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The struggle between individuality and gender conformity

A literary study of Joyce Carol Oates' *The Falls*

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Abstract

This essay investigates the gender roles in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Falls*. The novel concentrates on a family who live by Niagara Falls in the US, but the novel's main focus is on a woman named Aria. Aria is considered as an outcast and different from her surrounding socialites and therefore it is interesting to investigate how society and its norms affects her. This essay concentrates on the main character Aria and how the society's norms affect her and contribute to her alienation. The essay focus on the key norms in the novel and analyzes them with the help of Betty Friedan's theories in *The Feminine Mystique* to investigate if there is any correlation between society's norms and the main character's alienation. The aim of this essay is to investigate the connections between the main character's alienation and her refusal to succumb to society's expectations of her as a woman.

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Introduction

The novel *The Falls* by Joyce Carol Oates (2003) revolves around a female protagonist and deals with social conflicts that were occurring during the 1960s. It has its focus on the character Ariaah and spans through her life, from her late twenties to middle age. Ariaah is the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and is haunted by her family's and community's expectations of how she ought to behave. Shortly after her husband has taken his own life, throwing himself down the Niagara Falls, she falls in love with Dirk Burnaby. Dirk is an outgoing man and comes from a wealthy family. Dirk falls in love with Ariaah, who is unlike anyone he has ever met. As the years go by, she gives birth to three children – Chandler, Royall and Juliet. Eventually, Dirk dies when his car is forced through the railing of the Niagara Falls. The story continues with the family dealing with his death, and how the members of the family are never quite able to heal.

This C-essay will start with a section on feminist author Betty Friedan, who published her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and the concept of femininity. The reason for concentrating on Friedan is because her text from *The Feminine Mystique* incorporates important issues that Oates dramatizes in her novel, set in roughly the same time. Thus it contextualizes the situation of the characters. The essay will then discuss the validity of feminism in the novel *The Falls* and the main character Ariaah. A specific focus will be on the concept of femininity. This C-essay will discuss how this character is portrayed. Through feminist criticism, this essay will investigate how her society causes Ariaah to become alienated from her surroundings and how that affects her identity.

Thus, this essay will deal with the question of how the protagonist's identity is affected by her alienation, which in turn is an effect of her not following the ideal of femininity. During the 1960s, women's rights were voiced loudly – it was the era of the feminist movement. To understand what this novel is telling us about the time and how the characters speak to us, it is vital to consider the setting and how it affects the character. In order to do so, one needs to take a look at the time period of the novel from a feminist perspective. The novel is telling the stories of the past, but also the

stories of the future. In order to look ahead, one needs to look back. It is important for us today to be aware of changes since they have a major part in creating the society we live in today. The idea that society shapes us and tells us how to behave has been an important part in feminist criticism. This novel is very clear on the society's effect on the main character's identity. This essay finds it important to consider how women are portrayed and what the novel might be telling us about femininity. It is relevant to attempt to understand the time in which the novel is set. Therefore I will investigate an influential feminist who dealt with the situation of women like the character Ariah, Betty Friedan.

Betty Friedan and Femininity

There was a great deal of debate during the 1950s and 1960s about women's role in society; this was the time of the second wave feminism. One influential second wave feminist was Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The authors of *Century in Struggle* (1996), Flexner and Fitzpatrick claim that “*The Feminine Mystique* struck a nerve among American women and became a best seller” (324). *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) has been credited as one of the major instigators of second wave feminism: “*The Feminine Mystique* ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world” (Margalit Fox, *NY Times*' website). Friedan dealt with a group of housewives, women who were average middle class Americans. Friedan noted that women became only sexual creatures, and that they did not have an identity outside their home and family. She argues that “in the suburbs where most hours of the day there are virtually no men at all – to give even the appearance of sex – women who have no identity other than sex creatures must ultimately seek their reassurance through the possessions of 'things'” (Friedan 236). In order for these women to forget their ‘hollow lives’, they bought things to fill up the voids that the lifestyle

left them with. As women had no real place in society they were kept happy through possessions. Joanne Hollows, the author of *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (2000), discusses how housewives are described in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963):

The Feminine Mystique produced the housewife who stunts her intelligence to become childlike, turns away from individual identity to become an anonymous biological robot in the docile mass. She becomes less than human, preyed upon by outside pressures, and herself preying on her husband and children. And the longer she conforms, the less she feels as if she really exists. She looks for security in things: . . . she lives a vicarious life through mass daydreams and through her husband and children. (Hollows 11)

In Friedan's book, the housewife shuns away from activities that would help her develop, for example pursuing a career (290), and instead she concentrates on living a life for her children and husband. Thus she never pursues her own individuality, and only lives through her family. Friedan argues that suburban housewives were subconsciously unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives, but that women were “too socially conditioned to recognize their own desperation” (“Betty Friedan”, *Brittanica*’s online encyclopedia). On recognizing this, Friedan asked all women to reexamine their lives. Friedan had great importance because she made women more aware of themselves and of the importance of seeing themselves as individuals. She highlighted the emptiness and hollowness that women could experience in their life: “As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even herself the silent question: 'Is this all'” (Friedan 13). Yet these women were leading the “ideal” life with their husband and children. However, these suburban housewives were not satisfied with their lifestyle. Yet, they did not dare to speak of their depression, since their life was regarded as the feminine ideal: “The

feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity” (Friedan 38). The sole purpose of a woman's life was, therefore, to fulfill her femininity. Women should be “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home” (Friedan 16). These women were thus intelligent individuals who were educated, at least to a certain degree, but their only purpose in life was to live for their families.

Femininity thus categorizes women and keeps them under control. It is true that different theorists have different hypotheses about what femininity is. However, according to Hollows, feminists believe that femininity has nothing to do with how women actually behave. Femininity has to do with how society envisions the role of women and how they ought to behave. Hollows argues about the socialization of female values:

For many second-wave feminists, femininity was seen as a fundamental to understanding women's oppression. Girls, it was often claimed, were socialized into feminine values and behavior which were associated with passivity, submissiveness and dependence. For many feminists, in becoming feminine, women were 'colonised' by patriarchy and became implicated in their own oppression. (Hollows 10)

Hollows also discusses Friedan's notion of the “feminine potential”, which was the potential that every woman should strive for according to society, a life in a perfect home with an ideal family and to be content with only this. Hollows argues that “[s]triving to fulfill their 'feminine potential' produced a common range of symptoms – feelings of failure, of nothingness, of 'is this all there is?'” (Hollows 11). Today, society still tries to encourage women to strive for the “feminine potential” that Friedan analyzed. Thus patriarchal society continues to oppress women and the idea of

femininity continues to mold women.

The concept of femininity entails that women need to be molded and controlled in order for the society to remain as it is. Barbara Johnson (1998), the author of *The feminist difference: literature, psychoanalysis, race, and gender*, argues:

...[T]he concept of femininity acts as a mold for shaping and controlling women's behavior. As Simone De Beauvoir points out, “as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the eternal feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh – and – blood, women, it is the latter who are wrong; we are told not that femininity is a false entity, but the women concerned are not feminine.” Femininity becomes, therefore, that from which women are always in danger of deviating. Unless of course femininity is judged liability, in which case it is that into which women are always in danger of falling. (Johnson, 101-102)

Women who rebel against this concept are thus seen as lacking femininity. Second wave feminism brought some issues to light concerning how little women are valued and the pressure the society puts on them. Hollows argues that femininity was associated with submissive and passive forms of behavior. She also argues that femininity and female values were passed onto future generations, who did not reflect on their gender role. In this manner, femininity has been used as a tool to keep women and girls in line for their future roles as mothers and housewives. If women do not submit to these female values, they are excluded from the female groups, and it can cause them to become alienated. To survive this social climate and be able to be part of the female group, the girls need to incorporate femininity into their own identity. These girls and women can not see the trap they are in, resulting in them colonizing themselves.

Literature has played a part in enforcing femininity. Classic literature, for example *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) by James Fenimore Cooper and *Emile, or On Education* (1762) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, partly deal with femininity and women's role in society (Baym 25; Lise Busk-Jensen 50). Literature has always been an influential part in creating ideals and values, as authors re-evaluate and sustain the concept of femininity; therefore literature can play an important part in freeing women from their chains. Peter Barry, the author of *Beginning Theory* (2002), argues: “The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (Barry 122). In some literature that deals with femininity, women are put in inferior positions; hence, here “the concept of femininity acts as a mold for shaping and controlling women's behavior” (Johnson 101-102). Literature and media mirror their time and give certain people the opportunity to tell people in society how to act and think.

Attempting to conform to the feminine ideal promoted by media forms such as women's magazines and advertising, it was argued, caused these Stepford Wives of the 1950s incredible psychological harm by making them deny their minds. Household drudgery caused a fragmentation and a loss of concentration and led to fatigue and breakdown. Women no longer had a sense of their own identity because they were encouraged to see themselves only as someone's wife or mother. (Hollows 11)

The ideal of femininity was enforced in media, in magazines such as *Reader's Digest* (Connell 226) and *Ladies Home Journal* (Blackwelder 180) . These magazines were devoted to women's identities as mothers and/or wives, and promoted the female ideal describing how to behave to become

'perfect women'. Women were not allowed to develop into what they wanted to be; instead, they were forced on by a personality that the society wanted.

This enforcement of a "feminine" personality is still being promoted today. *Ladies Home Journal* and *Reader's Digest* and similar magazines are still being published and the concept of normative femininity still has a strong hold on society. It is, therefore, important to continue to discuss gender roles and the dangers of the patriarchal concept of femininity. In discussing feminist criticism, Barry states that cultural values divide men and women, and make it difficult for women to be socially equal to men: "Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, it is the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Barry 122). Feminism highlighted that gender is a cultural construct and showed that this construct could be resisted. Gender roles are still a vital part of society, and feminism still plays an important role in questioning patriarchal cultural values that are very influential in society. In opposing the construct of gender, the individuals are able to develop their own individuality – regardless of their sex. Thus, feminism has made people aware of the social construct of the society, the social conditions that created "the concept of femininity."

The Ideal of Femininity in *The Falls*

The Falls (2004) is a novel that deals in depth with the ideal of femininity. One of the most essential attributes in the ideal of femininity is the notion of beauty (Friedan 16). Beauty is an important theme of the novel, and the concept of beauty affects the main character. Aria's body image is vital in the novel, and references to her body occur frequently, for example: "She was well aware that everyone stared at her bosom in the exquisite Chantilly lace bodice, pitying her. She was

well aware that everyone pitied Gilbert Erskine, to have married an old maid” (Oates 11). Ariaiah believes that she lacks beauty, and is self-conscious about not having the ideal body type. Her lack of beauty is also dealt with when she meets Dirk's mother, Mrs Burnaby who states that “I was groomed as a debutante – I was a 'great beauty' – to use an expression of that era. You, Ariaiah, have been spared that, at least” (Oates 160). Mrs Burnaby is described as an ideal woman, who has fallen from grace but looks back at her life as a beauty. Ariaiah is described as the opposite of her, at least when it comes to beauty. Since Ariaiah has “been spared” (Oates 160) from it, it is clear that Mrs. Burnaby does not see Ariaiah as the conventional beautiful woman. It is also clear that Ariaiah does not have the body that a woman “should” have. The novel emphasizes this body ideal when Ariaiah's mother is dressing her for her wedding to Gilbert: “Mrs. Littrell, mother-of-the-bride, relieved and anxious in about equal measure, had conceded to Ariaiah that, yes, it might seem strange to her, a full corset to contain the tiny 32–A breasts, the twenty–two–inch waist, and the thirty–two–inch hips, yes but this is a wedding, the most important day of your life ... Never would Ariaiah have defied Mrs. Littrell in such matters of feminine protocol”(Oates 11-12). It is evident that Mrs. Littrell is a spokesperson for “feminine protocol”(12), of how women should act and appear. Mrs. Littrell is described as a full- figured and gentle woman, with a “soft, warm, bosomy body” (Oates 145). In contrast, Ariaiah is described as “no beauty, with eyebrows and lashes so pale a red as to be nearly colorless, and a translucent skin showing a tracery of small blue veins at her temple” (Oates 47).

An important part in being a feminine woman is to carefully consider how a woman should act; it is a must in order for a woman to be able to behave the way society defines “proper” feminine behavior. Ariaiah thinks a great deal of how to behave as a “good woman”: “For it seemed to Ariaiah that she'd failed somehow. She was a female (obviously!) and yet somehow not a worthy womanly woman, not a good woman” (Oates 172). Ariaiah here connects the notion of a womanly woman and a good woman. In the novel, there is a strong correlation between the two notions, and the idea of a good woman reappears several times. Ariaiah also defines what a “womanly woman” is. A womanly

woman needs to follow the social code and be “feminine”. The social code states that a woman needs to be beautiful and soft and warm, as Aria's mother is. However, Aria is the opposite; she is pale and skinny, and does not correspond to the notion of the warm woman.

Aria believes that she needs to play the role of the stereotypical woman in order to be a good wife and mother. However, Aria has mixed feelings about her children, and acknowledges that she does not love her children as much as she believes a mother should. Aria thinks that “if you fail to love your first-born as much as a mother should love, you certainly should have a second child, to make things right” (Oates 163). However, she does not realize that this role is a product of her social surroundings; it is not nature in itself that decides the characteristics of this role but since Aria does not believe that she loves her children enough, she believes that she is not a “womanly woman” (Oates 172). Part of the definition of the ideal of femininity is that women are not allowed to get agitated or have deep thoughts. Barbara Johnson (1998) argues,

What this internalization indicates is that the repression of writing is related to a repression of ambivalence. The woman is not allowed to have mixed feelings, to be “composite” or “interwoven”. She must renounce everything about which she has negative feelings, even when those feelings are internalized from the opinions of others. Ultimately, the thing about which she feels ambivalent, and which she renounces, is herself. (Johnson 28-29)

Therefore, the woman needs to renounce negative feelings and avoid situations which might lead to serious conversations, which also can be seen in the novel. Aria starts to avoid reading the Gazette, a morning newspaper that deals with local and national news: “During the past several years she'd become increasingly anxious about the vast world outside their home in Luna Park. She refused to read the front section of the Gazette” (Oates 192). In refusing to read this newspaper, she is also refusing to confront negative feelings that this magazine might stir up. Aria acts this way because

she is isolated in the role of the good woman. It is clear that Ariaah becomes increasingly anxious of the outside world; she feels the need to not be anxious and cuts out the activities in her life that might stir up feelings of anxiety: “Abruptly she’d excuse herself to leave conversations at social gatherings that drifted onto unpleasant subjects” (Oates 192). Ariaah is not only avoiding to become upset by not reading or listening to news, but she is letting the refusal of negative feelings affect her social life. When she is speaking to other people she fears becoming upset over “unpleasant subjects”, and feels forced to excuse herself. The narrative makes it clear that a woman is not supposed to get upset and men should avoid conversations that could lead to that reaction. Such conversations could lead to mixed feelings, which Johnson claimed a woman following the ideal of femininity should not have. In the novel there are examples where Ariaah's husband, Dirk, avoids discussions with his wife: “he knew better – he’d had enough experience by this time! - than to discuss anything problematic with his excitable wife” (Oates 191). Dirk shows, by avoiding to excite his wife, how a wife should behave. He believes that she would get excited if she was told the truth, and he feels uncomfortable when she becomes excited. Dirk's reaction towards Ariaah shows what kind of social climate the characters are in – women are not suppose to get excited or agitated or too involved in politics.

In *The Falls*, it is vital that a woman is dependent on and protected by her husband. The following quote shows Ariaah's relative independence.

Her Burnaby in-laws and social acquaintances thought it eccentric, Ariaah knew. That the wife of Dirk Burnaby gave piano lessons. For five dollars an hour. A woman with three young children. Like a genteel spinster in need of an income. Ariaah had said in wide-eyed innocence to Dirks disapproving sisters, “Oh I am preparing for some future time when I might be abandoned and bereft and will have to support myself and my children. (Oates

When Ariaah utters these words, Dirk's sisters become upset. The reason this upsets them is because she is telling them that one day she might be on her own and will have to take care of her children. This is unacceptable to them, since men are supposed to take care of women, and to even suggest that a woman should provide for her family does not seem right to these women. Ariaah is acting in a way that is not common in these social surroundings; hence she is not behaving according to her social code. Ariaah's social circle consists of her husband, children, neighbors, her husband's both family and acquaintances. The passage quoted above deals with Ariaah's desire to work, which is not acceptable to these society women. A suburban wife simply does not work. When Ariaah opposes the ideal of femininity by wanting to work and implies that her husband might leave her one day, the women become terrified of her.

Dirk's sisters contempt can also be seen when Clarice calls Ariaah to tell her about the rumors of Dirk and another woman. When Ariaah does not react the way the sister anticipated, she says: "...you, his wife, who has always imagined she's so clever and cultured and sharp-witted and superior to the rest of us, haven't noticed ? Are you blind, Ariaah?" (Oates 216). Clarice then continues her attack on Ariaah: "Hiding away playing your precious piano! 'Steinway spinet '!"
(Oates 216). Clarice shows her contempt for Ariaah, and again her piano playing becomes ammunition. The piano is the tool Ariaah uses to work and collect money, so in attacking Ariaah as a pianist, Clarice is also attacking her as a working wife. Dirk's sisters become terrified of Ariaah because they realize that their belief system and normalized behavior are jeopardized:

But now Ariaah wondered if she'd gone too far. It was 1950, not 1942. American woman didn't work. Especially, married women of Ariaah's social class didn't work. She could

imagine how such a proposal, made by Ariaiah's mother, would have been met by Ariaiah's father. No women in the Littrell family worked. Not a one. (Except an unmarried aunt or two, elementary schoolteachers. They didn't count). (Oates 128)

It is true that Ariaiah's husband seems to want to avoid the static gender roles when he says: "I want a wife I can respect intellectually. A wife who's smarter and more sensitive than I am, and tougher. A wife who's talented at something I'm surely not" (Oates 108). However, he seems to change his mind when they marry. Ariaiah wants to work and Dirk tells her that she can, but adds: "Until we start a family, anyway" (Oates 128). This seems to indicate that he will allow her to make a free-spirited decision until she has taken the proper role as the traditional mother and housewife. When the family is created, she needs to evolve into a suburban housewife. The idea that women should be economically dependent on the husband is also why society has a problem with Ariaiah moving on without Dirk's money. In this situation, Ariaiah has inherited Dirks money. Consequently, Dirk's lawyers and his family try to convince Ariaiah to take his money, but to no avail: "The tried to make me. His lawyers. His family even" (Oates 401). Society has a problem with this because Ariaiah shows that she does not need his money, hence she does not need a husband to take care of her and her family. She can earn her own money without her husband.

In the society depicted in *The Falls*, It is important for women to have men in their lives, since it is considered that women can not manage on their own, they need a man to take care of them. Furthermore, men are a necessity in order for women to be able to start their life: "Dear God send someone to me. Let my life begin. I beg you!" (Oates 22), Ariaiah begs. Ariaiah's thoughts point to the obvious patriarchal structure in her social surroundings and her needs of a husband to take the role as head of the household. Ariaiah's thoughts illustrate that the social code claims that a man should take care of her. That Ariaiah exclaims that her life has not begun until a man has entered it, indicates

that a woman's "real life" does not exist - without a man. Ariaah can survive without a man materially, yet she can not live without a man socially. To be without a husband is not accepted in society. Who the man himself is seems to be of less importance: "Would have gladly exchanged her soul for an engagement ring, it was that simple. The man himself was a secondary matter" (Oates 22). Kristina Westlund (2005) also discusses the issue with social norms in her review of the novel in *Kristiansstadbladet*, and argues that *The Falls* is a discussion about social conventions and family. There are a great deal of social conventions that are forced upon Dirk and Ariaah's marriage, for example the idea of that a housewife should not work.

Betty Friedan's notion of the stereotypical housewife can also be seen early in the novel. Betty Friedan's definition of the housewife is a healthy, beautiful, educated woman only concerned with her husband and children (Friedan 16). Ariaah is a fairly talented and educated woman. As mentioned above, she does not possess the traditional beauty attributes, which is dealt with several times in the novel and she is not perceived as pretty enough for Dirk. However, she does have other attributes, and she plays the role of the stereotypical housewife: "As soon as she heard his car pull into the driveway she'd prepare his drink: martini on the rocks" (Oates 129). Her life revolves around him like a true suburban housewife; she is portrayed as the sex-craving wife: "Her voice was low, seductive. She heard herself murmur things to her husband over the phone she'd never have dared to say face to face" (Oates 129). Oates emphasizes Ariaah in the role of women as sexual creature, this is a phrase which underlines Ariaah taking the role as Dirk's housewife, similar to how Friedan saw them, "sex-creatures for the man" (Friedan 236).

Oates' novel deals with the split that was occurring between the old and the new, the traditional view women and the feminist view of women. This split can also be seen in the main character, as she is split between a new and an old social identity. This split causes her to have two different personalities. Ariaah has one personality where she revolts against being like other women in her

presence: “her refusal to be humble, 'ordinary’” (Oates 396). Yet there is a passage in the novel which seems to suggest that Ariaiah still has the traditional views of how a woman should be and act. In this passage, Ariaiah is speaking to one of her sons, Chandler, and the conversation highlights how Ariaiah feels about other women. When Chandler speaks of his new lady friend, Ariaiah does not approve of her. When it comes to Chandler's lady friend, Ariaiah has a different view of women than she usually has: “Ariaiah had not wanted Chandler , aged twenty-five, to 'see' a woman friend of his who was separated from her husband, and pregnant” (Oates 311). It is clear that a woman who is divorced, while being pregnant, is not a good woman. Ariaiah believes that to be divorced was something scandalous and unladylike and such a woman is not suitable for her children to associate with.

As we have seen, the novel is then about gender roles. Regarding Oates' gender roles Friedman argues, “In later portraits, Oates registers social change that do allow for elasticity in gender roles“ (Friedman 479). This might explain why Ariaiah is depicted as being able to revolt against the ideal. Oates depicts how the climate of female roles changed. Ariaiah is able to revolt against society's values because the social climate in society is more forgiving towards people who want to step out or expand their gender role. Obviously, it was possible for some women to expand their gender roles before this era, but during the 1950s it evolved into a social movement. Prior women's movement was focused on voting and political rights, however this movement during the 1950s focused on social roles and sexuality (“Women's movement”, *Brittanica*’s online encyclopedia). Even though the novel is set from the 50s to the late 70s, the readers are from 2000s. Therefore, there is a meeting between the older and the present norms. However, Ariaiah does not revolt all the way through. While Ariaiah goes against the stream and works, she still lives like the ordinary housewife. She works at home with the children, which is more acceptable than if she had gone into a workplace. She realizes that she needs a man in order to be accepted, and she gets a man. In the beginning, Ariaiah even goes as far as marrying a man she does not love, Gilbert. While she does

revolt against the ideal through working and not accepting her deceased husband's legacy, she does not challenge gender roles all the way since she still plays the housewife, who adapts her life to her husband's needs. It is evident that she needs to balance the two personalities, the old social identity and the new, and is not able to simply latch onto the modern view of women.

Alienation

Ariah feels the need to hide and control herself. However, she does more than hide herself, she also creates a false persona. Ariah's false personality can be seen several times in the novel, here below there is a reference to her “phony personality”:

From time to time, pushing the baby's stroller in Luna Park, pausing to talk beneath the tall splendid trees with other mothers or nurse maids, in her bright chattery Lucille Ball manner, that masked Ariah Burnaby's secret disdain not only for the company she kept at such times (while her gregarious attorney – husband Dirk Burnaby kept a very different company) but for her phony altered personality, Ariah heard tales of the Widow-Bride of The Falls. (Oates 175)

Ariah compares herself to Lucille Ball, who was a famous television actress during the 1950's. Ball portrayed a housewife in *I Love Lucy* (*Time magazine's* website 1998) and by comparing herself to Ball, Ariah is also implying that she is playing a role. Furthermore, by pointing out that Ariah is using a “bright” voice (Oates 175), the act of role playing is enhanced further. To fit in, Ariah is using an altered personality, a personality that is changeable and does not correspond to whom she is. Ariah is clearly more accessible with her phony personality; she is given passage into these women's community and female conversations. Ariah's personality is referred to as altered, which implies a changeable personality. It is a personality that shows a willingness to adjust to certain circumstances and environments.

Ariah is using her fluid personality and is adjusting herself to the people around her; the housewives' community. She plays the role of the loving wife, an ideal that is mentioned earlier in this essay, but she does not seem to be comfortable in that role. There are several passages in the novel that draw attention to Ariah's false personality. In fact, she is being false towards her family, and does not express herself or her thoughts. Her falseness is visible when she discusses her parents with her husband: "Ariah shook her head, bemused by her affable husband. 'Of course we 'agreed' darling, I always agree. But it isn't so'" (Oates 172). It is evident that she pretends to agree, and that her feelings do not correspond with the answer she gives Dirk. However, Ariah's role playing is rather paradoxical, since she later on in the novel during a discussion with her children states : "Life outside the family is a masquerade', Ariah said flatly. 'You kids will learn " (Oates 321). Thus this quote explains that she is wearing a mask when she is interacting with people outside her family. These two contradictory statements indicate that Ariah's personality is fractured. It exposes yet again, as mentioned earlier, that she is balancing two personalities. Ergo, these two quotes reveal the contradictory personality she possesses. It is arguable that Ariah does not show who she is, because she is unaware of her own identity. While Ariah does admit to playing a role outside her family, she does not seem to realize that she does the same role playing inside her own family. Regarding Ariah's role playing, the narrator marks that this is something all husbands and wives do: "They were married, and so became *husband, wife*. These roles awaited them in the house at 7 Luna Park like his, hers monogrammed robes which each slipped into, happily. And gratefully" (Oates 123). By remarking that their "monogrammed robes" (Oates 123) were waiting for them at home, the act of role playing is enhanced further. Robes, in this context, are used as a metaphor for the roles they 'slip' into. The narrator is no longer just talking about Ariah and Dirk, but it makes a statement about the gender roles in society which all couples must play.

In her gender role, Ariah seeks to adapt to her husband Dirk's settings:

"Ariah awkwardly tries to adjust to Dirk's family and social circle", Navratil notices (Navratil,

Boston Globe's website). There is a balancing act in the novel and a strong metaphor can be seen in a passage about Dirk's grandfather. In this passage, Ariaah understands the need to adjust her personality to her surroundings but still keep her own feelings and motivations: "In a framed photograph in Dirk's study was a faded daguerreotype of his notorious grandfather Reginald Burnaby, a tightrope walker captured in the act of crossing the steamy Niagara Gorge, holding a twelve-foot pole across his shoulders for balance. Ariaah understood the precariousness of that balance "(Oates 169). Here, it is implied that Ariaah knows the balance of walking between two identities and the danger of falling into the abyss. This balancing act might suggest the struggle Ariaah feels within herself, the struggle between responding to Dirk's expectations and the unwillingness to let go of her individuality. Amy Mathieson argues that in *The Falls* "Oates paints the picture of a conventional 1950s marriage, following the birth of two sons and a daughter, while showing us how Ariaah's thoughts undercut the conventional, happy picture" (*The Scotsman's* website, 2004). Mathieson claims that there are two images in the novel, one is the image of the ideal family, the other image is of a woman who is not content with her life. While there are strong suggestions that Ariaah is living an ideal life with children and husband, there is a strong subtext that Ariaah's life is not as impeccable as it looks on the outside. As mentioned above, Ariaah is balancing the torment of living with two personalities, and Mathieson shows the readers that there is more to Ariaah's life than meets the eye. Furthermore, when Ariaah thinks about the community that she lives in, she feels unable to be honest with her feelings and wishes, without being judged: "Ariaah thought how disapproving these people would be, how they'd look upon Dirk Burnaby's eccentric wife with distaste, if they knew how badly she wanted another baby. Oh, yet another!"(Oates 179). Here, Ariaah shows an association between the feeling of distaste that people might feel for her and the desire for an additional child. Ariaah believes that people in the community would be repulsed by her if they knew that she has a longing for more children. As mentioned earlier in this essay, the ideal of femininity is for women to be content with what they have. In other words, her longing for

more children contradicts the ideal of femininity. Aariah has a husband, and two children by this time in the novel. In accordance to the ideal of femininity, she should be a satisfied housewife. As mentioned above, Aariah's role playing does occur within her home, too. Aariah's oldest child, Chandler, hears his mother shouting and being panic stricken in one passage in the novel. Aariah is upset because she has discovered that Dirk's has made monthly payments to someone, which stirs up anxiety about the possibility of Dirk being unfaithful. Here, Aariah does not act in a way that correspond to her "personality" : "Aariah said hotly, 'You did not hear me scream, Chandler. Don't be ridiculous. *That wasn't me*' "(Oates 218). Here, Aariah is not able to accept that she did not act according to her role. She acted hastily, without thinking about her role and cannot accept herself acting that way. The idea of roles is something that Oates incorporates in her text multiple times, for example when writing about Aariah and Gilbert's marriage: "And so 'Aariah' and 'Gilbert' were but pawns on a chess board who'd imagined themselves players!"(Oates 32). Oates is using the metaphor of a chessboard to depict how constrained Aariah and Gilbert are. Aariah and Gilbert believe themselves to be in charge of their own lives. Yet, in reality, they are nothing else than two people who have been forced into two roles that they are not comfortable in. They are not in charge; it is society and the norms of the society that have decided what kind of life they should lead. Thus, the traditional roles of husband and wife are two of the key norms in society, and which they are clearly examined in Oates' novel.

In the beginning of the novel, Aariah feels the need to play a role: "Aariah had tried, Aariah was determined to be an ideal bride, and an ideal daughter-in-law" (Oates 11). This is then a conscious decision, to play a role of a bride she believes other people want to see her in. Aariah tried to be the bride that everyone wanted her to be, but her husband still committed suicide. After her second husband's death, she eventually moves on and into a new neighborhood. Aariah is repulsed by this new milieu she lives in, an environment that includes the nuclear family in suburbia. She lives among housewives, whose husbands are away much of the day and also have children to take care

of just like Arian does. Yet, Arian does not feel that she is similar to this kind of women- “And yet she was Arian and not another woman in the neighborhood” (Oates 416). It is evident again that there is a distinct line between Arian and the other women, the women become the “others” which becomes clear in phrases like “not another woman in the neighborhood” (Oates 416). Arian still wants to play the respectable and high society wife. Yet, she has never felt comfortable in that role. Arian does not want to be like the other women in her new neighborhood and believes that they are beneath her: “To her, such behavior was 'common'-'crude'” (Oates 395). Apparently Arian sees her neighbors as ill-mannered, and this does indeed imply that she sees herself as more worthy. Arian is not like other women in her old neighborhood either. Still when she moves to another neighborhood, she does not let go of her old high society role. In her new neighborhood in Baltic Street, it is noted: “Arian Burnaby was a woman of dignity, backbone straight and head high, in a neighborhood in which housewives frequently appeared on their front porches in nightgowns and bathrobes, hair in outsized curlers” (Oates 317). These other women, who live in this neighborhood are the kind of women which Friedan discusses. This kind of women wait for their husband to come home, and make themselves pretty for them. They are the same kind of women that Arian had as role models when she was younger, when Arian was adamant to become the ideal wife. Now, as a mature woman, Arian instead decides to exclude herself from society and alienate herself from her surroundings: “It was the irony of Arian's life that, being so reclusive among her neighbors, so intent upon preserving her privacy, she drew attention to herself as few others residents of Baltic Street did” (Oates 395). In being an hermit, Arian drew people to her, and her behavior generated the opposite of what she wanted to accomplish.

In the novel Arian feels the need to stop herself from speaking too much: “Being in love with Dirk Burnaby, being so happy in love, Arian had to bit her tongue often for fear of speaking intemperately. For fear of speaking brashly, For fear of speaking truthfully”(Oates 115). “Bite your tongue” is an idiom in the English language. Someone might say “bite your tongue” instead of

saying "silence". This also symbolizes the need for Arianne to hide herself, since what we express verbally also expresses our own individuality and personality. Biting her tongue here symbolizes how confined Arianne is in order to survive the patriarchal, social climate she is in. A woman in her social status is not allowed to say what she wants. Such social constraints are also clear in another passage when she thinks about Dirk and, when socializing with his friends, and she feels awkward and different: "She'd seen his face when, in company of his friends and their wives, she, Mrs. Burnaby, made one of her coolly enigmatic remarks" (Oates 182), and she literally needs to bite her tongue to prevent herself from speaking and being herself. Because speaking intemperately and truthfully was not looked upon well in these surroundings.

Later in the novel, Arianne says to Dirk: "It isn't worthy of your wife, maybe. But it's worthy of me" (Oates 244). This shows Dirk that his image of her does not correlate with whom she is. This gives us a hint that who she is does not correspond to his standard of how his woman should be. Mathieson argues that "Burnaby is Erskine's opposite: masculine, experienced with women, the all-American hero with a progressive attitude. He opens up Arianne to the possibilities of sexual pleasure. He doesn't object to her unconventional ways and doesn't try to make her something she is not" (Mathieson, *The Scotsman's* website). In this view, Dirk has an open and direct relationship with Arianne. However, they have a relationship that idealizes the traditional female and male roles: "The Burnaby's were a romantic couple like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers" (Oates 123). Even though they have an liberal relationship, Dirk also puts her in a stereotypical female role: "She was *wife* who stayed home while husband drove each weekday morning into the city to his law office" (Oates 127). Therefore, Mathieson's argument that Dirk does not try to make Arianne into something she is not, could be strongly disputed. Dirk does accept Arianne as someone outside his social realm, but she nonetheless needs to play the housewife. The women in Arianne's community feel uneasy around her. Her sister-in-law says to one of Arianne's children: "Mother said of her, 'She's a demon'" (Oates 378). The Burnaby women feel that Arianne is evil, because she has taken Dirk away from them. Arianne, who

has a disliking of high society status, has alienated Dirk from his family and his siblings have the conviction that Ariaiah is to blame for it. They feel that a woman like Ariaiah must be a demon in order for her to be able to take him away from his family. Moreover, Dirk went outside their social circle and found a woman beneath their class. The sisters' dislike of Ariaiah is also apparent when one of the sisters says to Ariaiah concerning Dirk's supposed affair: "...and you, his wife, who has always imagined she'd so clever and cultured and sharp-witted..." (Oates 216). The sharpness of this statement is clear. Here, Clarice reveals that she believes that Ariaiah is neither smart nor sophisticated, and it is also a clear statement that Clarice does not like her. Because, to speak to someone, who has just found out that her husband might be cheating on her in this manner reveals a strong dislike of that person. Since the sisters are in a higher social standing, they feel they are the superior and that they are treated wrongly. It is evident several times that Dirk's family feel animosity toward her. One example of this dislike for Ariaiah is when Dirk is thinking about Ariaiah and her relationship with his sisters: "No wonder Clarice and Sylvia disliked their sister-in-law. Dirk couldn't blame them, really" (Oates 223). One plausible reason for his understanding of their animosity could be that Ariaiah is not acting in accordance to the realm of her social class, neither is she acting properly according to her role as a "feminine" human being. Therefore, Dirk can see that they have a strong dislike for her since he, perhaps unconsciously, has these thoughts too.

One of the strongest instigators who causes this alienation is Dirk's sister Sylvia, who tells Ariaiah that she is not how she is supposed to be. Ariaiah is blamed for not being social enough toward them and for not reacting, in what they believe to be, a proper way to Dirk's "adulterous behavior" and she is in the end blamed for Dirk's mistakes. This blame is proven when Chandler, Ariaiah's son, talks to Sylvia:

"Dirk fell in love with the red-haired woman, you see. He'd been meant to marry and live on the island with his family; he'd been meant to oversee us, our holdings, our investments, all

of Burnaby, Inc., but instead he broke his mother's heart, and stole away a part of her soul, and nothing in our family has been the same since, our children, your cousins, are grown and gone, scattered to the four winds, why? - because the red-haired woman put a spell on our brother. Her first husband threw himself into The Falls. And so her second husband was fated to die in The Falls. It had to happen. Momma predicted, and so it came to be.” (Oates 378-379)

Ariah feels alienated in her surroundings, but she also alienates herself: “Ariah shut the door upon them. Locked all the windows and pulled down the blinds” (Oates 276). When Ariah locks all the doors and closes off the world, she shows the community that she wants to be left alone, thus alienating herself. However, one might question why she alienates herself. One could argue that it is not for her dislike of people, but rather it is her fear of being judged and attacked. This is insinuated when she tells her children that people look for weakness in each other and are ready to attack (Oates 315). This suggests that she is afraid of getting hurt. Ariah also alienates herself in order for her to be herself and stop playing roles, such as mentioned earlier. Moreover, when she moves to Baltic Street, she, herself, makes a conscious decision of alienating herself from the society.

When Ariah lives with her children on Baltic Street, she draws much attention to herself but her ultimate goal is to detach herself from the world. Her life is very reclusive, and her children also have to live the same kind of life that she leads. Yet, unlike Ariah, the children never choose this way of living: “She took advantage of you, being so young. That's why we're so lonely. We grew up, people looking at us like we're freaks. Like cripples who can dance, and seem happy. People like us that way, they don't have to feel sorry for us. God damn fuckers! It's been going on all my life” (Oates 330). Life in suburbia is not an ideal upbringing for the Burnaby children. It is clear that the children feel like outcasts as they refer to themselves as abnormal. The children feel like outsiders, just like Ariah has always felt, and they feel different because their lives are so reclusive.

Ariah is afraid of people outside her family, outside her community: “It was acknowledged that Ariah Burnaby was someone special, an 'educated' - 'talented' - woman; it was understood that she feared intruders, even a friendly knock at the door could upset her” (Oates 314). She is unable to socialize with these women and is afraid of their judgment so she has to become a hermit. This is abundantly clear when Ariah does not want to thank her neighbors in person for taking care of her children when she was hospitalized, and instead sends them notes: “Ariah had written formal thank-you notes on expensive cream-colored stationary, and sent Juliet out to deliver them” (Oates 396). By assigning her daughter Juliet to give the neighbors the cards, Ariah is showing yet again that she does not feel comfortable socializing with the neighbors. The gap between Ariah's reclusive life and society is also visible when Royall thinks about his childhood and states: “Always there was a they, them. Always there was we, us” (Oates 297). The society was the strange, somewhat abstract threat. One way to build a community is to create a “them”; who “we” can unite against. Human beings need to fit into a community, and think of themselves as belonging to a number of categories. Henrij Tajfel, a British social psychologist, argues: “we have a need to understand and to evaluate ourselves. This is achieved through self-categorization, in which we think of ourselves as belonging to a number of categories” (Eysenck 496). When Ariah is not a part of a group, she is forced to create a new group. She is unable to identify which group she should belong to, in other words she is not able to put herself in an expected social category. According to Tajfel people feel the need to categorize themselves into categories such as mothers, children, wife etc. (Eysenck 496). Humans have a need to be in a group with people who are similar to them, in order for humans to feel that they belong somewhere.

Ariah is always creating an image of herself of what she thinks other people want from her. She hides parts of herself that she believes are distasteful. However, she is never able to be herself or find her own identity. Jane Ciabattari, a reviewer of the *Washington Post*, argues regarding the

Oates' themes in her novels: "Oates frequently examines the lives of American families balancing precariously on the edge of social, financial or psychological ruin" (*Washington Post* website 2004). Oates also uses this formula in *The Falls*. Ariaah is on the verge of psychological ruin. The urge to please others creates a fractured personality, created from the fact that she does not know who she is. Ariaah is constantly trying to please others, and live up to a personality that she believes the people around her would like her to have. She does not know who she is, which creates a fractured personality - a damaged personality. It is evident that when she attends Dirk's memorial she has a fractured personality: "Should she smile? Laugh aloud? A screaming laugh, or a laughing scream?" (Oates 479). This passage reveals that Ariaah has lost herself, she is not able to react, because she does not know what her initial reaction is; she has no impulsive action, since she makes every decision and action consciously in relation to her role. Thus, when she does not know how to react she cannot react at all. Navratil also remarks on Ariaah's discomfort and claims: "A seemingly brilliant woman whose nervous temperament and social awkwardness begin to torment not only herself but those closely associated with her" (Navratil, *Boston Globe* website). Navratil argument is well-grounded, Ariaah's artificial appearance at the memorial shows that she has a social awkwardness.

In "History and Representation of the Falls", Dean argues that *The Falls* is a social novel and that "it also derives from the tradition of the classic American novel that is abstract, ambiguous and obsessive, haunted by the past and conflicted between the forces of individual freedom and the obligation to community" (Dean 528). Dean argues that *The Falls* portrays a story that contains strong connections between an obligation to society and the will to be free to be whomever the person wants to be. Ariaah is caught in the middle of these two states. She has a strong sense of her obligation to society as a member of the female gender, yet she has a strong personality that she has difficulties keeping hidden. When Ariaah alienates herself from society, she still has another source of obligations – her family, and she is conflicted regarding how to behave toward them. Dean

argues in her article about *The Falls*, that Aariah “reigns at the service by her psychical appearance. She looks in her straw hat and white dress like a Renoir painting, a representation both of the family matriarch surrounded by her children and the vulnerable bride, present yet detached, a wispy figure whose meaning, like the meaning of the Falls, remains elusive” (Dean 540). Aariah puts a lot of energy on psychical appearance, and she is convinced that she needs to portray a certain image of herself. Regarding images and the illusion of the ideal woman, Brenda Daly refers to Marita Golden: “In this way, Oates' fiction is profoundly political', as Marita Golden remarks, 'and she is making a political statement about how people digest dreams and how those dreams just destroy them” (Daly 460). Daly argues that Oates has a tendency to write about human's visions of themselves and how the vision destroys them. These arguments can also be used in the case of *The Falls*. Aariah is trying to achieve a dream image of herself. She sees herself as the actress Lucille Ball (as mentioned earlier) among others; she seems to be aiming to be someone that she is not. This explains why she needs these “images” of Hollywood actresses to compare herself to. By doing this, she is losing a part of her own individuality.

Summary

Aariah is an intelligent woman who has very deep and profound thoughts about herself and society. However, she does not possess a traditional beauty. Aariah also gives an impression of being a driven woman, however she is not allowed to work and be the person she needs to be; she is not allowed to be a self-sufficient woman. These two notions; the expectation of being a beautiful woman and being reliant on her husband, show some correlations to Friedan's notion of beauty, and there seems to be the same emptiness in Aariah's life as Friedan claimed suburban housewives were feeling.

After Aariah marries Dirk, she becomes a wealthy woman, and she lives a conventional family

life. She is a mother, a wife and a daughter. She is constantly taking on roles without realizing who she is, since she empathizes the roles and does not incorporate herself into them. It is possible that she is not able to incorporate herself into them since she has not figured out who she is.

This essay shows that Arian's alienation is an effect of her not corresponding to the society's gender ideal of a woman. As shown above, there are vital points in Friedan's arguments about gender in the American society that are dramatized in Oates' novel, such as the fact that a woman should be content with what she has and that a woman needs to adjust herself to her husband's needs. Arian is an intellectual woman; she is well-educated when the readers first meet her in the novel. However, she seems to be declining in that aspect as the novel progresses. She is adjusting to her husband's need of a less intelligent creature and she allows him to feel superior. Dirk's friends and family are strong enforcers of female norms. It is revealed that they would never accept her as a part of their community. Otherwise, Arian knows that his friends want her to be the ideal wife, and if she were to show the men her true strengths and thoughts they would be terrified. Therefore, she changes her identity in order to suit her husband Dirk and his friends and family.

The aftermath of Dirks' death is a difficult ordeal for Arian, and the portrait of her after his death is somewhat confusing. The reason for this might be, that with Dirk's death, she does not know what role to play any longer, forcing her into a reclusive living, in order for her to not take on another role. It is very likely that Arian did not want to go through the same kind of ordeal as she did when she met Dirk, an ordeal that meant that she had to put on a mask and hide her personality. Therefore, she keeps to herself and tries not to let the world affect her. Arian is very well aware of her alienation, but in order for her alienation to not destroy her, she builds her own community with her children.

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