



## Existential Struggle in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*

**M. Murugan\***

Ph.D., Research Scholar

Department of English

Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

**Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar\*\***

Associate Professor

English Wing, DDE

Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

---

Joan Didion, a contemporary American author who demands consideration both as a non-fiction author and as a fiction author, is regarded a novelist, an essayist, and a New Journalist. An empirical approach to Didion's works shows a progressive change in her perception of the connection of literature to life. As the stature of literature in current life holds a crucial position in contemporary literary theory, Didion's concern to this point posits her in the mainstream of American literary notion.

Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970) comprises her fictional canon. It probes the painful path by which Maria Wyeth happens to discover the meaning of existence. Learned scholars have been strangely brutal in their evaluations of Didion and her female protagonists. In "The Case of Ms. Joan Didion," Catharine Stimpson notices Didion to be "a curious creature, whose sense of literature and existence is common, disappointingly conventional, and always problematical" (36). She adds Didion women are small, badly timid, quarrelsome, and imbued with angst.

*Play It As It Lays* begins to show the growing finesse of Didion considering her sense of place. Not only does the locale adopt two regions this time, but also locale fuses fully with theme to make dramatic and effective metaphor. The locale of *Play It As It Lays* intersperses between the frippery of Hollywood and the emptiness and aridness of the Nevada desert. Travelling back and forth between the two worlds, Maria is incapable for some time to detect a source of meaning in either. Her momentous experience emerges from a confrontation she has, humorously, in Death Valley. Maria finds that under the showy and seductive costume of Hollywood one may discover life void and fake, whereas in even the very apparently barren ambience, one may still plant hope. In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria's father Harry Wyeth implants in his daughter an even more overt faith in fortune. Wyeth is a bettor; he lost the house of his family in Reno and "happened to remember" (3)

that he possessed the town, people of Silver Wells, Nevada. Harry and his family have, like mirages in the desert, several things that come and go: a hacienda without cattle, a restaurant without customers, a reptile museum, and an ornament shop, a small golf course, and a motel for visitors those who never turned up.

Even Silver Wells itself fails to stand; it becomes the place of a nuclear missile ignition sphere. The advice of Harry to his daughter, imbued always with the jargon of gambling, appears to mean nothing. In a turn of reasoning that no one, majority of all experienced gambler, could perceive, in a remark of positivism that neither logic nor probability will help, Maria is trained to feel that “life itself was a crap game” (199) and that “what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last” (3).

Infected as well with the optimism virus are the other people in the life of Maria: Paulette, who owns the restaurant, has sex with the father of Maria, and played the slot machines with nickels from the cash register; and Benny Austin, the godfather of Maria and the crony of Harry, who could always be depended on for yet another “sure-fire” scheme to an ample fortune. Even Francine Wyeth, the mother of Maria, devoted her cocktail hours poring over magazines for gambling she might try. Equally dubious is the marriage between Maria and Carter Lang in *Play It As It Lays*. The way in which Maria becomes Carter’s wife is not described; readers know only that Maria “screamed at Ivan a former lover and married Carter” (8) and that she acted in the short films of Carter.

Maria is subjected to his direction not only in the films but also in her role as wife. Being a wife is specifically upsetting for Maria because it nullifies her own existence. In spite of her own profession, she discovers herself being interpreted only in connection to her husband, and because she refuses her own influence, Maria survives in *Bad Faith*. Once film institute students from UCLA and USC stop the couple to discuss about their recent attempts; but once they are introduced to Maria, they deter their eyes because they have nothing to talk to her. Agents and actors stop and talk to her not because they recognize her presence but because they view her as a weak expansion of her husband.

Freddy Chaikin, the agent for both Maria and Carter, to manage good will lands Maria a small role in a two-episode television show. Furthermore, after Maria is detained for robbing the Ferrari of an actor, she contacts Freddy Chaikin who, with some diligent bargaining, convinces the car-owner to revoke the complaint, deals he makes “in his day-long effort to protect Carter” (155). Carter himself treats Maria just as if she is bothering to him, an irritating effort to which he should show up before he is granted to seek his own interests. In this point, the relationship of Carter and Maria varies strongly from the relationship of Everett and Lily; whereas Everett and Lily are satisfied calmly to admit each other the freedom he/she wants, Maria and Carter are bitterly and explicitly inimical to one another. Carter is the shrewdest of all the characters in *Play It As It Lays*; he claims that she bears the abortion, and he directs her as well into going forward with the divorce. Moreover, Carter’s exploit of Maria in his first two films is certainly wily due to the depraved subject of those films: the first one invasively documents every facts of Maria’s life for a few days, giving her no privacy; the second features her being gang-raped. The abortion itself shows the absolute dependency of Maria on men and her concurrent helplessness. She should really linger by the telephone to get a word that she

has been decided a fair risk for the abortionist to make. The two strangers regulate all the causes: they determine if they will recall her, when and where the action will happen, who will propel. In the action, Maria is mechanized into being an object, a body, a customer to them, not a woman with a cluster of responsive emotions.

The important place in *Play It As It Lays* is no-place. The theme is nothingness. The female protagonist is a woman whose character and whose mental stability have degraded to the point where life does not appear feasible to her. She has no past and desires none. Her native town no longer remains. Her line-up of “Thou Shalt Nots” is ended by a forbiddance against having a Yorkshire terrier in Beverly Hills. She dwells motel rooms, hangs out in gas-stations, and goes long drives in the highway with high-speed with the radio blasting, in an effort to escape thinking. Unlike earlier works of Didion, *Play It As It Lays* adopts no comprehensive narrations of background, nor of anything else, for that point. Austerity is the fair technique to evoke the emptiness. Also, a trimmed, cinematic technique is perfect for evoking the psyche of a dazed film actress. *Play It As It Lays* is a fiction drafted basically as a film, and this is because, as one can see in the works that follow, outdated narrative has no place in a senseless world, one where, as Maria claims, “nothing applies.” Film technique, like the dream process, engages proximity of images; removed from it is the discourse that clearly links one scene to another and describes their context.

The doubt surfaces as to whether Maria, as a woman in the world of a man, is ever actually sympathetic, as played off to solely pathetic. Or, set another means, are women wholly powerless victims or not? If not, then this means they should have some liability. Her drive towards self-definition is nearly microscopic, mainly because in the desert of nothingness it is tough to fasten precise meanings to anything that is told or done. For instance, after Susannah Wood is beaten up and Maria picks up later that Carter is present when Harrison made it, she accepts to BZ that male-female relationships do, indeed, “make a difference” to her (195). Whether she knows it or not, this seems to be a reversal of her previous call to Ivan Costello that sex has nothing to do with her. Both remarks are honest in one manner, not honest in another. When one has no character, no sense of self-definition, then any relationship one has are naturally impersonal. This appears real of the relationships of Maria, for she is so vague of herself that she marvels where her body stops and space starts, or she goes to make a call because she likes to listen the sound of her own footsteps, or she speaks not to talk but to listen her own voice.

At the same time, if personal and sexual affairs really made no difference, then Maria would not be so distressed to start with. BZ believes that Maria would have done away with herself by now if things counted to her, but he miscalculates her sickened numbness for apathy. If Maria has a better strength for self-determination, she would realize that what she needs to do is protest Ivan Costello on the one hand, and have her marriage mean something on the other. In other words, when she tells she is not concerned, she implies she does not like to be, and when she tells she is concerned, she likes to be. But in both cases, Maria is not dominant enough to interpret realities, because only men interpret realities. If readers also keep in mind that Maria comes ultimately to diagnose her complication as a temporary loss of her sense of humour, readers are tempted to have the thought of parody more effectively.

*Play It As It Lays* is much less disturbing, mostly entertaining. Yet, parody does not appear effectively enough hinted to consider the novel basically that manner. Again, BZ perceives the attitudes of the bikers' gang-rape: macho mentality is homosexual mentality. BZ, although he hits Helene, is not completely a man, but that is the point. Suicide is selfish if it implies that one feels one should have purpose to live and selfishness is what all these non-men in the desert are about. Enough of them; get Kate; do some preserving.

At the end of the book-length negative illustration is something very optimistic: a new person, one without any logics. Not one who questions why, but one who demands why not, and wants only silence. There is a sense of self being formed here, but as yet there is no new place to include this new self, only a sanatorium. The readers endure to feel about Maria at the end, because even they do not know where she can go.

In *Play It As It Lays*, the majority of the places have belonged to the negative model: the three allegorical metropolitans of the American dream, the desert of male gambling and exploitation in which the female characters are alienated and imperilled, the road and the motel symbolising homelessness and the mocked wasteland. Maria has only her asylum in which to take her optimistic accord and attempt to heal - only the asylum in which to "watch the hummingbird." The asylum symbolises order for Maria; and, in the sarcastic manner noted above, her canning jars portray her art. The concept of sanctuary, of refuge, has now become deliberately artificial in Didion's fiction.

Majority of critics, observing the Didion women in comprehensive terms of their fallibility or other emotional or physical frailty, are substance to evaluate the female protagonists as static, non-developing characters. For that reason such critics constantly neglect to accept or to view the important personal change of each protagonist's existential struggles.

Didion's range of differences in fictional technique surfaces in the manner in which she perfectly fuses existential ideas with a variety of similar styles. Her *Play It As It Lays* show an evolving finesse in creative technique in three elemental manners: in terms of narrative context, setting and her adoption of some phenomenal stylistics.

### Works cited:

Cotkin, George. *Existential America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003. Print.

Didion, Joan. *Play It As It Lays*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970. Print.

Foust, Ronald. "Family Romances and the Image of Woman's Fate in *Play It As It Lays*."

*Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 5 (1984): 43-54. Print.

Stimpson, Catherine. "The Case of Ms. Joan Didion." *MS Jan.* 1973: 36-41. Print.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Play It As It Lays: Didion and the Diver Heroine." *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (1983): 481-95. Print.