

GENDER, WRITING AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian author, released her book *The Edible Woman* in 1969. Numerous distinguished academics have analysed the work from different angles. This thesis makes an effort to analyse Atwood's use of writing in *The Edible Woman* in relation to gender, food, and feminist awareness. The novel's 1969 release coincided with the second wave of feminism's consciousness-raising campaigns for women. The female protagonist, Marian, undergoes a metamorphosis in her sense of self, and this shift in viewpoint is associated with the novel's disjointed structure. Alternating between first-person, third-person, and first-person accounts of Marian's experiences distinguishes the novel's three main sections. In the midst of the story,

before she achieves her emancipated self-actualization, Marian experiences existential distress, which is brought to light by the shift in narrative voice. Atwood calls the book "protofeminist" as its 1965 publication anticipated the emergence of second wave feminist groups. This is the Atwood X report. Set in this era, the novel's heroine portrays the hardships and disappointments endured by the more reasonable women of her day. The novel's female characters stand in for 1960s women in general, and the protagonist's internal struggle with writing appears to reflect that of many women of her generation.

Key Words: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, Identity, Liberation, Cibophobia, *The Edible Woman*

INTRODUCTON

The Edible Woman, Atwood's first book, was released in 1969. Numerous distinguished academics have analysed the work from different angles. As stated by Lilburn, "*The Edible Woman*" solidified Atwood's position as a fiction writer and has since garnered immense academic acclaim. An outstanding first novel, *The Edible Woman* is hilarious, insightful, and a lot of fun.

"Its cannibalistic undertones menace and force people into prescribed roles, threatening their integrity," Carla D'Antonio said of the work by one of the best recent novelists in North America. Cannibalism in Atwood's works is also associated with postcolonial discourses,

particularly those that deal with the colonisation, exploitation, and objectification of women's bodies.

(36) This research endeavours to investigate Atwood's use of writing as a tool for exploring themes of food, gender, and feminist awareness in *The Edible Woman*. The book was published in 1969, coinciding with the emergence of female awareness raising activities of the second wave of feminism, according to Moi. "By 1970 there were already many different strands of political thought in the 'new' women's movement" (22). The portrayal of female characters in fictions adds to the theoretical examination of women in society, as Atwood puts it, "...fiction is one of the few forms left

through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge ourselves" (27). 'A literary work should provide role-models, instil a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men"' (qtd. in Moi 46), as Cheri Register so eloquently puts it in an essay published in 1975. Atwood's portrayal of Marian is identical to this description. In addition, the protagonist Marian's (our heroine) shifting views on her own identity is associated with the novel's disjointed structure. The narrative shifts from first-person to third-person and back again throughout the work, with each section focusing on a different aspect of Marian's life. In the midst of the story, before she achieves her emancipated self-actualization, Marian experiences existential distress, which is brought to light by the shift in narrative voice. Atwood calls the book "protofeminist" as its 1965 publication anticipated the emergence of second wave feminist groups. (Atwood X) A decade after the war, post-WWII society was still fighting for the status quo of long-held patriarchal ideals, spurred on by the rising consciousness of women who were challenging long-held assumptions about their own personal capabilities. Society was prepared to demand the adoption of gender equality policies once the suffragette campaign succeeded and more women entered traditionally male-dominated fields.

along with the consciousness-raising feminism of the second wave. Set in this era, the novel's heroine portrays the hardships and disappointments endured by the more reasonable women of her day. The novel's female characters stand in for 1960s women in general, and the protagonist's internal struggle with writing appears to reflect that of many women of her generation. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous urges women to break "out of the world men constructed for women." Marian,

echoing this sentiment, attempts to write about the "unthinkable/ unthought" that patriarchal ideology has forcefully removed women from, according to Tong (276). During the 1960s in North American consumer culture, Atwood's imaginative universe portrayed women as beings who were both helpless and edible.

Main character Marian lives in a flat with her companion Ainsley and is a strong-willed, self-reliant lady. Among her close friends are the trustworthy and soon-to-be-successful lawyer Peter, her college buddy Clara, and the quirky Duncan. Marian is a market research business employee who is thought of as reasonable and bright; yet, she is anticipated to leave her work soon to settle down with a husband and household duties. Marian sheds light on "the multifaceted sources of patriarchy and sexism" that these women encounter at the business where she works. (Bottici 1) According to the established organisational chart, the company is structured as follows: the upper-level executives are males, the lower-level workers conduct physical labour, and the female employees handle customer surveys and product samples.

Throughout her career, Atwood has spoken out against essentialist ideas about what it means to be a woman. "To expect or demand that they be angelic and perfect is very Victorian," she says, adding that women come in diverse sizes, ages, phases, heights, colours, and regions of the globe. Perimeters on pedestals are small. "You don't get to move around very much" (quotation taken from Masterclass, page). Various facets of femininity are portrayed by Atwood in *The Edible Woman* via shape of a number of selected female characters. Although there aren't many female characters in the book, the ones that are there all highlight different ways of "becoming a woman" (Beauvoir). In addition to those who challenge such conventional beliefs, Atwood presents a few clichéd characters. Gender norms are upheld by Peter, Joe, and Lucy, while Duncan and Ainsley refuse to conform. Ainsley, a fellow anrcha-feminist and Marian's friend, has declared her intention to have a child but has no plans to get married. This

is because, according to Ainsley, "The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands." (42) Clara, a friend of Marian's from their time in school and college, is now a housewife who relies heavily on her husband for help with almost everything. Ainsley makes a poignant point in the following lines about how many women deliberately embrace patriarchal thinking, even though they may not be the ones suffering as a result. This challenges the typical perception of Clara as a submissive and oppressed woman who deserves pity. According to Ainsley:

Does she think she can handle it?"She does nothing but lie there while he gets everything done!" She allows herself to be handled as if she were nothing! I'm afraid she's sick.... It is he who is unwell; she is thriving. In the short time that I've known him—less than four months—he has aged. All of his vitality is being sapped by her. At least she ought to make a gesture, even if it's only a symbolic one. Was her degree ever completed? She should definitely go to work on it right now, wouldn't you agree? That's the number 39.

To others around her, Marian, on the other hand, seemed like a strong, self-reliant lady. Everyone thought she was a reasonable woman who was prepared to play the role of a submissive social bride. This is shown in her statement: "of course I'd always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does..." She believed that marriage was the only way for women to be accepted in society. Her submission to patriarchal norms is glaring when she says, "I'd

would prefer that you make that call. The major choices should be yours to make, not mine. To my surprise, I had achieved it. I had never spoken to him in such a way before. While trying to internalise a female subject position that would positively react to Peter's idea of a wife in her, Marian ended up creating a rift in her personality. "The funny thing was that I

really meant it." (107). Unbeknownst to her, she splits into two distinct feminine identities. While one of her hidden personalities subtly resists and becomes lost, the other stays hidden under the surface by absorbing the anticipated behaviours. Toril Moi effectively defines Marian's confused identity when he comments:

So, to speak as a subject is to symbolise the presence of suppressed desire: the speaker is deficient, and this is how Lacan can state that the subject is not what it appears to be (97). "The speaking subject that says 'I am' is actually saying 'I am he (she) who has lost something'—and the loss suffered is the loss of the imaginary identity."

Marian and Peter's relationship began with a preconceived duty to conform to social standards. Peter, who planned to become a great lawyer, seemed like the perfect guy to Marian, so she thought it was only fair that she accept his proposal and begin to rely on him for major life choices. Peter had similar views on his role as an accomplished and respected member of society. Marian was the kind of reasonable lady he was hoping to settle down with since she wouldn't throw him for a loop. He had high hopes that the marriage would boost his reputation and employment prospects. Indeed, Marian demonstrates that she is the kind of woman who will submit to societal pressures and allow herself to be led. Rather of pointing fingers, Duncan tells her not to. He insisted throughout the book that Marian should rely on her own intelligence to make sense of her problems, and he did her best to help her see herself as a powerful and capable person. Nevertheless, it has been clear from Marian's early acts that she would succumb to materialism and allow others control her every move throughout the book.

will remain a target of its injustices and manipulations," (Lilburn) Marian confesses that she "probably intended to marry Peter all along," yet she becomes dependent on him after accepting his proposal. (101) Everyone anticipated her to leave her work immediately

because she was going to get married to a prosperous and talented man like Peter. Marian goes on to explain that Mrs. Bogue "perceives pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company" (107) and that the firm where she worked was not supportive of her continued employment after her marriage, and that her identity as a female office worker had to be entirely erased. Bogue would have loved it if her daughters were either single or had served their country well enough to have outlived their potential for unanticipated pregnancies. She had heard that newlyweds tended to be unstable (107), and Marian's subconscious reluctance to leave her work later on only contributes to her feelings of embarrassment. Even though Marian presented an idealised picture to her loved ones, there was a hidden side to her that wasn't as stable and consistent as Peter had imagined. Marian began dating Duncan, who shared her peculiarities and scepticism, due of this split personality trait in her character. Marian becomes acutely aware of her own retaliations after her experience with Duncan, which manifest as her persistent aversion to eating.

When Peter wants her to alter her look to suit his liking for their engagement, her affinity with food becomes even stronger. It is societally propagated that women are required "to pay attention to their clothes, to use makeup and to become flirtatious to hold on to their husbands and stimulate their desire" (The Second Sex), which Beauvoir condemned. In Atwood's portrayal of Marian's fiancé Peter, a chauvinist, we see him imposing the aforementioned demands on Marian. Over time, she becomes unable to eat since she associates food and prey with her state as a woman. When Peter brings up the horrific practice of animal killing, Marian starts to see herself in the animal and flees the gathering, thinking the camera is her harpoon.

to a firearm. After seeing Peter carve his steak at supper, she decides she can no longer eat meat. She quits her own engagement party and spends the night with Duncan, making her

retribution against Peter's subjection more apparent. Her cibophobia and developing association with food were merely the beginning indications.

Throughout the story, the narrative voice shifts to reflect Marian's journey from a rational lady to an enslaved figure, and last, to her own emancipation. She gradually succumbs to the stereotypically anticipated femininity as the narrative shifts from first-person to third-person, emphasising her disconnection from reality. By the novel's conclusion, Marian has achieved emancipation and is prepared to take charge of her life and be accountable for her choices, while the narrative voice shifts back and forth between first-person and third-person perspectives. Marian goes through existential crisis at the beginning of the book before finally finding harmony with her own spirit. The abrupt shifts that Marian identifies with her clothing and food are a representation of her anxious mood in Atwood's writing. There are a lot of moving parts that reveal how the characters are building or even being marginalised in their identities, such as their outward look, the varied discussions they have, the individuals they choose to befriend, etc.

The garments speak for themselves. They may be worn as a badge of honour or as an expression of one's character. A person's clothing may either accentuate or conceal their deeply held ideas and ideals. Peter prompted Marian to choose an outfit that was different from her normal choices for their engagement since he thought Marian's clothing were "mousy" and boring. It was indicative of Peter's hypocritical and ostentatious character that he preferred women to wear brightly coloured clothing and have spectacular hairstyles. He wished he could mould Marian into a woman he could control and dominate. He had no plans to participate in their marriage on an equal footing. Peter was Atwood's way of demonstrating how sexist males engage in indulgent behaviour towards their female partners in a patriarchal manner, which demoralises and dominates them. Read alongside Smith's explanation of the following phrases to

have a better understanding of the patriarchal ideology danger and Peter's role:

For patriarchal gender ideologies, "it is" the "double move of a reifying a diversity of traits into a determination as masculine or feminine... ", which both essentializes male and female difference and the idea of an autonomous, unitary "self." This ensures that phallogocentric discourse takes precedence and maintains its authority. According to Smith (49).

Because "For a child, --- the world is the world of one's parents, --" and because of this, Tuan and Sack argue that a person's environment plays a significant role in shaping their identity.

such as a house, street, park, etc. According to Cecil and Cecil (244): "One's place is small in scope and scale, yet one identifies with it intimately." (qtd. in Cecil & Cecil 244). Atwood sets her characters in appropriate locations, and those locations reveal a lot about their personalities. Somewhere at a dreary theatre, a shabby motel or a dull laundromat is where the quirky English literature major Duncan is unexpectedly encountered. In contrast, you may find Peter in a spotless flat or a classy pub. To Marian, it was clear that they were diametrically opposed. The wild, unsophisticated, but naked reality was genuinely tied to Duncan, the guy with the plain and honest work. Peter is shown as a traditionally perfect, but chauvinistic, masculine character due to his rigid commitment to the traditional role of the gentleman. Such diverse men and women are perpetually in Marian's vicinity. Unknowingly, she assumes the roles of a variety of female and even male subjects. But in her efforts to live up to other people's expectations of her, she begins to lose touch with her own identity. According to Lilburn:

Marian struggles throughout the book to find her place in a society where males produce all the models seen in ads and on magazine covers. Anticipated to Marian fights against what she thinks is her doomed destiny of conforming to

cultural expectations of femininity.

She worries that her own future may be much like the ladies around her, given the situations they're in. The thought of becoming the annoying elderly woman she regularly sees in the basement is something she despises. Equally unsettling to her were Ainsley's extreme and myopic predictions for the future. Although she consented to the marriage, she hoped she wouldn't wind up like her friend Clara, who seems to be almost paralysed and completely powerless since her husband left her. Cibophobia is a manifestation of her anxiety, which is fueled by her worry about all the potential future confusions. Her physical health deteriorated as a consequence of her unconscious attempt to gain control of her life via her unwillingness to eat.

Smith notes that, "...with the rise of effective piety, female figures of immense power emerged from relative obscurity to introduce a female presence and a potential locus of identification in a formerly male preserve." (67) Atwood describes Marian in a same way. She begins to let her guard down as soon as she realises she has to stand up for herself. To put her condition into context, consider Millett's definition of a woman's emancipation: "For Millett, woman is an oppressed being without a recalcitrant unconscious to reckon with; she merely has to see through the false ideology of the ruling male patriarchy in order to cast it off and be free." (qtd. in Moi 29) When Marian finally decides to do something about her predicament, she plots her road to recovery by analysing her degraded state. After realising that Peter was somehow involved with the prey animals and food, she contemplates their connection and her place in it as a woman. She gets down to the serious business of self-actualization, embracing the vengeance bubbling up within her as she fights patriarchal tyranny. She bakes a cake representing herself and presents it to Peter as a replacement. Her intention in making the sacrifice was to signal her opposition to the usual submission as a woman. By the book's conclusion, she has matured into a strong, self-reliant lady who is comfortable with who she is

and can decide for herself what to do next. "Appropriating her voice and writing her unwritten tale, thereby becoming a subject that forms instead of being an object that has been fashioned by patriarchal ideas" (Koyuncu) describes Marian's journey through the book. She "examines her unique life and then attempts to constitute herself discursively as female subject" (Smith 47), which gives her personal narrative a non-linear quality. It is widely acknowledged that "Women's autobiography presents "visible formerly invisible subjects" and that women speaking from this position of Universal man proffers authority, legitimacy, and readability. In Atwood's portrayal of the protagonist, Marian, we see that Marian is unconsciously narrating her own autobiography. Smith argues that by using autobiography to create identity, Marian breaks down the hegemony of formal "autobiography" and breaks out of the silence that has bound her culturally to discover a resonant voice of her own. In the final scene, Marian prepares a cake that represents her suppressed and vulnerable self and offers it to Peter as a replacement. By actively realising her full potential, she is able to break free from the oppression she endured and achieve a spectacular climax.

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