

Body as a Symbol of Oppression in Margaret Atwood's 'Lady Oracle'

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood (1939-) is that gem of Canadian Literature who began writing at the early age of six. She is the author of over forty books and is a social activist and a keen environmentalist. The novel 'Lady Oracle' is in the form of an autobiography of the protagonist, Joan Foster, her journey from a young girl to an established writer. Her early childhood is filled with various incidents of body shaming mainly by her mother. The whole society looks upon slenderness as a virtue. The plump Joan is looked upon as an undisciplined creature. Leading a life of multiple identities, whether it is the colour of her hair or country of residence, or her choice of partners. She is forced to take up residence in an Italian hill town in order to analyse the pitfalls of her life. Her husband Arthur is a radical and she fears to reveal her writing to him mainly because she had been introduced to the concept of automatic writing through a lady called the Reverend Leda Sprott who had first informed Joan that she had huge powers and should try using them. Heavily influenced by her aunt whom she lovingly referred to as Aunt Lou, Joan spent some of her happiest times with her, where she was never made fun of, or reminded of her excess weight. Unfortunately, her aunt died and left Joan a sum of two thousand dollars, which she could get only if she lost a hundred pounds of her weight. Whether it was the money or her aunt's wish, Joan embarked on a journey of losing weight, even to the extent, that she assumed a new lifestyle as a writer and to escape from the past assumed the identity of her dead aunt. She was so upset with her past that she decided to stage her own death and escaped with her new identity to another place. However in an attempt to redeem her friends, Sam and Marlene who had helped her escape, but had been arrested on charges of murdering Joan, she is forced to return as her true self and confront the demons of her past.

Keywords: Alienation, Fat lady, Automatic Writing, Body Shaming, Depression

"I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempt to control it" (Atwood, 3). So arresting is the opening line of the novel that the reader is forced to contemplate on the reason that has driven the protagonist Joan Foster to plan her own death. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that she stages her death in order to escape from her past.

A childhood that is fraught with insults by her mother and bullying by her friends Elizabeth, Marlene and Lynne, she confides in her husband Arthur that her mother named her after Joan Crawford. She cannot understand why her mother named her after her whether it was because she wanted her to be successful or destructive to men? When she was eight or nine years old, her mother reproached her, regretting the fact that she had named her after Joan Crawford. As Joan reflects, "my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome

with shame; I knew I was being reproached, but I'm still not sure, what for" (40).

Even the sentimental act of going through the childhood albums, is marred by the realisation that her pictures stopped being taken when she was six years old and she feels, it was then that her mother gave up on her, she thought it was because it brought unpleasant memories for her mother to be reminded of, as she realised that Joan would not do. The next incident which rankles in the readers mind is an easily identifiable one. Joan used to attend a dancing school where a woman by the name of Miss Flegg, used to teach tap dancing and ballet. Her mother enrolled her in the hope that she would lose some of her puppy fat and because it was fashionable for seven-year-olds to attend such schools. For the Annual Spring Recital there were groups called Teenies, Tallers, Tensies, and Teeners (43). Joan was in the Teenies but as she writes herself, "I was a Teenie, which in

itself a contradiction in terms, for as well as being heavier than everyone else in the class I had begun to be taller" (43).

Joan put her heart and soul into the recital, as she was part of "The Butterfly Frolic" (44), a number that required Joan to wear the outfit of a butterfly. Though her mother tried her best to stitch up a suitable costume, the short pink skirt, with her hands, arms, and legs exposed made the plump Joan look obscene. Joan admits that she did not look like a butterfly but she was hoping that wearing wings would magically transform her. On the day of the recital as she was wearing her butterfly costume, she saw her mother talking with Miss Flegg, who then reassessed Joan's outfit and offered her a special role instead, that of a mothball in a teddy bear costume. She even threatened to remove Joan from the dance if she refused to play the new role. Joan performed as a mothball, but she felt naked and exposed. She went home with the feeling that her mother had betrayed her. At the age of ten Joan reflects, "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 overweight" (51).

Another aspect of Joan Foster's life discussed in the novel is her admission in a new school called the Brownies at the age of eight, as they had shifted to a new neighbourhood. The Brownies demanded all to be the same and Joan enjoyed the experience too. She was unable to repair her relationship with her mother because whenever she wanted to help her she ended up doing more harm than service. For instance on a Sunday, she brought breakfast for her mother in bed on a tray, but she tipped and covered her mother with cornflakes. Similar efforts were in vain when she ended up polishing her mother's navy-blue suede shoes black; she tipped the heavy and full garbage can down her back steps and earned the adjective of 'clumsy' by her mother.

Joan was also not spared by the senior girls Elizabeth, Marlene and Lynne who walked with her to school through a deserted ravine and slanting bridge. After two months of normal behaviour, they three would plan and suddenly run ahead, leaving the fat Joan behind, who would gasp and fall short of breath, often ending up in tears and they would giggle and call her a "Cry baby" (58).

Once Joan and the girls were confronted by a man in the ravine, he smiled at Joan who was walking ahead of the others. She smiled back and he lifted the daffodils he was carrying to show his open fly. For the first time she saw the strange ordinary piece of flesh that was nudging flaccidly out of it. (60) She asked the other girls to look, who promptly screamed and ran away. The man handed over the daffodils to Joan and walked away. On another occasion, the girls left her blindfolded in the ravine and the man came to her rescue. When her mother saw her with the man who was leading her home, she was annoyed and slapped Joan. Joan's mother had a triple mirror and Joan dreamt that her mother was a triple headed monster. As she grew older, she further dreamt that a mysterious man would enter and find out the secret that her mother was a monster. The hatred that seemed to have developed between mother and daughter was mutual.

At the age of thirteen, she was relentlessly eating, obstinately, anything that she could lay her hands on. The result as Joan states:

"The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body.... I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes. I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. I was five feet four and still growing, and I weighed a hundred and eighty-two pounds." (71)

Joan continued her clumsy movements and the more through rooms where her mother sat to irk her and show how least affected Joan was by her pleas and nagging.

At the age of fifteen Joan seemed to have reached the pinnacle of her growth. She was five feet height and weighed two hundred and forty five pounds. (76) Joan writes as follows, "I no longer attended my mother's dinner parties; she was tired of having a teenage daughter who looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something into it"(76).

Eavesdropping during one of these parties Joan learns that her father used to kill people who they thought they were fake. He would shoot them in cold blood. Joan is shattered when she further hears her mother asking her father why he did not do something when she was pregnant with Joan and he replies it was sacred, implying that they had discussed aborting Joan. Joan

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started eating more, mostly to defy her mother, but also from panic. She dreams of becoming an opera singer so that though she was fat she could wear extravagant costumes, nobody would laugh at her and she would be loved and praised. She could also scream about hatred and love and rage and despair and still refer to it as music.

The lonely Joan often asked her mother for a pet only to be turned down at her various suggestions, which included a dog, kitten and even a turtle. Finally, her mother relented and she got herself a goldfish, though her mother had forewarned her that all cheap goldfish are diseased. Joan even named it Susan Hayward, as all odds were stacked against it. However, it died and Joan's mother said it was because Joan overfed it and she heartlessly flushed it down the toilet before Joan could give it a proper burial.

The failing relation between mother and daughter was compensated by her blooming and affectionate equation with her aunt Louisa Delacourt whom she fondly called Aunt Lou. Her apartment had a lot of stocked food and was always cluttered which seemed to Joan was the freedom to do what one wanted. Joan's mother however did not relent and continued to provide Joan pills or diets to make her lose weight. When Joan refused, she was sent to a psychiatrist. As she confides in tears to the psychiatrist, "I like being fat" (85). The psychiatrist gave up on her after three sessions of tears and silence. That seemed to be a breaking point. Joan's mother who took to laxatives as a refuge. She became frantic, was somewhat obsessed with Joan's bulk, and even started adding laxatives to Joan's food secretly.

Next her mother tried giving Joan a clothing allowance, as a kind of incentive to reduce. She thought that Joan would buy clothes that would help her look leaner, but Joan wore outfits that are more outrageous. Once her mother started sobbing seeing Joan sporting a new lime-green car coat. She sobbed, "Where do you find them? You're doing it on purpose. If I looked like you I'd hide in the cellar!" (91). Another haunting image that influenced Joan was the one she saw during an outing with Aunt Lou. To the Canadian National Exhibition. Aunt Lou didn't allow Joan to visit the tent which housed the fattest woman in the world. Her whole life Joan imagined the fat woman in various stances but never saw her in reality, except in the publicity billboards, wearing a pink short frilly outfit.

How embarrassing was her body for herself is later revealed when her husband enquires on seeing an old snap of hers with Aunt Lou. Arthur enquired if the lady other than Aunt Lou was her mother and Joan passes off her own image as that of a dreadful Aunt Deirdre. She cooked up many lies to hide the part of her own shucked-off body. (95)

Even her first sexual experience was a flimsy reminder of an incident that was best forgotten. Joan had been walking her friend Valerie home because a boy had joined them, who was trying to get Valerie's attention, in vain. After Valerie left, the boy knelt down and buried his face against Joan's enormous stomach. After a few minutes, he got up and walked away. Joan consoles herself thinking, "Perhaps it was sorrow over thwarted love and he was looking for consolation" (103).

Her second sexual experience was during one of her part time jobs. Joan worked as a cashier in one of the restaurants. One of the cooks there was a foreigner. He offered marriage to Joan but Joan refused him. She assumed his interest in her stemmed from the fact that she was the shape of a wife already, a shape which most women took years to achieve. Even though she had refused him, he continued to spoil her by cooking exotic dishes for her. The effect was seen in her lack of appetite as she writes, "My appetite usually gargantuan, began to fall off, partially from the effects of being in contact with other people's food for hours at a time, but partly because at every meal I felt I was being bribed" (106). Later she quit the job.

The turning point in her life came when Aunt Lou took her to the church where Leda Spratt, a Reverend Lady was there. Leda Spratt, looked into Joan's eyes and said that Joan possessed great powers and that she should try her hand at Automatic Writing. That concept took root and helped Joan to become an established writer towards the end of the novel.

The next job after the cashier stint was at an archery range where Joan was supposed to pull out the arrows and drop them into the barrels when they had been shot. One day as she was replacing the target face, she felt something hit her in the left buttock. Though a man said that he didn't mean to shoot the arrow, Joan felt that the sight of her 'moon like rump' had probably been too much for him. (124)

Her world collapsed when she heard that Aunt Lou had passed away after a heart-attack. Joan

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comes to learn that her aunt had left her two thousand dollars, which she would receive on one condition, she had to reduce lose a hundred pounds. Joan knew that what her aunt had offered her was not money, it was the means to escape from her mother. She took stock of her health after the arrow that had struck her had caused a bout of blood poisoning and she was seriously ill. Seeing that her illness had already made her lose thirty pounds' Joan was motivated and started taking all her mother's remedies and instructions together. She suffered some side effects too. Occasionally she binged but her shrunken and abused stomach revolted and she threw up.

As she started to lose weight, she started drawing the attention of strangers who had earlier slid their gazes over her unseeingly. Her mother though now found Joan over doing the weight loss program. As she comments, "You should eat something more than that, you will starve to death" (131). Something Joan had never dreamt that her mother would say. Her mother pleaded with her to stop taking the pills and eat better and in fits of rage (often drunk) would scream at Joan to get out as if her sight made her sick. Things came to a head when one afternoon after school, a hungry Joan went to eat a piece of Ry Krisp and found her mother with a

glass of scotch yelling at Joan, " Eat, eat that's all you ever do...."(132).

When Joan reminds her gently that she is on a diet and that she just had eighteen pounds to lose in order to get Aunt Lou's money with which she planned to move out. An enraged mother took a paring knife from the kitchen counter and stuck it into Joan's arm, above the elbow. It pricked the flesh and fell to the floor. Joan continued to make small talk, as if nothing happened and her mother responded. However, that evening Joan packed a suitcase and left as she felt her mother had gone crazy. How she achieves her target, inherits the money and sets up a new life away from her shameful past forms the rest of the novel.

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