, salaam, (respect, gesture), prow, stem nose (front), longbow, crossbow (arms), curve, bend, arch (curve, bend)} \\
\text{Bow – v. nod, salaam, curtsey (respect, gesture), arch, round, incline (curve, bend), cringe, stoop, kneel (slavery), submit, yield, defer (submission). (266)}
\]

She thinks about the word, whether it suits her, as she thinks herself, Penelope. But, she can’t get anything. After three months, once again her mother’s astral body visits and scribbles. Joan collects some words out of it: iron, throat, knife, heart. All these words
centered around figure, and in her consciousness, Joan can see such a figure. She was happy and inept on seeing such figure:

Lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. (269)

The woman puzzles Joan. She isn’t like anyone she’d ever imagined, and certainly she has nothing to do with her.

The astral body of Joan’s mother visits, cries like a child and wants them to be together. Joan realizes that her mother’s life is curse and she has been her reflection too long. She needs her real freedom but what would set her and her mother free? Her mother desires her to develop her great power on Automatic Writing. Joan decides to make her mother happy. Joan was strongly tempted to try Automatic Writing. She got candles, red ballpoint pen, and her mother’s Jot-a-Note from the telephone table. She lit the candle and sat in front of the vanity-table mirror. She then looked at the small flame in the glass and waiting for something to happen. Her hands moved consciously, but nothing happened except the candle flame got bigger. At last, there was a single long red line that twisted and turned back on itself, like a worm or a snarl of wool. As a result of her tentative experiments in automatic writing, she achieves celebrity as the author of Lady Oracle, a prose-poem. It deals with male- female roles in the society and seams to be a reminiscent of Kahlil Gibran and Rod Mckuen.

She keeps thinking she should learn some lesson from all of this, as her mother would have said. The future doesn’t appeal to her as much as the past, but she is sure it’s better for her. She conceptualizes fat as a form of sexual protection. It removes her from the category ‘sexual object’ and allows her to function as some ‘one’ rather than some
‘thing’. As a writer, she plans to try science fiction instead of Costume Gothic. As a lady, she wants to be calm, and be collected herself.

When her mother’s astral body visits her after her marriage, there is an illusion of candles and mirror. Joan stares at the candle in the mirror, there are three candles. There will be infinite number of candles, if she moves the two sides of the mirror. Then a figure appeared before her. She tried again and again by lighting the candles and staring at the mirror. She specially bought six pairs of dinner candles. When once she tried with candles and mirror, she found out that a man is following, and at last realized that it is none but Fraser. At this time also, she sees her mother through mirror.

Everyman with whom Joan has come across has had two costumes each. Joan’s father is both a healer and a killer. The daffodil man who rescued Joan is a pervert. Royal Porcupine, a writer of Nurse Novels has a double life as Chuck Brewer. Paul, a Polish Count has another sinister life. Joan’s husband Arthur is not an exception, who always changes his theories. Joan can’t penetrate these costumed men in the patriarchal society. She discovers that they all made her life, “all the more threatening” (357). At last, Joan becomes a threat to the costumed men by challenging their male egos.

While portraying Arthur, a religious and orthodox man, Atwood gives an account of Biblical reference. Joan and Arthur talk about books, articles and pamphlets. Arthur reads the religious pamphlet, and explains her that DOG spells backward is GOD, and apparently dog is the fourth member of the Holy Trinity and is going to be in on the last judgment. Joan loves Arthur, not only for his theories and grandeur, but for his pronunciation of certain words. Joan pronounces ‘aunt’ as /ant/, and ‘grass’ as /grass/, whereas Arthur pronounces /ahnt/, and /grahss/ respectively.
Joan and Arthur never invite anybody even for their marriage. So, they never get any wedding gifts. Joan herself buys some wedding gifts – a soup kettle, a pair of oven mitts, and a gadget for taking the stones out of cherries and the pits out of olives - , to make herself more like a bride. Leda Sprott is a qualified minister named Eunice P. Revele to perform weddings. She specializes in mixed marriages. She can do marriage between any combination of Jewish, Hindu, and Catholic, Five kinds of Protestant, Buddhist, Christian Scientist, agnostic, Supreme Being. She only performs the marriage between Arthur Edward Foster and Joan Elizabeth Delacourt. Her speech during the ceremony is appealing to Joan:

For true happiness, you must approach life with a feeling of reverence. Reverence must be for life, for those loved ones who are still with us, and also for those who have gone before. All we do and all that is in our hearts is watched and recorded, and will someday be brought to light. Avoid deception and false-hood; treat your lives as a diary you are writing and that you know your loved one will someday read. Above all, you should love each other for what you are and forgive each other for what you are not. (245).

Even then, Joan is very particular in hiding her past from Arthur. Joan is caught in a maze of incomprehensive, unresponsive and apathetic marriage with Arthur. Arthur suppresses her ‘self’ both as a wife and as a writer. She meets Arthur, a multilayered personality with various colourful revolutionary costumes, by chance, when she walks through Hyde Park. She is involved in romance with Arthur, who is first associated with Ban-the-Bomb movement as a leaflet man and later with Civil Rights movement. He poses as a revolutionary and changes his theories constantly.
He transforms himself from Lord Russell to Mao. He proposes to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her.

Joan is dismayed when she discovers Arthur, the so-called ‘leftist’ husband, has expected her to be a cook. Arthur wants her to be a domestic servant and not to wear fashionable dress as it may attract the exploiters. It is for the love of Arthur she obeys him. She tries her hand at cooking. Her each meal is a crisis and failure for her. She realizes the sadism of Arthur when he enjoys her failures as a cook. He loves hearing the crash of utensils and smearing of Joan in the kitchen. Though he criticizes her cooking, he eats it and resents its absence. Joan is frustrated and angry by the behaviour of Arthur and says, “My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience” (253). She wants to prove that she doesn’t really care about it. He is too sadistic to look at her reproachfully in the bedroom. In spite of the oddities, she plays her role as a dutiful wife. She hopes to win his love some day as she is “an optimist with a lust for happy endings” (259). She proposes him to settle down somewhere permanently, and have children. But Arthur deplores her suggestion. He festoons their bedroom with every known form of birth-control device and urges her to take the pill.

Whenever Joan commits a small mistake, his exasperation is “like that of a father with smart kids who got bad report cards” (36). So she secretly guards from him, her former obesity, her identity as a writer, an earlier liaison with Polish Count in exile, and an affair with Royal Porcupine, a self-described “con-create” poet. The secrecy is the result of her Miss Flegg syndrome: “If you find yourself trapped in a situation you can’t get out of gracefully, you might as well pretend you chose it, otherwise you will look ridiculous” (178). Through Aunt Lou, Atwood gives many maxims, some traditional,
some invented by her. The maxims influence Joan all through her life. The reason for
Joan’s habit of hiding truth from Arthur is the influence of following maxims:

If you let one worm out of a can of worms, all the other worms well
follow;
The tongue is the enemy of the neck. (43)

The dual personality of Joan has route cause from the following maxims:

There’s more than one cat in any bag;
Don’t count on your rabbits before they’re out of the hat. (43)

Arthur does not understand her ideals and aspirations. She gets bored and frustrated in
her marital life, by her continuous cooking and serving to her husband.

Writing serves a therapeutic purpose for Joan as it soothes and consoles her mind.
She writes Love Defied at the beginning of their marriage. Then she wants to get the
identity as a Costume Gothic writer and starts writing Love, My Ransom. Life is difficult
for Joan. Tears trickle down her cheeks. She shoves her head under the pillow and cries,
when Arthur is controlling her life. She sells her book, Love, My Ransom, and out of that
money, she takes Arthur to a honey-moon. Though she hopes to have reconciliation with
Arthur, there is no change in his attitude towards his wife. His damned theories and
ideologies make her puke. She doesn’t feel safe and secure in the presence of her husband.
She begins to think that her life with Arthur is like living in a “train station” (24).

Arthur’s male chauvinistic mind neither approves nor appreciates the publication.
He is appalled by the news of the publication of Lady Oracle, bewildered by the sudden
emergence of Joan as a writer, and feels embarrassed by the theme of her book. Her
interview on T.V. is a terrible humiliation to him. He behaves as if she has committed
“some unpardonable but unmentionable sin” (280). He is hurt by the theme of the book as it strikes his misogynist mentality. He begins to look at her as a betrayer, and never comes home. He is completely absorbed in the activities of ‘Resurgence’, a left-oriented magazine.

The indifference of Arthur drives the naïve and gullible Joan to get involved with the Royal Porcupine, a homicidal maniac with costumes. He meets Joan after her T.V. interview, and wants to be her husband. He poses to be a con-create poet and invites her to the show called SQUAWSHT at an art gallery. There, with his elegant way of dressing and appearance, he drags her into sexual immorality. Later on, he behaves more and more like Chuck Brewer and less and less like the Royal Porcupine and blasts dynamite for sensational news. All of a sudden, he changes his costume into grotesque style to behave more like Arthur. He frightens her to make seismographic love and wants her to leave Arthur. Soon, he is no longer the Royal Porcupine, but only Chuck Brewer. He rips down his dynamite poster and throws it on to the pile of his costumes. Joan is trembled by his unexpected behaviour. When Chuck has planned to manipulate her by transforming himself into something more like Arthur, he has murdered the part of him that she loved.

When Arthur is watching Olympic doubles figure-skating championship in T.V., the people on the talk show in the lower third fold have four hands. For Joan, it seems to be the Indian gods and goddesses. Paul, as an importer also imports garments from India. One of Arthur’s room mates is an Indian. He cooks brown rice and curries for himself and also leaves the plates around. Joan was supposed to clean the plates. He loses the initial respect he’d had for Joan as a politico of sorts and begins to make cow-
eyes and flare his nostrils. At last Joan realizes that one cannot apparently be both a respected female servant and a scullery maid. When Joan arrives at Arthur’s flat to inform him about her mother’s death, Arthur and Indian radical are conversing. Indian radical exemplifies Gandhi, and advises Arthur to draw the seminal fluid up the spinal column into the pituitary gland. If he has too much sexual experience, he will weaken spirit and thereby his mind will become politically useless. Joan overhears, but is not curious to hear and ask Arthur.

As Arthur changes his theories form Marx to Mao, Joan gets interested in dramatization of many popular men at their homes. According to her, Bertrand Russell has appealing face, Mao likes to eat and is fat but doesn’t take any shit about it. Castro is a tiger in bed, whereas Stalin is a Puritan and his home life is boring. Marx is talented and smart, and Mrs. Marx excuses him from sex and tells him to get out of the room to do smart things outside. When Arthur came to Terremoto, he didn’t participate and allowed Joan to do things for him, thinking that, “Heroes were supposed to be aloof” (236). He might confess and in turn Joan also might confess. But Joan decided, “Passionate revelation scenes were better avoided and that hidden depths should remain hidden; facades were at least as truthful” (236).

Arthur and Joan went for outing, after the successful sales of Lady Oracle. At that time, they watch the statue of Diana of Ephesus, rising from a pool of water:

She had a serene face, perched on top of a body shaped like a mound of grapes. She draped in breasts from neck to ankle, little breasts at the top and bottom, big ones around the middle. The nipples were equipped with spouts, but several of the breasts were out of order. (308)
As a Goddess of fertility and childbirth, the statue symbolizes the essence of femininity. It is a paradigm of the patriarchal controlled female body. Joan is not serene, as she wanted things, for herself. This analogy firmly ground the Goddess in reality. Her description completely undermines the familial virtues for which the Goddess is traditionally worshipped. The body of the statue emphasizes that “the body is the female’s primary site” (Singh 159). Thus, Joan detaches herself from the figure, acknowledging her own limits and desires. Her act is “the protest against the society that situates her as a reproductive machine” (159).

Atwood offers her protagonist, the power of pen, as the means to reconstitute traditions. Authorship or the power of the pen is customarily male and so for a woman, ‘to write’ represents a challenge to patriarchal culture. Joan becomes a successful writer of Costume Gothic, in which Atwood rejects the ordinary Gothic formula. In the formulaic plot of Gothic fantasy, the victimization of young, chaste heroine serves as a necessary function. She is allowed to do very little for herself, even though she is given independence. Her need for solution, her vulnerability, evokes heroic qualities in the man who rushes to her rescue and thus becomes the hero. But Joan provides her heroine with opportunities for maturation and insight. In *Stalked by Love*, the Gothic romance written by Joan, Redmond, the hero approaches Charlotte, his mistress passionately. But unlike ordinary romantic heroines, Charlotte pulls him away, seeking wildly for some object to defend her. At last, “she seizes a weighty copy of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*” (153). In her real life also Joan chooses the intellect writing profession instead of the domestic submissive life with Arthur. Thus Atwood manipulates Gothic conventions in her fiction with the subtle use of parody.
Popular gothic romance affects Joan’s mind more deeply than any other form of romance literature. Gothics produce masses, and it is an example of closed texts, formula fiction or category literature in its genre. They are essentially mysterious novels written largely by women for women. The art on their covers usually depicts a beautiful young woman, usually dressed in a flimsy gown, running away from a gloomy mansion in which a single light shines in an upper window.

Gothics differ from the romance form in the greater forcefulness of their heroines who, though totally other-directed are always, outspoken, spunky, spirited, independent and proud. They fall in love with men who are initially portrayed as muscular, strong, arrogant, vital, careless, mocking and cruel, but, who soon become magnetic, exciting, and fascinating. The language of Gothic is referential. Its vocabulary and syntax are simple, repetitive and familiar despite their excessive literary quality. On the whole, Gothic is the “conservative genre which mixes wish with the fear of nothingness or non separation” (Holland 283). It validates social mythology which defines woman primarily as wife, as mother and as homemaker.

In gothic romance, the danger is located in a specifically domestic context, and the heroine’s motivation is the preservation of the family unit. Her actions serve to protect the innocent victims of the villain and the integrity of the family rather than to reinforce a concept of justice or retribution. Her meaningful life is – cooking, serving, furnishing, counseling, supporting, decorating, beautifying, soothing and caring. Women seek out gothic romances “to receive confirmation, and affirmation that love really is what motivates and justifies a woman’s life” (Fleenor 4). Gothic romances provide dual fantasy by combining both world of excitement and domestic social roles. There is no
conflict between these two worlds. In fact they enhance each other. They make readers believe that that is real, through elaborate descriptions of clothes, appearance and furnishings.

Joan, as a writer of Costume Gothics, devotes a lot of attention to the clothes of her heroines, heroes, villains and rival females for she thinks that if only she can get the clothes right, everything else will fall into line. For this purpose, she researches at libraries, visits museums and frequents shops which deal in age-old articles. In her Gothic, *Stalked by Love*, the heroine Charlotte finds her clothes slashed to ribbons. In her previous Gothics, bad things always happened to the clothes of her heroines. But Joan can not attribute the bad things done to the clothes of her heroines. Thus, Joan uses clothes and setting merely to heighten the element of sensationalism in her novels.

The obsession with costumes in her novels spills over into her private life. Each time Joan sheds an identity. She discards the clothes associated with it and tries to transform herself into a different person. For instance, after her fake suicide she thinks that it is necessary not only to bury her funerary costume belonging to her former ‘self’ but also to cut and dye her hair and innocuous brown and dress like a tourist. Though Joan struggles to forget her former ‘self’, her clothes insist on reminding her of them. For example, though she takes pain to bury her funerary costume in the foundation of the house in Terremoto, her jeans and T-shirt refused to stay buried for, a few days later, Mr. Vitroni brings them back to her neatly washed and pressed. Joan fails disastrously in her numerous efforts to live out plots of art.

As a Kuntlseroman novel, *Lady Oracle* explores the matured development in Joan’s writing, coincided with her inner development. The novel subscribes to the
traditional Bildungsroman. But it takes on different forms as its subject is female.

Throughout Joan’s journey towards the development of her ‘self’, there is a “disjunction between a surface plot, which affirms social conventions, and a submerged plot which encodes rebellion and subversion” (Nageswara Rao 114).

Joan’s romance-bred yearning for magic transformations manifests itself in her obsessive desire for wings. Like the optimistic caterpillar, Joan too has a lust for happy endings, and hopes to be a full-fledged butterfly with beautiful wings. Imagining herself to be one such butterfly, the adult Joan dances right through broken glass on Mr. Vitroni’s unromantic, poured concrete balcony in Terremoto. Her bleeding feet force her to realize that she is not likely to ever be a romance heroine. Her present condition is because of her unerring faith in metamorphosis. So, the fictions perpetuated by society force women to live inauthentic lives.

Joan’s mother tells Joan that movies are vulgar but her own lifestyle seems to be created out of the destructive myths in fairy tales and in Holywood movies. She also ardently believes in magic transformations. Instead of accepting her appearance as it is, she tries to transform her face by putting on layers of make-up. Joan remarks that the make-up sessions in front of a triple mirror, only made her mother sadder "as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate" (LO 75). She is a perfect homemaker who keeps her home, “static, dustless and final” (75) but fails to see that instead of living in accordance with her own inner self, she has let her society tell her how to live her life.

Not only weak-willed woman like Joan’s mother but also pragmatic-minded and strong Aunt Lou is also victimized by romance stereotypes. Her amorous desires and the
mushy side of her nature become apparent from her lust for melodramatic romantic films. She attempts to live by the romantic scripts created by her society, but fails.

The suppression in the patriarchal society is experienced by Joan, when she has contact with men outside her home. Paul, her Polish Count lover, who writes nurse romances, believes in cataclysmic relationship. Paul has written the novel, *Nurse of the High Arctic*, in which Sharon, the Nurse and Hunter, the Doctor had illicit relation. Joan comments that seductive ringlets, tendrils and strands featured in Paul’s books, as in Milton’s. In a conversation with him, Joan questions the binary constraints. Paul remarks, “Mystery of man is of the mind… whereas that of the woman is of the body” (200). According to him, ‘the mind’ is thoroughly incompatible with femininity. He categorizes women as “mistress” (179). Joan soon realizes that he is a threat to her identity of a writer and leaves him.

Paul’s attitude towards Joan clearly indicates that he has got his ideas of womanhood directly from fairy tales and romances. As a male chauvinist, he regards women as dependent and naïve. He feels that their mystery lies in their bodies and not in their minds, as in the case with men. While Joan is with him, he makes all the decisions, gives her performance points after sex and minus points for not feeling upset at being deflowered by him. He complains about her disorderly ways and expects her to learn to do a few things well. She feels that he intends training her like a pet dog. Paul does not alter his views and his overbearing attitude.

On the other side, Paul reappears with a new layer of a successful businessman and wants to kidnap her from Arthur. He brainwashes her: “Now you are a woman. You will leave this man, you will divorce, we will be happy…If you tell him it is I you love,
he will…” (342). Joan doesn’t want to be rescued by him, and realizes that Paul does not love her but he wants the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be “a den of fanged and dangerous communists…” (345). Paul tries to rescue Joan after her marriage, refusing to listen to Joan’s version of her life with Arthur. Both Joan and Paul are both the consumers and creators of pulp fictions, do not permit their readers to soar above “the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (Chopin 110). The view is enhanced by the view of the spiritualist Leda Sprott, while she warns Joan: “People have faith in you…They trust you. That can be dangerous, especially if you take advantage of it” (245).

Fraser Buchanan, a secret agent knows about the private lives and the secret past identities of Joan. In the name of literary critic, he blackmails Joan in terms of money and sex. He poses to be the Montreal Poet and so he has also got two sets of costumes – as a lover of arts and as a fake-researcher. He lets Joan know the existence of his ‘black note book’, which is a collection of the data of the lives of women, his clients. The notebook is organized like a diary and it documents the personal and public lives of women writers, including Joan, from head to toe. It is known from the book that blackmail is the very breath of Fraser’s life. Money, sex, power are tools of his business of literary criticism.

There are many blackmail phone calls for Joan from anonymous voices. She takes it as a chance to change the place to another city. After six days, she gets the letter with the message OPEN THE DOOR. On the doorstep, there is a dead porcupine with an arrow stuck into it. A label attached to the arrow read JOAN. She suspects Royal Porcupine, and Arthur, but they are not the persons, who blackmail her. Malevolence is
flowing towards her, around her, someone is sending her absurd but threatening notes, phoning her up and breathing. Fraser Buchanan visits her home and accepts that he only has been blackmailing her. He deals with twenty percent of her income to him. Joan pretends to accept his deal, makes him drunk and gets his diary. In the diary, he records Joan’s fat identity, her marriage with Arthur, her bank account in the name of Louisa K. Delacourt.

In spite of her realizations about such men, Joan redoubles her efforts to establish a healthy and balanced relationship with them but her trials are in vain. Ultimately Joan concludes that every man with whom she has come across has had two costumes each. Arthur, a hero, wears the mask of a villain whereas the other men, who are villains, wear the mask of heroes. So she decides to become a hero herself, a ‘Lady Oracle’, and a threat to them.

The frustrating Joan longs for the simplicity of the world in Paul’s Nurse of the High Arctic, where happiness is possible and wounds are only ritual. She starts challenging the male egos, by leaving Paul, and Royal Porcupine. To free herself from Fraser, she seizes his black notebook and runs away as he is fully drunk. She tears out a choice page from the notebook, seals it into an envelope and sends it to Fraser. Thus, she lets him know that she has owned his notebook. She also encloses a note: “If anything happens to me, the book is in good hands... and it goes to the police” (354).

To escape from the false life in the midst of ‘costumed men’, Joan stages her fake suicide in Canada. She pretends to die so she can live. Sam and Merlene are the co-workers of Arthur in Resurgence. With their guidance only, Joan planned and executed her fake death and ran to Italy. She escapes to Rome and celebrates the birth of her new
personality - “a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest and confident, with soft green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair” (221). Her escape to Italy implies that Arthur is moving away from her at an ever-increasing speed into “the land of the dead, the irretrievable dead past” (159). There she narrates the truth about her identities to Mr. Vitroni, a harmless reporter. By narrating her tale of *Lady Oracle*, she is released from the cocoon of privacy, freed from the canons dictated by patriarchal culture and “metamorphosed into a creative writer” (Prabhakar *Feminism/Postmodernism* 35).

Vitroni advises her to live in the present and to take life as it comes. He also warns her that it is not good for a woman to be alone, because the world can’t understand her feelings and will make a sign on her. As per his advice, she informs her presence to Arthur by sending card to him.

Women feel the need for escape to a greater extent than men. This is so because the patriarchal tradition educates women into nothingness, and denies them transcendence of being. Conscious of their powerless positions and a lack of identity, women desire to escape from the meaningless of their lives. Joan defends her reader’s pure quintessential need for escape, “Escape wasn’t a luxury for them, it was a necessity … mine are available for them” (170). Joan knows all about escape, as she was brought upon it. She further says: “The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were puzzle which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty” (171). She provides succour to the thousands of depressed, overworked Cinderella and she believes she has the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold. Joan’s self-defusion prevents her from realizing that pumpkins
remain pumpkins, and that, by giving false hopes, she is encouraging them to accept their victim positions in a passive manner rather than actively striving to change them.

More than that, she wants to establish her identity as a serious writer without deducing her fat. Being fat, she has no female fears – fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything following her. When she shrinks her size, she has to develop those fears artificially. Men don’t make passes at fat girls so fat would be an “insulation, a cocoon…, an essential covering” (167). Joan also reviews the circus fat lady, adorned in a pink fluffy skirt and glittering tiara, and the fat lady floating into the arena during the game of ice-hockey, whom she has seen with Aunt Lou. They are examples of the female bodies forgetting their places. They become the symbol of the female body against its confinement. Slowly Joan’s tortuous fat lady fantasies disappeared. She realizes her inner self as a writer and never bothers about the external fatness: “I turned professional and now it’s the only way I know of earning a living” (38). She decides to write a novel with happy endings and starts writing the end of Stalked by Love.

Joan’s quest for identity ends with the realization of her original name. She concludes that her mother might not name her after Joan Crawford, but after Joan of Arc, who went up like a volcano, a rocket, a plum pudding, and remained in everybody’s heart. With that realization, she decides to become a committed writer to serve community. She contends with the literary woes of women, overcomes a variety of patriarchal obstacles to establish her literary vocation and transcends an inferiority complex induced by the dismissive attitudes. Her writing is a springboard for subversive thought, and it deconstructs the roles assigned to women and represents a challenge to
patriarchal culture. For her, writing is a visionary experience and she plays the role of “an oracle, the voice which comes out of a woman’s body, the voice of the God Apollo, the voice of the Earth Goddess” (Howells 67). As a fat lady, who couldn’t wear butterfly dress in her school days leaves an optimistic note to the female writers whose voices are marginalized: “…dark place is only a cocoon...we will be butterflies and fly up toward the sun”(LO 117).

The mirror image is often used in the novel to emphasize the multiple personality of Joan. When Joan was prepared to have a butterfly frolic dance, she looked at the three-sided mirror over her vanity table. Though she was not looking like a butterfly, she hopes for magic transformations. After deciding to have the mothball dance, she looks into the bathroom mirror. There were, “black streaks down her cheeks like sooty tears, and her purple mouth was smudged and swollen” (19). Her mother’s dressing table had triple mirror and grandiose. In her dream, she realized the three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her towed shoulders on three separate necks. There is a man outside the door, but Joan wishes him to enter, to find out her mother’s secret: “My mother was a monster” (75). Aunt Lou’s favourite place is midway place, ‘Laugh in the Dark’. It had phosphorescent skeletons, and distorting mirrors. Joan found those mirrors disturbing, and used to imagine a Fat Lady.

Atwood questions the nature of self-identity and selfhood, defined by the phallocentric culture as coherent, unified and rational. The protagonist Joan has a multiple duplicitous selves and dual names. Authentically she was Joan Foster, but she was also Louisa K. Delacourt. With two sets of identification papers, and two bank accounts, two different groups of people believed she existed. As Fraser discovered both
the identities, he blackmailed her to reveal it to media. The Spiritualist Leda Sprott used
that name only in Jordan Chapel, but changed her name into Eunice P. Revele at home.
On seeing this at the time of her marriage, Joan thought, “Men who changed their names
were likely to be con-men, criminals, undercover agents or magicians, whereas women
who changed their names were probably just married” (244). However men who don’t
change their names also have multiple personalities. Arthur, who seems to be single-
minded, single hearted, single-bodied, is not moderate and honest. He has many paths,
sometimes way up and sometimes way down. What he thought and what he said are the
same, but what he felt is different. Sometimes Atwood avoids the name of the important
characters. For instance, Joan’s parents have no names in the novel. They are known
only ‘Joan’s father’, and ‘Joan’s mother’. Atwood abandons names “to have meaning for
words, and to look for a certainty of the substantial stories against the abstract order
inherent in mere words and misnomers” (Rajat Mahapatra 160). Thus Atwood reifies her
voice by abandoning the signifiers, names and figures of the fictitious characters, and
reaches her readers with immediacy.

Atwood destabilizes the notion of female subjectivity. For women, selfhood has
often been defined primarily through relationships – daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother,
co-worker, etc. of somebody else. Joan is not shown somebody’s daughter, but they are
shown Joan’s parents. Atwood renders ‘being in love’, the most problematic state, and
marriage, a consuming entrapment. Both the states will result in the owning and
possession of women as an object. Joan is shown to will and create her own trap, her
own illusions in love and life. Finally she herself finds a way to get rid of that trap.
On the whole, Atwood envisages in *Lady Oracle* that women should no longer barter reality for a pseudo security as promised by male. Joan conceptualizes fat as a form of sexual protection and re-embodies her self. It removes her from the category ‘sexual object’ and allows her to function as some ‘one’ rather than some ‘thing’. Thereby, Atwood reveals that women no longer wish to be scapegoats in the mazes, thickets, and rambles of life. She also encourages women to be bold enough to face life head-on. As a writer, Joan plans to try science fiction instead of Costume Gothic, and as a lady, she wants to be calm, and be collected herself. So Atwood makes clear that women must no longer hold to the wife-mother role as it has been interpreted in the past. Atwood thus exhorts women to exercise their autonomy and be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

The mind/body dichotomy has pervaded for centuries. Descartes’ ‘Cogito ergo sum’ partitions human experience into two: spiritual and bodily experience. Spiritual experience, which is ‘not-body’ is considered the highest, the best, and the noblest, the closest to God. Body is merely an external vessel for the rational objective mind. It is considered something apart from the true ‘self’ and a heavy drag on self realization. This self/other dualism is reflected in the constructed oppositions of culture and nature, and of reason and emotion. Mind is allied with culture and reason. Body is associated with nature and emotion. Atwood re-embodies the constructed tradition that not only men, but women are also allied with reason, and through Joan she affirms that women writers are not inferior to men. In brief, it is a feminist writer’s frontal attack on “the dominant pattern of gender relations in contemporary society” (Thieme 78). Atwood guides the suppressed women to be creative in order to enjoy the autonomy across time and place.
If the autonomy of woman is oppressed in the marital or any other relational bondage,
Atwood advises to negate such power politics in the novel, *Cat’s Eye*. 