



ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*: A SAGA OF IDENTITY CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the dilemma of Canadian women who oscillate between conventional social code meant for women and their self-identity. *Edible woman* showcases myriad feministic issues like subjugation of women, male hegemony, disagreement with feminine roles, women: commodity and consumerism. Margaret Atwood highlights through her novels the pathetic facet of Canadian women who are trapped in framed roles which suggest them a conventional code of conduct. They experience an irrevocable loss of self-identity. The adamant rigidity of the patriarchy, which advocates feminine traits and secondary position of women in society, pushes women to an abysmal thralldom.

**Key Words:** Subjugation, femininity, self-identity, patriarchy, gender, equality

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Atwood's feministic ideology not only advocates the social emancipation of women by repudiating patriarchal oppression, but also suggests that women should realize their potential and assert their self-identity. She penetrates to the heart of issues related to women and their lives. She is in touch with the real implications of female roles and has illustrated in her works that centuries old man-dominated society does not let modern male ego accept the equality of genders. Each of her novels reflects the predicament of Canadian women underscoring the supremacy of patriarchy. Christine Gomes analyzes in *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*,

At the thematic level, Atwood's novel examines themes related to the politics of gender such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy., the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual craving out of female space by woman through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy... not only at the thematic and structural levels, but also in the organization of women characters, Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender (74).

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is explicitly concerned with the complexities of culturally-encoded concepts of femininity. Atwood explores the problems associated with the life of Canadian women during 1960s. The novel is written during a time when Canada witnessed a whirlwind change in its social, political and economic structure. This transition in Canada had severe impact on the established mind-set of Canadian women as they started questioning the established feminine codes. They began to confront the gender distinction that set limitations to their existence. Sofia Sanchez-Grant writer in *The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle* about feminine traits which are made to serve the

patriarchal society,

Femininity is supposedly the 'natural' essence of womanhood itself: to be feminine is to be a woman. By contrast, Conboy et al. argue that femininity is just another social mechanism which is based on male desires and used to curtail the freedom of women (79).

Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is an abrasive critique on marriage and consumerism existing in Canadian society. The novel exhibits women being thrust into the role of commodities and portrays them as productive in different professions and reproductive in family. Marian MacAlpen is the central character of *The Edible Woman* around which the fabric of the novel is interwoven. She inspects and compares her life with the environment and women around her and tries to develop a clear perception about herself. Her engagement with Peter, an established lawyer, becomes the main impediment to her true identity. Atwood clearly illustrates Marian becoming a passive partner by changing the narrative from first person to third person. She submits to Peter's expectation which disintegrates her personality. Her engagement makes her identify with the things which can be consumed and the forced split in the personality makes her lose her appetite. Gradually she gauges her passiveness in relationship with the people around her, i.e., - Ainsely, Peter and her friend, Duncan. Atwood exhibits integration in her personality by changing the narrative into first person. It shows that Marian has identified her true self and has decided not to be acted upon. J. Brooks Bouson says in *The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Characters in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman* that,

Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women (230).

Atwood has clearly presented the restricting codes set in women's life and their severe repercussion. The patriarchal society devours as well as questions the physical and mental capabilities of women. They are considered equivalent to any edible commodity which could be relished by men. Women have to prove their utility to men if they want to secure a space for themselves in men's life. It is witnessed in most cases that women find it difficult to escape from patriarchal surveillance hence they silently adopt passive roles. Atwood suggests through *The Edible Woman* that women should reorganize their lives and give it a substantial motif to pursue. The novel focuses on certain central issues like rejection of gender roles, women: commodity and consumerism and male domination. The novel ends with a positive note showcasing woman as finding a way through the cul-de-sac of gender roles and attaining self-realization.

#### DISAGREEMENT WITH FEMININE ROLES

Marian belongs to a family which professed and advocated the traditional social dogmas associated with women. The family also has certain reservations and apprehensions related to Marian's education and feels that "the effects of her university education" are "never stated but always apparent" (174). They have a fear that after graduation Marian would become a 'school teacher' or a 'maiden aunt' or a 'female executive'. Marian admits that education unleashed her from her family's conservative values.

The social structure of Canada gives an upper hand to men and the roots of gender discrimination are deeply ingrained in it. *The Edible Woman* reflects the period of 1960s in Canada. During this period women were unequally treated in their personal and professional life by men. They were paid less for the same work done by their male colleagues. Marian, the female protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, inspects her future in the company she works. Atwood discusses the structure and exploitation of the company by giving it an image of ice-cream sandwich. Men get the 'Upper Crust' position on the top floor of the office buildings. Machines and their operators were set on the bottom floor like modern slave labourers. "The goosey layer in the middle" (12) is given to women to women who are housewives working for low pay in their spare time. Marian knows that she can only become a head or assistant of her department like Ms. Bogue who will retire as a spinster in future. Marian rejects to become one like Ms Bogue. Marian does not want to follow the path set by the patriarchy for women because it deprived them of the basic rights. The upper crust was meant for men whereas women were relegated to secondary status in professional life.

Marian rejects the idea of living a demarcated life because of her being a female. This is the first role she rejects. Marian analyses the life of the three office virgins. They dress up in pure feminine way and wear heavy make up to impress others. They want to enjoy life before settling down. They decide to remain virgins till they get married. Marian disagrees with the stereotypes image of the three virgins. She shuns the idea of exposing her femininity and luring others.

Marian also tries to correlate her life with Clara, her friend. She seems to explore the meaning of womanhood and motherhood through Clara. Clara bears many children and Marian is a witness to her multiple gestation periods. Clara appears to be finding fulfillment through motherhood. Marian is baffled by the aimless reproduction of Clara. She intricately and loosely watches the body of Clara which looks like "a boa-constrictor who swallowed a watermelon" (25). The reproductive role of Clara humiliates Marian. She rejects the idea of becoming a breeding animal. She perceives the reproductive capability of a woman setting limitations and the women succumb to the demands of their bodies. Marian also observes the discriminating attitude of the society towards pregnant women. Emily Martin observes in *The Woman in the Body*,

[o]ne cannot help but see the clash with which the two worlds, meant to be kept ideologically separate, collide. A pregnant working woman is an embarrassment, an offence. She is threatened with loss of job or career, or it is assumed she will quit; she is told she never would have been hired if her supervision had been warned, she is told she cannot have it both ways (197).

Marian loathes the idea of becoming a woman like Clara. She despises the image of aimless motherhood producing children for no specific purpose. She considers such a role of a woman as irresponsible and vulnerable.

Marian finds a fourth alternative in her roommate, Ainsely, who is an example of predatory female. Ainsely represents those women who want to become single parent to their children. She shows no inclination towards marriage but wants to become a mother. She has no faith in the institution of marriage. She impregnates herself through Len Shank. Later, she realizes that her baby will have to bear the brunt of the society in future as it will be labeled as an illegitimate child. Hence she tries to force Len to marry her. Marian concludes that Ainsely is immoral in her approval towards life and relationships. Marian finds her in empty state as she is not able to reconcile with any of feminine roles thriving around her.

#### **WOMEN: COMMODITY AND CONSUMERISM**

The age-old phenomenon, to eat and being eaten, has still its strong and firm roots in the life cycle of living beings. Larger animals act as predators of smaller animals. . The locus of power lies in the hands of the strongest. Similarly, human beings have been a prey of the mightiest of the human beings who have been ruling and preying on the basis of religion, class, community and gender. Atwood, as a novelist, delineates the concept of eating and being eaten through gender discrimination. Her novel, *Edible Women*, enunciates the identity of women has been devoured by the conventional social codes of behavior and developed polarized views regarding femininity. It also portrays women's rights being eaten by vociferous patriarchy since ages.

Atwood presents women reduced to the status of consumable goods in Canada during 1960s. Women are not only celebrated for their beauty but are also available for sale. Marian too beautifies her by donning flashy red dress and wearing heavy makeup. She presents herself as a commodity to suit the wants of her consumer, Peter. She paints her face with several layers of cosmetics on the demand of her fiancé, Peter. He wanted to see her in better appearance in the party organized by him that night. Marian becomes fearful of the wants of Peter. She thinks that this new guise is a change that Peter wants to make permanent. Women in 1960s were emerging from the accepted social roles and Marian too exhibits the same approach. She feels stifled on being continuously moulded by her fiancé. Peter's attitude too reflects the phallogocentric Canadian society of 1960s. He does not treat Marian as his equal and exhibits his supremacy over her. Marian becomes aware of Peter's delight in her being edible. She starts identifying herself with the things being consumed. She observes Peter eating meat,

She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. Watching him operate on the steak like that, carving a straight slice,

then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks : the cow with lines on it and the labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken. She looked at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a cow that had once moved and ate and was killed. She set down her knife and fork. 'God', she thought to herself, 'I hope this isn't permanent; I'll starve to death (152).

The above episode exhibits Marian suffering from anorexia. She somehow feels Peter adroitly slicing her into pieces to relish and quench his desires. The pressures of adjustments tear her apart and she too starts finding similarity with the commodities which are used by people for their own needs and interests. Peter perceives the engagement as a new purchase. Marian concludes, "He sounded as though he had just bought a new shiny car" (96).

Atwood explicitly illustrates consumerism, stereotyping and rebellion in Canadian society through Marian MacAlpin. The protagonist truly identifies herself with the consumable goods. Women treated as commodities reflect the intense exploitation of women. The stereotypical role set by the society for women reduce them to the status of a commodity.

#### **MALE DOMINATION**

Margaret Atwood assertively presents the aspect of male domination through her protagonist's relationship with her fiancé, Peter. Peter is a person, who wants everything from Marian according to his desire. Every action of hers is instructed by him. We can say that Marian became a prey of Peter's dictatorship. He finds her important only for her physical appearance whereas he ignores her emotional and psychological requirements completely. Marian is strictly expected by Peter to fulfill his desires and needs. She does not want to annoy him because she is scared of him. Many times she wants to rebel, as she states, "I was hurt: I considered this unfair... I was about to make sharp comments, but repressed it" (74).

Marian, always tries to adjust according to the needs of Peter. Her desires have secondary place and Peter plays the role of decision maker. She summarizes that Peter, "could make that kind of decision so effortlessly. She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her. I got rid of vacillation..." (185). Marian wants to lead a healthy relationship with Peter, but he does not understand her desire. She is forced to follow Peter's demeanor without any argument. She is always neglected by Peter and expected to accede to him in every way. Marian's submissive nature makes him more domineering. She knows that her relation with Peter is not compatible and comfortable, nevertheless she tries to make it fruitful.

Atwood explores the predicament of women's dependency on men through her novel *The Edible Woman*. Through Marian, she portrays that burden of femininity makes women an oppressed character and turns her personality into a submissive follower of her fiancé, Peter. Her submissiveness gives him the realization of supremacy. Atwood clears that it is difficult for Marian to set her in mainstream male theories. Atwood considers victimization of women equivalent to victimization of a group or a country. She states, "... the positions are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group or a victimized individual" (1972).

Marian reconciles with her submissive position and accepts Peter's proposals, "I'd rather leave all the big decision up to you" (87). She listens to a hunting story by Peter, in which he describes the killing and gutting a rabbit. She feels very sorry for hunted animal and identifies herself with the rabbit. She runs away from Peter because she does not want to become a victim like the rabbit. Her irrational escape from Peter and later hiding under a bed gives her a sense of achievement and victory,

"Though I was only two or three feet lower than the rest of them, I was thinking of the room as 'up there'. I myself underground, I had dug myself a private burrow. I felt smug"(76).

Atwood, explores that a woman is not only physically humiliated by man, but also suppressed psychologically. Marian's personality switches from first person to third person after accepting Peter's proposal. Marian becomes a possession for Peter so it becomes obvious for him that she would blindly follow his dictates. His complete dismissal of Marian's opinions is explicit,

"Darling, you don't understand these things', Peter said, 'You've led a sheltered life'...  
.....He smiled indulgently"(147).

Marian's subjugation stifles her. She loses her appetite and starts rejecting food-meat in the beginning, then eggs and finally vegetables. Emotional disturbance brings her to the brim of anorexia where everything in her environment becomes threatening for her. Even the telephone lines make her feel as if "They were prehensile, they were like snakes, they had a way of coiling back on you and getting you all wrapped up (168). Peter's frequent intervention in Marian's life makes her feel timid and incapable of making correct decisions. He even instructs what Marian should eat,

"[...] she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away" (147).

She watches Peter devouring his food with confidence and dexterity.

"She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. Watching him operate on the steak like that, carving a straight slice, then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks : the cow with lines on it and the labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken. She looked at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a cow that had once moved and ate and was killed. She set down her knife and fork. 'God', she thought to herself, 'I hope this isn't permanent; I'll starve to death" (152).

The novel explicitly shows the male desire to take control of women's lives.

#### SELF-REALIZATION

Age old indoctrinations have frozen the society into two sections –male and female. Social norms have bequeathed males a supreme position in society. Males have been adorned with the qualities of becoming a sheltering tree for women. Hence the desire to possess a sheltering tree has become an unflinching desire of women. Marian's quest for a sheltering tree ended at Peter however it was catastrophic. She experiences a lopsided relationship with Peter. She meets Duncan during the market survey on beer and finds a true friend or a mentor in him. After meeting Duncan, she realizes that she has been continuously trying to maintain a healthy relationship with Peter and in this journey she lost her self-identity even after making uncountable compromises. Self-expression and equality come into existence in her relationship with Duncan and it becomes the cause of Marian's self-realization. She realizes,

"It occurred to her also that she didn't see any point in starving to death. What she really wanted, she realized, had been reduced to simple safety. She thought she had been heading towards it all these months but actually she hadn't been getting anywhere. And she hadn't accomplished anything" (343).

. Marian compares hers with two dolls of her childhood days. One was blond rubber-doll which she believes is her image presented in front of the society i.e. a perfect symbol of femininity, and other, was dark-haired which represents her inner-self. At a party, she discovers Peter's true-self as, "a homicidal maniac with lethal weapon in his hand" (255). She concludes that she has not been able to impose herself, because throughout her life she has been dominated by others. Finally, she concludes that, "It is your own cul-de-sac, you invented it, you'll have to think your own way out" (343).

Atwood maps out a strong journey from exploitation to exploration through her protagonist. She gives her space to define her life with new enthusiasm after 'the black episode', which starts after her engagement. Marian's exploration starts when she rejects the steak which was chosen by Peter and she also denies to accept the subordinate role, intended by Peter. We see that food and body become the language and a source to refuse Peter's domination for Marian. She bakes a cake of in the shape of a woman's figure and serves it to Peter and states,

"You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork", she added somewhat prosaically" (352).

The episode portrays Marian's resurrection. The end of her relationship with Peter also ends her quest for the lost self-identity. Her lost appetite returns and she eats the cake voraciously. It dissolves the imposed image thrust on her. The protagonist seems to suggest that submissiveness stagnate women's life. As Sofia Sanchez-Grant explains in *The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle*,

"Atwood indicates that the solution is not to accept and adapt oneself to repressive culturally-defined conventions, but to rewrite them" (82).

The Edible Woman seems to proclaim that women are reduced to the status of possessions in a male-female relationship. Their secondary status disintegrates their self-identity. Atwood's novels exhibit the true nature of conventions which not only stagnate but also hamper the normal growth of women in a patriarchal society. Male supremacy remains unchallenged and women's subjugation is deeply embedded in social structure. Though women are educated and economically independent yet they couldn't escape from becoming possessions and consumed. A novel outlook towards femininity is the need of the hour.

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