

**Sense of Guilt and Search for Self-Hood in  
Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and  
Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terror***

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**Abstract**

Margaret Eleanor Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terror* is an excellent source of feministic approach and search for self-hood. Both the writers are from different countries and lifestyles, but the way they handled the search of the protagonist stands on the same stage. Both the writers brought in a modern flavour to the feministic view. Atwood and Deshpande are modern-day feminists. They do not believe that women deserve special privileges, and they no longer play the victim card, which is optimistically delivered in the select novels. The concept of **New feminism** is a philosophy which emphasizes in the novel *Lady Oracle*. On the aspect of New Feminism, Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* is unique in its own way. Sarita or Saru's is a heart-rending story. Fate and social conditions seem to torment the innocent girl. Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* handout the quest for identity of the protagonist Joan, as she believes that in killing herself, her old self, she will be able to finally live an honest and true life. But she never gets the chance to experience it. Even though **Shashi Deshpande** and **Margaret Eleanor Atwood** are from different cultures their thinking about women and their quest for identity is same. As a woman they need their gender to be free and they want to deliver their unique attitude towards the society. This paper focus on the identity crisis of women in *Lady Oracle* and *Dark Holds No Terror* who are from west and south.

**Keywords:** Shashi Deshpande, *Dark Holds No Terrors*, Margaret Eleanor Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, New feminism, femininity, custom, harmony in life, quest for identity, deserted, treachery,

In the novel, *Lady Oracle*, the protagonist Joan Foster is in search of harmony in life. Joan's crises concern her growing awareness of the imbalance between her outward appearance and her inner sense of identity. She is in quest for an authentic self - development, both environmental and psychological, which entails coming to terms with multiple social forces—external as well as internal—that violate upon the path towards female individuation and an understanding of the

individual self. The Aristotelian dictum that the human being is a social animal is central to the novel, as it traces the development of the protagonist as a social being. The protagonist becomes the representative symbolic reflections of different social circumstances and as such her individual existence cannot be distinguished from her social environment, her human significance and her specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which she is created.

Joan wishes to transform the society where women are packaged for consumer society. Throughout the novel, Atwood is openly concerned with the complexities of body images and attempts to clarify the female form. She shows the treatment of mind/body dualism and analyses the ways in which she responds to and resists, its destructive effects. Joan is suppressed by the society and isolated from the society. She is filled with problems and started to consider her family and friends as strangers. The society expects her to fit in to the norms that it describes but she always tries to stand on her own. But it took a long time to understand that the more she gets opponent to the society, the more the society will get her in to trouble.

At the beginning of the novel, Joan has just faked her own death and is living in a suburb of Rome, where she decides to start a new life. Then she narrates the sad story of how she has ended up to a unrealistic situation. Lady oracle's protagonist, like the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*, creates a fictional past. She never tells her husband about her past, and her childhood, that she was a fat girl and what kind of relationship she had with her mother. But she tells the truth of her past and her most private memories to her readers. She tells the reader about the things that she was afraid to tell her husband and friends. Joan Foster, the protagonist, lives within a *phallocentric* society and as is, torn between unconscious feminist questions and the stereotypical answers which society provides. She is repeatedly confronted with culturally gendered distinctions that limit their existence to the corporeal.

Childhood is once memorable happiness in lifetime, but Joan's childhood is filled with misery. Due to her overweight the society and even her own mother hated and rejected her. As a little girl she felt ashamed of her appearance. Joan's mother who is an epitome of repressive social forces, a woman trapped by patriarchal culture, wants Joan to be thin but she has an urge to defy her controlling mother which she values higher than the need to get adapted to a socially acceptable corporeal style. Sarah Seats rightly argues that. Atwood brings eating into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics. Joan's mother intends to control Joan by trying to limit her food consumption, and Joan too uses food to fight her mother, since it is the only tool of defiance that is available to her.

As she begins to realize the prevalent bias, prejudice, and hate in the society, she started to over-eating specially to irritate her mother. Her only comfort is her Aunt Lou, she likes to spend

time with her aunt. At a certain point Joan leaves the house and visit different hotels to stay using her aunt's name in order to escape from her mother. Once she loses weight, she collected the money from the layer and flees to London.

On her process of weight loss, she realizes that the body is prime site in females. Her assertion is a protest against the society which situates females as reproductive machines: women are eaten by society that views the female body as consumable. Women are not inexhaustible bodies, and, through the protagonist's resistance, Atwood is able to defy convention and assert the solution is not to accept and adapt oneself to repressive culturally defined conventions, but to rewrite them. Society expects slenderness from women:

“if Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not  
Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture  
on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always  
good looking? The effect would be quite different if they  
were overweight.” (Atwood: 56)

When a woman is overweight her excess weight marks her as an undisciplined woman, a woman who occupies more space than her allotted space by patriarchal society. Even the psychiatrist says, “Don't you want to get married?” (*Lady Oracle* 95)

After she lost weight the society accepted her normal “I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared, and I was no longer among the untouchables.” (*Lady Oracle*, 180) Even after her weight lose Joan neglects to revile about her. She met Polish Count, who made Joan as his mistress. Joan starts writing Gothic romance in the name of Lousia. K, as she can revolve around with freedom but still, she tries to hide her identity. Atwood points out the stresses and insufficiencies connected with women living in a community, obsessed with rigid roles through the struggle of Joan's passiveness to reveal her identity. In other words, Joan refuses to become the kind of women that society considers perfect and refuses to become the epitome of femininity which her mother represents. She wanted to gain power and autonomy and wants to take control of herself and expresses it through her body: “I sat at the table with my hot, adding another white ring to the vanish.... organize my life.” (*Lady Oracle*, 25) Joan was afraid to reveal herself to Polish, so she decided to leave him.

According to the protagonist, the most destructive thing to her were “the attitudes of society” manifests through the angry mother, cruel and mean schoolmates, and the dance teacher, who excluded her from an important performance. The person who has all the characteristics of an ideal woman is Joan Crawford who embodies all the dreams and demands of society. She is beautiful, thin, successful, and tragic at the same time. She is an example of a woman who can

control her life, but who is also loved and accepted by others. As Joan refuses to be the daughter of her mother's dreams and rejects the role of a polite, submissive female who is valued for her appearance instead of intellect, the war between her and society begins. Devoid of any weapons, Joan uses her body as an object of resistance. Joan's first love was Paul, who was interested to write about the femininity of women, and he has written the book "Nurse of the High Attic".

In the beginning Joan was not aware of Paul but later she come to know about him then he starts denigrating her work and resents her earning more money than he does. But Joan does not want to be rescued by him because she knew that Paul does not love her, he wants the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous communists. Thus, Paul symbolizes the typical men who takes delight in victimizing women. In her second lover and future husband Arthur, she encounters the same overpowering attitude.

When Joan meets Arthur, she pretends to be "at least semi-informed" of his political activism. Joan brilliantly feigns political interest to seduce Arthur who changes his theories constantly. He transformed himself from Lord Russell to Mao and proposed to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. He says Marriage itself would settle us down, and thorough it, too, he would become better acquainted. Arthur was "full of plans" and treats Joan as a child like Polish count: Arthur, the so called "leftist" husband, expects her to cook, and also imposes restrictions such as not to wear long fashionable dresses in public. Joan describes Arthur as a man incapable of knowing her personality: Arthur wouldn't have liked the picture. It wasn't the sort of thing he liked, though it was the sort of thing he believed she liked. He seemed to bend on changing her, transforming her into his own likeness. In spite of the oddities, she plays role of a dutiful wife and hopes to win his love because she is an optimist, with a lust for happy endings. When she takes refuge in Italy, she longs to let Arthur know how she cleverly deceived him. It was a good plan, she thought; she was pleased with herself for having arranged it.

She invented a mother for his benefit, a kind, placid women who died of a rare disease—Lupus, she thinks it was shortly after she met him. Luckily, he was never very curious about her past he was too busy talking about his. When Arthur discovers a picture of Joan as a teenager, she dismisses herself as an imaginary aunt, because she was afraid of her past and she said that it is her aunt: It features the inversion of the role of hero and villain implying that one should integrate the evil part of our 'self' to reach self-completion.

The important point about this tripled identity and its paralleled experiences is that Joan's writing is created out of the same feelings and experiences that also produce her fantasies and subterfuge. She desired to escape from the unglamorous facts of herself but "But hadn't my life always been double?" (*Lady Oracle*, 298). When Joan became entangled and her situation became

totally uncontrollable, she once again wanted to escape her labyrinth of deceptions: As J. Brooks Bouson stated:

“When all convoluted plots of Joan’s life converge her current lover, the Royal porcupine wants her to marry him; Paul her former lover traces her and wants her back, a black mailer hounds her, she imagines Arthur is the persecutor sending her death threats. She believes that once again she should escape her life which has become “a snarl, a rat’s nest of dangling threads and loose ends.” (Brooks Bouson, 43).

The biggest failure of her identity as a successful housewife is having a rebellious daughter, whose obesity is a contradiction to the stereotypical image of feminine beauty, and thus, a manifestation of the mother's failure to keep everything decent and within the confines of her control.

Joan has no feelings for her father as she rarely spoke to him. She forms a silent identity with him. Her father also had no expectations for her. When Joan meets Paul in London, she reacts in a way that he will find acceptable and not to get irritated. This is a direct contradiction of the identity Joan assumed when dealing with her mother. Instead of going against Paul’s wishes, Joan becomes passive. Her passiveness is easily visible during the beginning of her stay in Paul’s home as his mistress. Instead of voicing concern of any kind, Joan simply lets Paul do as he will. That becomes the pattern with Joan as her relationship with Paul progresses. Her identity at this point is based on Paul.

She is nothing more than an extension of Paul. Problems begin when Joan tries to break out of this pattern. Paul’s tolerance and patience regarding Joan began to wither as she started to do more things for herself, instead of doing things that pleased him. Paul began to have fits of jealousy. It was all right as long as she did nothing but roll around the flat, reading and typing out her Costume Gothics and going nowhere except with him. Joan’s identity had gone from being based on Paul’s wishes to being based on wishes of her own, and the turmoil in her relationship with Paul grew until she left and moved in with Arthur. However, Joan’s relationship with Arthur is much like her relationship with Paul. Once married and settled down, Joan returns to her pattern of doing what she thinks Arthur wants and shaping herself in a way that will be more appealing to him.

She lies to Arthur about her past, never telling him of her strained relationship with her mother or her battles with her weight, all in an effort to become the type of wife that she thinks Arthur wants. Joan feels that her real identity isn’t good enough, so she creates one. Her primary goal is being an ideal wife for Arthur and making sure that he is not displeased with her.

“Though I was tempted sometimes, I resisted the  
Impulse to confess. Arthur’s tastes were Spartan,  
and my early life and innermost self would have  
appalled him. It would be like asking for a steak  
and getting a slaughtered cow.” (Atwood p.215)

The poems contained in Joan’s book give insight into how Joan really feels about her marriage to Arthur, even though she denies that the book is about him. Just as with Paul, Joan’s first act of doing something for herself creates static in her relationship with Arthur. Joan goes even further and has an affair, further asserting her own needs and identity, instead of Arthur’s.

Joan, the daughter in *Lady Oracle*, rebels against her mother but then sways between the two positions of a housewife and an artist. Despite her rebellion against her mother, who acts as cultural agent to transmit stereotypes and the conventional roles of women to her daughter and who transmits social mythology –fictional constructs into which Joan is expected to fit, Joan gets assimilated in the patriarchal culture through her mother's influences as well as social and cultural activities as taking school education, reading, and writing Costume Gothic romances and watching Hollywood movies. Nevertheless, as an artist with abundant imaginative power, Joan is able to first survive social prejudices and then improve herself through fantasizing and creative writing, both of which help her work out psychologically and think through her relationships with her mother and eventually reject the stereotypes on women imposed on her as well as her mother. In other words, it takes a large part of her life and a lot more struggles on Joan's part to accomplish a spiritual quest for artistic independence.

Throughout Atwood’s novel, Joan’s identity is determined by the relationships she has with the different people she encounters throughout her life. Joan spends a great deal of her life pretending to be a person that she is not. In her third novel *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood gives us a very self-determined and active mother and a daughter whose life and writing are haunted by the mother. Moreover, it is through rewriting Costume Gothic conventions and telling her life story that Joan gains new awareness about her mother and her own identity.

In such a context, *Lady Oracle* is transitional because, instead of allowing the women of the other racial backgrounds, it focuses on the daughter, Joan Foster, who emerges at the end of the novel as a true artist and begins to understand the mother through creative writing.

Writing, as it is for the female writers before her, is difficult for Joan, not, however, in the sense of getting published or becoming famous, but in the sense of finding her own voice and



rejecting patriarchal ideologies and the stereotypes of femininity that her mother tries to install in her. She completely wants to free herself from her former self but fails to create a truly effective disguise. It is no surprise that she fakes her death and runs away from her life with Arthur soon thereafter. Thus, she fakes her death by drowning and sheds her past identity and tries to exert control over her life and wishes to remain unknown and unrecognized in her new life. Ronald D. Laing claims: "When faced with the society in which an individual feels estranged and individual's sane response is madness and the creation of a false-self which aims at making normal self possible. Even as a child Joan develops double personality; at home, she was deliberately quiet and 'comatose' while outside her family circle, her enthusiasm made her popular among her friends." (27)

In the case of Sarita from *Dark Holds No Terrors*, she succeeded in her effort to join Medical College at Bombay. Then she got married with Manohar even when they didn't have a house to live with Sarita. They had to live in a chawl of a friend of Manohar's who had gone on leave. Marriage woes began soon after. People in the colony they were living in began to take notice of the lady doctor. They smiled to her and she saluted to them in response. One day she closed the door of the room and overheard the words lady doctor. One evening, somebody knocked the door. Manu opened it, and a woman asked if the doctor was at home. Her child had diarrhea. She examined the child and wrote the prescription. Therefore, it happened again and again, almost every day. Sarita being young, listened, examined, and wrote prescriptions with enthusiasm. Thereafter, people greeted her with nods and smiles and namastes whenever they went out for walks.

Sarita became popular and Manu was relegated to the secondary position, which hurt his ego. One day he said. "I am sick of this palace" (*Dark Holds No Terrors*, 78). At the same time, she began shrinking from his love-making. She was generally tired after a long and busy day at the hospital. She needed rest. Manu, on the contrary, was eager to make love. Naturally, he was at times rough and abrupt with her. She attributed it to his ardour of love, but later she realized that Manu had a singed psyche because the esteem she was getting from the people had made her inches taller than her husband.

Things came to such a pass that she began to dominate over her husband against her desire. When she got married, she had sworn that she would never dominate. She had seen that Dhruva was dominated by two females and her father had become a cypher under the domination of her mother. Therefore, she decided not to dominate her husband. Yet it happened. She felt that there was something which was outside herself, driving her on. It was as a reflex action that Manu tried to dominate over her in private life. He snatched the book from the hands of Sarita and asked her to come to him. He tried to arouse himself to some pitch but failed since it was not an effortless

and natural, impulsive act. He failed to dominate in the private life. Sarita avoided looking at him, his body ugly now with its aura of failure.

On the economic front also, Manu was a defeated man. His salary was much less than Sarita's and Manu's salary never very, much barely covered their expenses. Sarita, on the contrary, got work in a research project, that got some extra money. Then Boozie came in the life of Sarita-like a good father. He got her work in research projects, she completed M.D. and became Registrar. Four years later, she became Assistant Honorary at a suburban hospital, with a consulting room of her own in the midst of other well-known consultants. On the day opening of her consulting rooms, she moved among the guests accepting congratulations. Then Boozie who had given money went to congratulate her. Manu all the while stood side-lined. As Sarita became busy, she kept away from Manu for longer hours. He sulked and Sarita was either impatient with him or ignored him. The result was disastrous. He became a psychopath; he would injure his wife with hands, feet, and teeth, like a beast in the bed and act like a normal caring husband in the morning. She told her father:

“He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this..... the man hurting me. With his hands, teeth, his whole body. He did it again and again, every night” (*Dark Holds No Terrors*,

45).

She could not resist him because he seemed more powerful room should hear and get shocked by the imbecility of their father. But she held herself responsible for it.

In the meantime, Sarita came to learn that her mother had died. She went to mourn for the death of her mother against the advice of her husband Manohar who asked her that why should she matter dead when she never mattered alive. But she had come to her father's house less to mourn and more to escape from the imbecile husband. In spite of cold reception from her father, she decided to stay. When she reached her father's house, she didn't pay to the rickshaw-puller until she could enter the house. Sarita felt that her father could not welcome her because that meant treachery to the dead. Her room in the house had been occupied by Madhav and she was asked to put up in the puja room signifying that there was no place left in the house for her. But she had no other place to go to.

Her problems began to increase. She came under greater psychological stress at her father's house. In the first instance, she had the feeling that she had done a mistake by coming to her father's house as she was an unwelcome guest. She observed, he sat gingerly on the edge of his



chair, like an unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest. Then she was worried about her children Abhi and Renu. Again, people in the neighborhood started coming to her for treatment.

She didn't refuse, yet she felt that she was not a doctor as she was while she worked in a hospital equipped with modern machines for diagnosis. She was, at best, a village health visitor. She thought she had become a well-wisher in a village. Finally, she had her sexual urges which remained unsatisfied. The idea flashed in her mind of using Madhav for this purpose. But now she thought, looking at Madhav, if she imagined that by sleeping with him, she could cure herself, would she not try to seduce in him. However, she soon dismissed the idea because that would not bring back grace to her tried, shamed one.

She had been passing through a labyrinth of all these ideas, when one day she decided to remove all the barriers between her and her father, the barriers between a man and a woman, to discuss her private life with him. She first sought for the permission to save herself being branded over-bold or him being shocked. She said to her father. "I am your daughter and there's nearly thirty years between us, still...you are a man and I'm a woman. Can we talk of such things?" (*Dark Holds No Terrors*, 96).

When her father agreed to discuss these things with her, she told him how she was subjected to a beastly treatment in the nights by her husband. And to add to this her husband would not apologize or explain or look guilty. He would simply act like a normal person in the morning. Her father could say nothing except that her needed treatment. But Saru said that she also needed treatment. She had nightmares for several other reasons also, the most dreadful of them was that she considered herself guilty of Dhruva's death.

Then she got Abhi's letter, informing that Manu was coming to meet her. She had deserted him and did not want to meet him. Therefore, she packed her clothes in the suitcase to leave this place. But she had no idea where she should to; she had no home. No, she couldn't call it home. Nor was this home. How odd to live for so long and discover that she has no home at all. Her father asked her if she was afraid to meet Manu. She said that she was indeed scared of him, not because what he had done to her but what she had done to him - she had broken him, and she was also broken completely. There is no way to seek pardon because she held herself responsible for the tragedies that happened in her family.

"My brother died because I heedlessly turned  
my back on him. My mother died alone  
because I deserted her. My husband is a  
failure because I destroyed his manhood." (*Dark Holds No Terrors*, 98)

She gave up the idea of leaving the house at the suggestion of her father, but she asked him not to open the door to Manu. Simone de Beauvoir, stated: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (225)

She was expecting Manu, mail had arrived. But Ravi, a child living a few houses away, came before Manu could. He held her hand and began to drag her saying that Sunita was having fits, and she would die if she didn't go with him at once. She was moved to compassion. She put on her sleepers and ran to Ravi's house. But she asked her father while going out-to ask Manu to wait, as she would come back soon. She had come to feel in that mood and spirit of compression that she should take pity on Manohar who was patient and deserved treatment as Sunita did.

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