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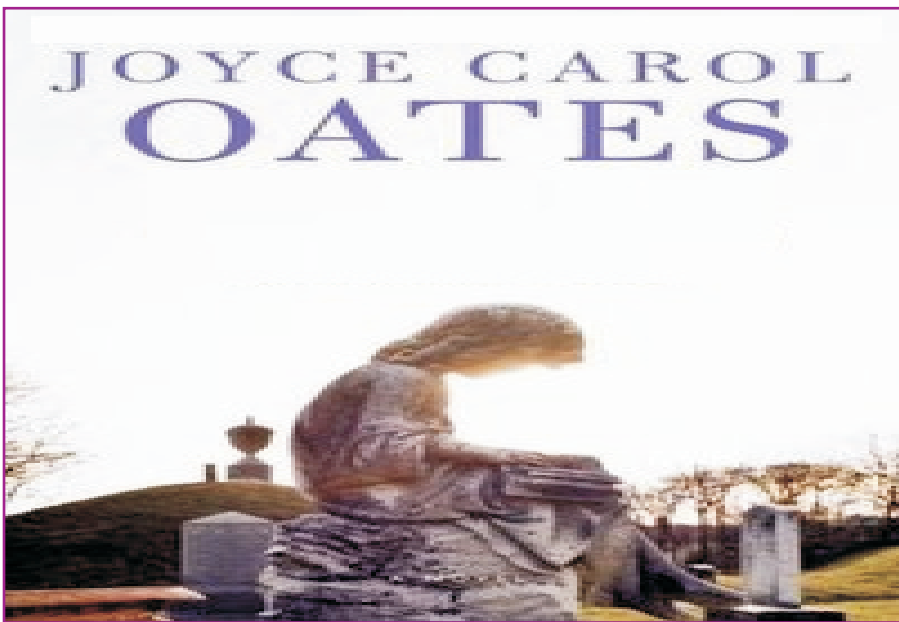
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ACADEMIC IDENTITY CRISIS IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S *MARYA: A LIFE AND MUDWOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This critical endeavor is a modest attempt to examine and understand the quest for identity as a central theme in two essentially academic novels of Joyce Carol Oates. Oates is the most influential and prolific American writer of the millennium. She has spent many years as an academician. She explores academic identity crisis in some of her novels. This study examines two novels namely *Marya: A Life* (1986) and *Mudwoman* (2012).

KEYWORDS: Academic Identity Crisis, Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya*, academicians and intellectuals.

1. INTRODUCTION

Joyce Carol Oates has published fifty four novels from 1963 till 2016. Every year she has two to three books to her credit. Her website "Celestial Timepiece: A patchwork" has a special webpage reserved specifically for her forthcoming books. Two of her representative novels are selected for detailed analysis. *Both Marya: A Life* and *Mudwoman* belong to the world of academicians and intellectuals. *Marya* was a writer and a professor in university, whereas M. R. Neukirchen of *Mudwoman* is the female president of a prestigious Ivy League University. Academic achievements determine the identity of any individual. It helps

to enhance the quality and richness of lifestyle and social respect. It plays a key role in securing a strong professional identity. It enriches the professional development. On the other hand, many people who lack education or proper training may have to accept lower wages, humiliation and poverty. Subsequently, they become labourers, workers with little scope for progress regarding occupation and social recognition. Such people are often victims of exploitation, subjugation, and overwork. They are indulged in addictions, promiscuity, drunkenness and crime and a life full of crisis.

The identity crisis academicians and artists is depicted in the novels such as Dr. Jesse Vogel in *Wonderland* (1971), *Marya Knauer* in *Marya: A Life* (1986), *Freaky Green Eyes* (2003), and *Mudwoman* (2012). Each of these novels portrays the crisis of an individual whose identity is at the stake of circumstances and cruel workings of the psyche. These academicians suffer because of their

exclusive ability to distinguish between right and wrong and their passion for righteousness. Several characters of Joyce Oates belong to this category. They are academicians, doctors, writers and research scholars in their chosen domains of learning. The examples are: M. R. Neukirchen of *Mudwoman* is a university president. Jesse Vogel of *Wonderland* is a neurosurgeon. Marya Knauer is a writer and university professor. Patrick Mulvaney is a research scholar.

2. ACADEMIC IDENTITY CRISIS OF *MARYA: A LIFE* (1986)

Marya: A Life is the story of a girl who seems to evolve from hardships and struggle into a successful author. She endures humiliation, abandonment and molestation from her childhood. She was adopted by her impulsive and dominant aunt. She learned it very soon that she cannot expect love and kindness from anyone. Her mother's indifference after her father's murder in a tavern brawl makes her mature in very early phase of her life. Besides, the mother also taught her to realize the responsibility of family ahead of time. She was asked to take care of her younger brother Davy. However, Marya managed to handle the situation after her mother's mysterious disappearance when she was less than eight years old.

Marya's father was a mill worker and was suffering from work layoffs because of the economic crisis of the Great Depression in America. His struggle to sustain in the crisis is evident from:

"Marya's father had worked in the mill until the mill shut down, and then he started work with Shaheen Mining Company until there was trouble there—but Marya didn't know what kind of trouble except he was "dropped from the payroll," that was how he phrased it, but he was expecting to go back, he was waiting to go back any day." (6)

Joyce Oates's most ambitious novel *Marya: A Life* begins with William James's statement: "My first act of freedom will be to believe in freedom." Marya suffers from the pangs of her memories. She feels anguish as she recalls her old house occasionally with a sigh of disappointment. In *Woman Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*, by Joyce has given genesis of *Marya: A Life* in her words:

"The spirit of William James, our greatest American philosopher, pervades Marya's story. *My first act of freedom*, James says, *is to believe in freedom....* Human beings forge their own souls by way of the choices they make, large and small, conscious and half-conscious. James's philosophy is ideally suited to the New World in which identity (social, historical, familial) is not permanent; it is a philosophy of the individual, stubborn, self-reliant, and ultimately mysterious." (Oates 377-378)

Marya Knauer was eight-year-old when she came to know about her father's death. The novel begins with the sad demise of her father and abandonment by her mother. She is old enough to understand this. The narrative is in a loosely connected episodic form. The agony of having lost both parents makes her untimely mature and excessively tolerant. She endures the daily assault by her cousin because being orphan she has to compromise everything in her aunt's home.

She also endures the bullying and harassment of farm boys who are older than her. She informs about this to her teachers, but they turn deaf ears towards it saying it is not their business to interfere in any matters outside school premises. Sometimes these incidents turned out severe and life-threatening.

Marya steals from Imogen her earrings. This act was done to overcome fear and to take revenge for the humiliation. "Marya kept the earrings, though her ears were infected and she had to give up wearing them; Imogene Skillman never approached her again, never pressed charges; nor did anyone dare bring the subject up to either of the girls." (*Marya: A Life* 183)

Marya's record remained perfect, but Imogene did poorly at the end of the semester, failing two subjects; and in place of transferring to another university, she quit college altogether.

Here is Marya Knauer, valedictorian of the class, Marya in her red-checked cotton dress with the low back, showing her long smooth tanned back and shoulders, her tanned arms. Marya drinking beer out of a can like the boys, throwing her head back to laugh helplessly at one of Lester Hughey's crude jokes; feeling with spiteful satisfaction the heavy, warm weight of her hair down her back. (124)

Marya a Life is the search for the identity of a struggling girl who was abandoned by her parents. She lived with her uncle Everard and Aunt Wilma. Wilma dominated and ruled in her family. She continued to follow her orders and do accordingly without any obvious choice of her own. She had no place, no home to sufficiently

establish herself as a strong and powerful personality under the warmth and support of her parents. Someone killed her father. She wanted to know about her parents. However, the facts of her miserable childhood were tactfully suppressed by Wilma.

Joyce talks about values of academic life in the persona of Maximilian Fein. These values and beliefs distinctly separate academicians and other class of people. Marya was entrusted the house of a scholar temporarily when the owner was away for some time. Joyce States:

“Marya gathered—they had never cared to buy property, evidently; Maximilian was not the sort to wish to be encumbered by such things. (Didn't he make contemptuous reference now and then, in his seminar, to the property-holding bourgeoisie; to the contamination of the human spirit by such things as the “burden of excessive ownership”?) A scholar in the classic European tradition, he owned books; his treasure was all in books, old manuscripts, objets d'art. (188)

Oates explored the issues and problems that influence growth and development of a woman who pursues her education in spite of many difficulties and later becomes a respectable writer and academician. Marya's quest for a stable professional identity is depicted vividly in this novel. She has to tolerate orphanage, abandonment, adoption and harassment at her aunt's residence. She was also exploited sexually by her cousin during her teenage. In spite of these difficulties, Marya struggles and works hard. She nurtures willpower and invests positive energy in academics. In the end, she desperately searches her mother Vera Sanjek. Her mother's blurred photograph gives the symbolic impression of her obscure past.

3. ACADEMIC IDENTITY CRISIS OF MUDWOMAN (2012)

Mudwoman is the recent novel of Joyce Oates. It is based on academic life and it projects the crisis of a woman, similar to Marya Knauer in *Marya: A Life*. It is an account of the struggle of M. R. Neunkirchen, female-president of coveted Ivy League university. It is one of Joyce's most powerful novels, evoking a young woman's sense of loss, anguish and disillusionment at the very moment when her professional life reaches its summit. Since M.R's youthful circumstances strongly resemble Joyce's – M.R. rural home sounds exactly like Joyce's in Lockport. It is about the nostalgia about her early life.

The novel begins with mother taking her children to unknown unexpected journey similar to *Marya: A Life*. But she was thrown in the mud to die slowly by sinking. The girl was saved miraculously by a passer-by. It is an account of her journey from an abandoned dying child to a woman presiding a prestigious Ivy League University. She was the first Female President of conservative university.

Creating such unnerving series of events is the speciality of Joyce Oates. Commenting on the common themes and treatment her novels, Angela Larson says: “Breaking out in a cold sweat is often the effect Joyce Carol Oates's writing produces in her readers. Oates is constantly pushing the margins of discourse with dark and starkly realistic portraits of America and, most importantly, portraits which often bring to the surface the violent undercurrents of American society.” (Larson 10)

Marya's story concentrates on her rootlessness. She has lost every connection with her past. Her father died when she was very young. Her mother left her to the care of a tyrannical aunt and cousin. She struggles to achieve academic excellence in spite of her poor background.

Similar to Jesse Vogel of *Wonderland*, Marya witnesses the loss of her family. After her father's terrible murder in a pub, her mother turned indifferent towards her. Joyce reinvented this pattern of parents' deaths or abandonment with different treatment in *Gravedigger's Daughter*. Rebecca is the only survived member in Schwartz family. Her father shoots her mother and commits suicide by shooting himself. Similar to Marya, Rebecca also loses both of her parents.

M. R. Neunkirchen in *Mudwoman* has parallels to Marya's story. M. R. was known as Jewell in her childhood. Her mother abandons her in the mudflats of Black snake river. She survives but loses track of her mother. It was an attempted murder. In Marya's case, her mother abandons her but does not kill her. Marya works hard. She was oppressed and tormented in school as well as at home. However, she takes it positively and persists relentlessly. She achieves her identity as a writer.

Parallel to Oates life, M. R. struggled hard. She had loving parents similar to Oates. M. R. goes to places where she had spent her miserable childhood. She was trying to get attached to the people of her past. Her

reckless driving is an exploration in the crime-ridden areas. She leaves Ithaca and dreams of things caught in mud missing her way misses her speech in the conference.

The novel throws valuable light on academic politics. The self-respect exerts influence by her decision, firmness, and certain straightforwardness brings series of troubles. Parents, loving caring to feel proud of her achievements keep it secret from her about her past dreadful. M R adopted child in Quaker family abandoned child gets very loving and kind parents.

Mudwoman is the story of a crisis of Meredith R. Neukirchen, a woman who belongs to the class of Academicians. She is the President of a high-status Ivy League University. She faces a crisis of the identity of this university which happens to be conservative. She wants to change it. A whimsical student named Alexander Stirk becomes a threat to her identity. Alexander Stirk is also facing similar kind of Identity Crisis.

The childhood of Meredith is treacherous. Her mother had thrown her in the mudflats of Black Snake River to die a slow, hideous death when she was eight years old. Someone saves her and sends her to a local Sheriff.

Meredith Ruth Neukirchen, known as M.R. is the central character of Joyce Carol Oates's *Mudwoman*. She becomes first woman president of Ivy League University, apparently a substitute for Princeton, where Oates worked as the Roger S. Berlind's distinguished professor of the humanities. (Maria Russo). Maria Russo claimed in her review of *Mudwoman* entitled "*The Ground Beneath her Feet*" that:

"Even as it travels over familiar Oates territory, there's freshness to this novel, a sense of some new, more personal beginning. It's bold of Joyce Carol Oates to paint achievement akin to her own as just the flip side of victimization — and it's perhaps even bolder to make such visceral drama from the story of a workaholic who finally confronts life unhooked from a keyboard." (Russo 3)

She could barely recall her past to the Sheriff's inquiries. She believed herself as "Jewell," one of the two girls the other was "Jedina" who received the similar ill-treatment from their deranged mother.

She was adopted by a Quaker family, who very much resemble Joyce Oates's parents. They give her a new and stable identity. An orphan girl 'Jewell' is renamed as 'Meredith' the adopted daughter of the decent and loving family. They never disclosed her past to Meredith because that will hurt her feelings. They never tell her anything about her past.

Because of her parents and their constant encouragement, Meredith pursues her education successfully with many rewards. She displays exceptional talent in school. Her academic achievements brought her recognition as an 'outstanding girl'. She achieved a superior position in Ivy League University. At university, her assistant and advisor tried to take the hold of internal affairs. However, Meredith tactfully kept the reins in her hands and is successful in keeping him at a safe distance.

She gracefully controls every situation in her daily affairs and masters it in her way without hurting anyone's emotions or self-respect. She was however troubled by her identity and wants to find a solution to the hallucinations. Since she survived from a mudflat, the mud becomes an integral part of her emotional life.

The recurring image of the dark rotting river and its sharp rancid odor is reminiscent of her past and keeps her under its spell. She wanted to search her mother who out of religious fanaticism, attempted to kill her. She also comes to know the truth about her sister. Long ago, her mother also killed 'Jedina' who was discovered dead in an old fridge. She has given her slow and freezing death which appears to Meredith as salvation.

Her search for truth and the nostalgia lead her to leave University and wander aimlessly in the slum areas around the bank of Black River. She was eager to meet her mother and by some divine intervention comes across her in a mental asylum. Obviously, she did not recognize Meredith.

M.R. Neunkirchen faces challenges to her leadership. A student commits suicide, and she was held responsible for his death. M.R. never allowed herself to follow others her classmates. She wanted to establish herself as a distinct personality she never let the things happen with her. The following extract indicates the keen observation of Oates about the uncertainty in the relationships:

Soon after the senior prom to which M.R. had not been invited. M.R.'s prettiest girl classmates were married and pregnant and remarried. Some were divorced and became single mothers a very domestic destiny from the one they'd envisioned for themselves. (126)

Above description also sheds valuable light on the contemporary family system in America. Divorces,

remarriage, single mothers is the stark reality in developed nations like U.S.

CONCLUSION

Marya has gone through painful experiences of abandonment, adoption and sexual harassment. She has been frequently assaulted by her cousin. Despite these complications, Marya works very hard and becomes a successful writer and academician. She nurtures willpower and invests positive energy in academics. She desperately searches her mother Vera Sanjek. Her mother's blurred photograph gives the symbolic nature of her identity crisis. Similar to Marya Knauer, Meredith from *Mudwoman* went through a professional identity crisis. She claims to have a career, and presumably she manage to become first woman president in Ivy League University. Meredith experiences crisis ensued from professional jealousy and challenging academic politics. Her position as an administrator was always threatened by uncanny circumstances.

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