

Exploring the Female Body and Identity of Marian McAlpin: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*



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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the female body and identity of the main protagonist, Marian McAlpin, in Margaret Atwood's fiction *The Edible Woman*. The female body has been a major theme in Atwood's fictions. Through the portrayal of the body, Atwood tries to give identity to her female characters. And in *The Edible Woman*, Marian is explored through this lens. In this fiction, Atwood tried to color her central character Marian McAlpin as typically Canadian woman. She always tries to ask key questions through the female body. *The Edible Woman* attempts to highlight the struggle, pain and trauma of Marian who is trapped in that subjugated body. In fact, Atwood has endeavored to present Marian as an edible woman due to the consumer society she dwells — a society where object/thing is considered as consumable.

Keywords: Explore, Female Body, Identity, Struggle, Pain, Trauma, Trapped, Subjugated, Consumer.

Introduction

Feminism is a movement aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social right and equal opportunities for women. Feminism focused on women's issues, behavior and belief of a feminist. It is a philosophy in which women and their contribution is valued. Feminists view the world as being unequal. They want to see the gender gap and the idea that men are superior to women decreased or even abolished. Different types of feminist theory add to this interesting study and each has had a profound impact on women and gender studies. The study of feminism can be divided into three parts as Cultural Feminism, Individual Feminism and Liberal Feminism.

The main aim of this paper is to unlock the writer's (Margaret Atwood's) viewpoint on feminism and the impact of the patriarchal society on the female body. The male-dominated society has always posed as a big threat to women's progress in general and her identity in particular. It is found that Atwood's women feel/find themselves suffocated and subjugated in the overrated artificial society where the image of women is disappointingly pitiable. Atwood tries to give the audience the picture of consumable female body through her portrayal of the edible woman, Marian McAlpin, who abides by the maxims of a consumer market. Marian's revolt against this set of patriarchal practice makes her a New Woman. She tries to deviate from the usual route/image of the suppressed woman. Hence, the paper is an attempt to show the pain, dilemma and resolution of the main protagonist, Marian.

The Edible Woman (1969) is Atwood's maiden attempt at fiction writing that represents the women's liberation movement. It describes a young heroine, Marian McAlpin, who feels caught in a sex role trap that she must break out of or risk losing her identity. It is a complex piece of realistic fiction—an intelligent woman's guide to survival in the contemporary world. It is the first Canadian novel that anticipated the trends of feminism found in the later women novelists such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Toni Morrison. Atwood rightly describes *The Edible Woman* as a "proto feminist" novel which shows the influence of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The title is significant, suggesting a view of women as objects for someone's pleasure.

The Edible Woman showcases myriad feministic issues like subjugation of women, male hegemony of women, disagreement with feminine roles, women: commodity and consumerism. J. Brooks Bouson remarks: "As a realistic novel, *The Edible Woman* shows how female

passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self" (Bouson 231).

Marian suffers because of the role that society imposes upon her and her personal definition of self. The food also becomes a symbol of her struggle and her eventual rebellion. She shows her powerlessness through her attitude towards food. Her eating disorder is her response to her social pressure. Her eating disorder acts as a metaphor of a revolt and protest—her rebellion against a modern, male dominated society. She tries to interpret the world in term of food. At the end of *The Edible Woman*, she restructures the new concept of self through a renewed relationship to food. As Sarah Seats says:

By looking right across her work it is possible to put together a picture of how food, eating and appetite in her fiction relate to 'how people order their societies' on micro (individual, interpersonal) and macro (cultural) levels, not just in specific instances, but woven into an overall political analysis or vision. (Seats 94)

Hence, *The Edible Woman* is a young woman's rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. Marian McAlpin, the complicated female protagonist, was shaped first by her parents' plans for her future, then by her fiancé, Peter. It expresses female/human discontent with the consumer attitudes of the society Marian perceives in relation to herself. The consumers are the men who run her life and devour her. The character of Peter suggests another theme that Atwood will deal with in her later novels (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*) – violence and aggression against women. In the beginning, the fear of marriage to Peter subdues Marian position as an independent individual. She struggles to be normal. Because she had no clear plan of herself she became a victim of others. Her acceptance of submission to the patriarchal society made her an abject object—a consumable object. She has imbibed the values of her culture to such an extent that she has chained herself with her principles/maxims. The cake woman image which Marian bakes with icing, symbolizes her personification of woman (her own image), representing her own stand. "You've been trying to destroy me you've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. That's what you wanted all along" (*The Edible* 271).

Marian eating the cake-woman, in a fit of anger and angst of retaliation after Peter's refusal to partake it, shows that she can rebel and survive rather than subduing to selfish male domination. By portraying how consumption relates to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world. The cake which she bakes is at once a therapy, a self-discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. In an interview with Gibson Atwood explains: "Marian performs an action, preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself" (Gibson 2). According to Glenys Stow, the cake "is of course, a deliberate symbol of the artificial womanhood which her world has tried to impose on her," and with the

"crazy feast" at the novel's conclusion "Marian breaks out of the expected social pattern" (Stow 90). Sharon Wilson conceded that Marian "returns to (the) society" that has oppressed her, but maintains there is symbolic agency in Marian's return: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food" (Wilson 96). *The Edible Woman* follows Marian deep into a self-exploration symbolized by her rejection and then eventual re-acceptance of food. She gives up food in her search for a place in society and to find out who she is and what her true persona is. Waugh notes: "by her act Marian has registered a voluntary and international protest which release her body from its involuntary rejection of food" (Waugh 181).

Margaret Atwood employs an eating disorder in her novel *The Edible Woman* as a metaphor of a revolt and protest. Atwood in an interview says: It's a human activity that has all kinds of symbolic connotations depending on the society and the level of society. In other words, what you eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from individual as well as from place to place. If you think of food as coming in various categories: sacred food, ceremonial food, everyday food and things that are not to be eaten, forbidden food, dirty food, if you like- for the anorexic, all food is dirty food. (Lyons 228)

Atwood suggests that in conventional society, women are edible. They are swallowed by their male counterparts. Marian is aware of this fact and decides that if she were eaten, then she will take control of her own life and eat herself. Eating disorders in Atwood's works is therefore employed as symbols of women's bodies' responses to social pressure. Even before Marian returns to first-person selfhood, she sees that there might be a way out, that becoming trapped by a repressive or unsatisfying role need not be the end of the matter. Atwood is urging women to assert their right to eat and re-inhabit their own bodies:

Through this novel, Marian examines and rejects the roles presented to her by society and also rejects domination of social conventions in order to achieve self-identity and self-knowledge and self-awareness. In the last part which is only five pages long Marian comments: "I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again." (*The Edible* 278)

In the male-dominated society in which Marian lives there are two options: eat – or get eaten. Both, however, pose a single alternative to a woman. The cake and Marian are delicious edibles, made for other people's pleasure, not their own. The fate of cake and bride is decided upon and determined beforehand. They will get consumed and eaten. Duncan, the self-absorbed English graduate, also functions as another mirror image for Marian's anxieties and bodily extinction. In this novel the heroine, representative of the early feminism, was set in an antagonistic relationship with the male world, where the woman is clearly victimized by the male world. This is a recurring formula of Atwood's novels, the basic perspective from which Atwood's women is seen in her early novels. The novel, however, in spite

of the limitations of Marian may have as a feminist icon, suggests the non-conformist role women might play in society. But it should be noted that Atwood's women usually epitomize and/or reflect more complex issues than the private ones.

Atwood's understanding of her female characters is so intense that she regards her works as a mirror to society. She points out that "It is fiction where individual memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportion. The closer fiction is to us as readers the more we recognize and claim it as individual rather than collective...each character in fiction has an individual life replete with personal detail...but each also exists within a context" (Atwood 2). Atwood's fiction reflects both individual and collective consciousness and experience. Her view of reality is characterized by a shifting of artistic focus from the individual to the social, from female to human, from past to present, from present to future – "to challenge an accepted version of history" (Ibid 8). Rosemary Sullivan points out, "Margaret had begun to see the novel as a vehicle not only for (feminine) self-expression, but also for social observation" (Sullivan 132).

Atwood, as both an iconic and iconoclastic figure of Canadian literature, does not reflect only historical, social and cultural diversification but also the main concerns and discontents of Canada. The literary works of Atwood constitute an inseparable part of studies on Canada because she reflects its national, cultural and social essence. Analyzing the novels of Atwood, one can discover that their primary concern with women's lives is communicated through varying perspectives of her view of a female world and the transformation of the positions of women in Canada and the world as well. Atwood in her novels uses her female characters to point to the problems of humankind as such through the paradigm of relations such as the relations of women to their own selves (*The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*) or to other women (*The Robber Bride*) or through presenting women in their relations to the male dominated society (*The Handmaid's Tale*), society in relation to women, women as the representation of humankind (*Oryx and Crake*), and so on. Atwood's prophetic insight into the female world is clearly demonstrated through Marian's anorexia. Anorexia, one of the major medical problems of contemporary women, is dealt with as a tool of woman's self-expression and self-liberation.

Atwood's novels strike as private and strongly individualized personal histories with the female protagonists being obsessed by their private dilemmas and frustrations. Her private, female and individual experience transcends into the universal and the global. Hence, while her perspective may be perceived as feminist, the major argument of Atwood's novels is wider – social, political, ecological, religious – demonstrating also her sensitivity to the catastrophic consequences of the excesses of humans if carried to the extreme. Atwood has always set her themes of womanhood into wider social frameworks and gradually extended her initially feminist concerns into global human concerns. Kate Millet in '*Sexual Politics*' points out that the basis for all power relationship is the male-female relationship. The protagonist of *The Edible Woman* is a female

who is unstable, mentally disturbed and unsure of herself. Her pilgrimage to the new identity is long and painful. Her transition from a victimized position to a non-victim is possible only in relation to a man. *The Edible Woman* in general expresses woman's uncertainty of her place in the society. Marian, freeing herself from the clutch of Peter's hand, says "Once I was outside I felt considerably better. I had broken out from what, or into what I didn't know" (*The Edible Woman*). Although Marian as a character presents a strong case for feminist argument, Atwood does not allow her to enjoy her flight from the restrictive male world. To regain her personal balance she starts eating again and looking for a new job – she becomes a consumer, thus accepting male dominance. Here, Atwood is defying the conventional female role that most females were expected to play during the 1960s.

Conclusion

Hence, it is marked that Atwood in her novels projects the modern woman's situation, who yearns impatiently to achieve her goals. Her female characters do not blame others but reject the human society and turn to primitive world. The heroines of her novels accept their mistakes and recover them. In their quest for survival and identity they suffer hard and at last they overcome the great panic. What Atwood attempts to do in her novels is to explore the process and possibilities of reckoning with the hegemonic power structures. Male control and power over women in all spheres of life is what constitutes patriarchy and therefore, one needs to eliminate it. But this is not easy as patriarchal ideology says Millet. He has made it certain that men always love the dominant roles while women love the subordinate roles. By such a conditioning, men are able to gain the approval of the women that they oppress. Millet also noted that contemporary feminism attempted to destroy the sex/gender system and she looked forward to a society in which equality of the sexes was established.

Margaret Atwood is one of those personalities who dares to speak the truth to show the harsh reality and cruel faces beneath the mask. She not only takes an active part in creating the female tradition, but also comments on it in her works. On one level—Atwood is simply preoccupied with women as characters. The main subject of her fiction is the way women feel, think and act. *The Edible Woman* shows how a woman's body is always a site of constant struggle between social control and self-assertion. The protagonist undergoes a traumatic journey in search of a viable route for survival, the female will struggle as a result of the flesh to be sold in the matrimonial market by selfish male will. At the end, Marian refuses to be a victim though her future is left unsure. She continues to be optimistic and achieve a new self-identity—self-identity of a new woman. Thus, *The Edible Woman* is a representative fiction focusing upon the theme of female suffering caught in the web of obnoxious male domination, being reduced to a consumable object.

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