Denial of Space: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* and *Lady Oracle*

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Abstract

'Space' can be understood in different dimensions. Women's spaces are limited the feminine space is determined by society. Women are neither given societal spaces nor professional spaces which are dominated by men. Men possess the power and occupy all the spaces of the society and women are denied the required spaces. Spaces continue to be a male construct in most societies. It is the feminine space that assigns a social role to the woman. Margaret Atwood delineates how the protagonists of *Bodily Harm* and *Lady Oracle* are denied the space and how they face the situation. Our conscious as well as unconscious and our innermost needs are projected in our space, which is the product of our culture. Space is important because it supports woman and intervenes in her needs. It has the power to restrict and sustain. When Women are denied a space in the society, she goes in search of her identity. Women must be able to formulate and express their own ideas as individual women and as a constituency that is affected by patriarchal laws and practices in uniquely gendered ways.

The paper examines Atwood's female protagonists in *Bodily Harm* and *Lady Oracle* by integrating the concepts of feminine space and female identity construction. Atwood deals with the concept of female space, as well as the 'space' of the female body. Tandon in *Feminine Psyche: A Postmodern Critique* comments: "Atwood has tried to present man-woman relationship as seen from a woman's point of view popularly called 'female space'… the colonial context lifts the concept of 'female space, to include 'inner space' "(214). There are quick transitions, subtle and unpredictable changes that refine the identities of individuals in general and of women in particular. As part of female identity, feminine space is traditionally considered to be domestic. In the larger space of humanity or global space, women are trying to establish their feminine spaces. Women do not have significant spaces in the society. They depend on male members of the society for their spaces and identities.

Atwood's *Bodily Harm* focuses on the literary articulation of the problems of being female, the exploration of the relation between the biological body and the cultural concept of the body, and the criticism of social representations of women. Alcoff suggests that "this kind of attitude is attributed to the colonised bodies of women and also to the lower classes" (103). Feminists challenge such assumptions and try to confront constructions of female subjectivity which deny them the required space and identity. "Space is in general encoded and policed /regulated in different ways for women and men" (Mills 699). Women find many obstacles on their paths of achievements. They are expected to accept the norms of the society by being submissive. Rennie of *Bodily Harm* loses her identity when she is diagnosed with cancer and one breast removed. She

associates her identity with her body. One of the principal factors in her discomfort and her later sense of inadequacy is the imperfect, flawed body, or rather; the burden of a body type existing out of socially accepted standards. In the words of Elaine Showalter, feminine space is "trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition" (131).

Joan Foster, the heroine of *Lady Oracle*, stands as an entity separated from the public sphere as a result of her physical condition. "The Human being is locked up within a protective corporeal shell" (Ferguson 49).The 'space' society demarcates for her is so restricting that she continues to gain weight. "Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" (Grosz14). The stereotype of feminine space in the western culture is "angel in the house" as mentioned by Virginia Woolf.   Atwood's *Lady Oracle* satirises the stereotypical image of the women writers. The society is more bothered about the physical appearance of the women writers rather than their works. M. Prabhakar says, "*Lady Oracle* raises its voice against stereotypical gender roles imposed upon women in a paternalist society as these role-models interiorize women and thereby distort and problematizes their self-perceptions" (53).   Friedman points out, women in certain circumstances   are "doubly victimized—sexually assaulted and impregnated or left unable to reproduce . . . they [also] must endure shaming by male members of their families and communities, who perceive the violation of 'their' women as another form of defeat" (598).

Women struggle to take active participation in the society culturally dominated by men. 'Space' can be understood in different dimensions. Women do not enjoy the freedom as men do. Women's spaces are limited. Women are neither given societal spaces nor professional spaces which are dominated by men. The feminine space is determined by society depending on whether one is a male or a female. 'Male' and 'female' denote the gender whereas 'masculine' and 'feminine' are cultural qualities and both are correlated as super ordinate and subordinate respectively. Men possess the power and occupy all the spaces of the society and women are denied the required spaces. The identity crisis, of course, is a psychological problem; a feeling of not being at home with anything leads the person to experience a quest for identity.   Identity crisis is the struggle of the characters in finding their personal identification. It is not a struggle for socio –economic survival. A feeling of not being at ease leads a person to the sense of alienation which in turn leads to an identity crisis. "The organization of space is not a direct reflection of cultural codes and meaning; it is above all a context developed through practice-that is, through the interaction of individuals" (Moore117).

When the notions of space and its occupancy in gendered terms are analyzed, it is shocking to find that only in the 20th century women have occupied limited space in patriarchal societies in their own right as women or as persons. Spaces continue to be a male construct in   most societies. Space is not neutral. It keeps on changing. The rich live in certain spaces and the poor are systematically excluded from those spaces. It is the feminine space that assigns a social role to the woman. "…the inequalities that exist are based on gender and reinforced by cultural beliefs and traditions, and that geographic space 'is deeply implicated in social exclusion'' (Smith 45). The woman is denied space in the workplace also. When women fail to find spaces in the societies, women of same ideas get together and form groups and men consider women's culture as subculture. For women, subculture is essential as it provides an opportunity to explore their identities, which can be an outlet for self- expression and useful to form an intimate community. It

gives alternative interpretations and values to people. It interprets the social world of the subordinates. Focusing on the female space, Spivak, comments on the female subaltern, the doubly marginalized that "… in the context of colonial production… the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (28).

The crisis of identity has intensified, with the decline of grandeur and dignity of human life in the post-world war era. Men face an unprecedented condition of rootlessness, loneliness and alienation. Their quest is to attain a personal view of life and world which make the life meaningful, and a sense of belonging to them. In the case of women, it is the double quest, the quest for identity as women and as human beings. It would be difficult to realise adequately the magnitude of the problems of loss of identity unless the root cause of all problems are understood. Women expect to love and be loved by the society. Joan of *Lady Oracle* has to transform her identity to please someone. She puts on performances for the people in her life pretending to be a person she is not. In order to fit herself to the society, she modifies her behaviour and her way of thinking. She changes her look in order to establish herself as a writer. She wishes to transform her society, searching for her identity.

The socially constructed gender roles of women become a problem because performance criteria have been defined from men's point of view. Women fail to function at times due to her biological, social, physical and psychological inabilities. Women are analysed in relation to the conditions of their male colleagues. The predicament of professional women is to reconcile their traditional and professional functions. Hierarchy boosts the authority of male superiors and it strengthens female dependency, socialised to obey males in positions of authority. Rennie of *Bodily Harm* realizes the fact that women relished sacrificing their lives, serving others, being subordinates.

In the male-oriented power structure, everything is determined by power and hence the so-called powerful males dominate the entire space and colonise the females, which in turn, lead women to go in search of feminine space and female identity. Atwood's *Lady Oracle* shows how the identity and the individuality of a woman writer is destroyed by the invisible authority of male writers and her writing is gendered and classed on the basis of sex. The protagonist's poetry collection in *Lady Oracle* succeeds as the best-selling, but she faces threat to her identity. The imperialistic mindset still prevails in all walks of life which threatens the existence of the 'other'. Women in any society perform various roles yet; they are discriminated and prevented from establishing their female identity. They are not permitted to bring their full potential. Joan of *Lady Oracle* is so humiliated that she hides her identity as a writer and her past from Arthur when she gets her book, *Lady Oracle* published. He treats her as if she has committed some inexcusable sin.

The social contexts and social changes are reflected in the family, which is the primary unit of the society. The feminine place in the house has been changing and it is related with changing actions of the woman living in it. The feminine gender is defined in our society by actions, behavior and attitudes. Femininity is developed and expressed at inside and outside contexts. It is by creating fear in the minds of women that the patriarchal structure controls them. Rennie of *Bodily Harm* also becomes an object of

man's gaze. She becomes passive, allowing herself to be taken advantage of by men through the influence of culture representing all women hoping to please men. Stuart Mill observes, "Identity is formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us… within us are contradictory identities, pulling a different direction, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about" (277). Joan of *Lady Oracle*'s crisis for identity starts with her name. She was named after Joan Crawford, a popular actress who is thin whereas Joan is very fat to the extent that she can inherit her aunt's money of thousand dollars only when she loses one hundred pound weight. So her identity is still pushed to the periphery. Joan uses her aunt's name 'Louise K. Delacourt' as the pen name when she starts her new life as a writer. Feminine space is denied to women in the society, promoted by social institutions like school, family, culture and media. Lefebvre says:

> Social space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all subjects are situated in a space in which, they must either recognise themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may enjoy and modify. In order to accede to this space, individuals are paradoxically already within it must pass tests. This has the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation within social space. (35)

Society has limited the spaces for women and they have to work within the masculine spaces, and this constrained the potentialities of women and they find it very difficult to achieve their goals. Women have been struggling to find spaces in the patriarchal society, where they can express what they wish to express. Women are invisible beings in the society as they are considered as objects. Women are never considered as independent subjects who hurt their ego and their wounds could not be healed in both the societies. Women's conscious as well as their unconscious and innermost needs are projected in their spaces, which are the products of culture. Space is important because it supports women and intervenes in their needs. It has the power to restrict and sustain. When Women are denied spaces in the society, they go in search of their identity. "Women carved out a space amid the options available to them: options for the most part created by imperialism and limited by male dominance" (Strobel xiii).

Arthur of *Lady Oracle* also does not have a good opinion about marriage. He proposes Joan because, "Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would become better acquainted. If it didn't work out, well, it would be a learning experience. Most importantly, we could live much more cheaply together than we could separately" (197). Paul's attitude towards Joan designate, he is a manipulator. He considers women are created only for childbearing and sewing and regards them as dependent and inexperienced. In *Lady Oracle*, when Joan comes in contact with an Italian cook, instead of showing his love he shows his bank balance and says, "I will give you babies. Lots of babies, I see you like the babies" (100). Joan of *Lady Oracle* is not satisfied with her real identity, so she creates another one. In her marriage with Arthur, her main goal is to be an ideal wife for Arthur and making sure that he is satisfied and pleased with her. "Then discovered to my dismay that Arthur expected me to cook, actually cook, out of raw ingredients such as flour and lard. I'd never cooked in my life. But for Arthur's sake I would try anything" (LO208). Joan's attempts to cook fail, but

she keeps cooking because she thinks that Arthur enjoyed watching her mistake: "My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. His applause kept me going (LO 209). Lady oracle's protagonist, like the unnamed protagonist of Surfacing, creates a fictional past. She recalls and understands Arthur "loved me under false pretenses" (LO 345). Frank Davey argues that "Atwood gives us a large view of Joan Foster's early life and makes it clear that most of Joan's difficulties with adult relationships are caused by the transferences and projections from childhood experiences" (56). Society force Joan to adjust to the pre-fixed social roles but she revolts against them. According to Rosemary Sullivan, Atwood examines how the forces of society interact with the individual (129).

It has been pointed out that, "History proves that marriage is essential to the well-being human society, and that celibacy brings ruin upon states"(Walker 80).

The social construct of gender and assignment of specific roles of men and women are used as significant tools by women writers. Women report about tensions between professional and personal responsibilities. Gender is used to describe those characteristics of men and women which are socially determined in contrast to those biologically determined. The working conditions of women have been analysed in relation to the working conditions of their male colleagues. The tasks associated with the reproducing of societies are almost carried out by women meeting the basic needs at the family and household. The women are given the responsibilities of productive and reproductive tasks. Organization including schools and universities has been conceived and constructed by men and the institutions have historically been dominated by men. The social distance women experience because of their sex, isolate them from their male colleagues. Women often feel alienated from this masculine working environment. This isolation hampers women from socialising into the organisation.

Society assigns different roles responsibilities and expectation to men and women.   These different gender identities are carried over into the work place also. Hierarchical structures of an organisation reinforce female subordination and are   often socialised to obey males in positions of authority. Difficulties in performance are often attributed to women's dual responsibilities as wife, mother and professional women, and to female characteristics, which make up women's roles and identity. As Caroline Lachapelle in   *Canadian Feminism Today* comments "The oppressive clause deprives her of her cultural roots, creates division within her family and denies her access to any treaty or reserve privileges" (258). The novels of Atwood explore the female psyche her characters undergo. Women are depicted in myriad roles, wife, mother, daughter and an individual.

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