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

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Abstract

The Edible Woman is a novel written by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood and was published in 1969. The book has been viewed from diverse perspectives by many eminent scholars. The paper attempts to study how Atwood uses the act of writing in *The Edible woman* in association with food, gender and feminist consciousness. The publication of the novel in 1969, corresponded with the rise of female consciousness raising movements of the second wave of feminism. The fragmented structure of the novel itself is linked with the change of the female protagonist's (Marian) perspectives of her selfhood. The novel is divided into three major parts and marked by the change of voice from first to third person narrative and then back to the first-person account of Marian's experiences. The change in the narrative voice foregrounds the existential angst that Marian feels in the middle section of the novel before achieving her liberated self-actualisation. Atwood describes the novel as "protofeminist" because it was written in 1965 with a perspective that foresaw the rise of the second wave feminist movements. (Atwood X) The protagonist of the novel is situated in such an age and depicts the plight as well as the disappointments felt by the sensible women of her society. The women in the novel represent the typical conditions and life-styles of the women of 60s while the protagonist seems to voice the inner conflict felt by the many women of her age through her writing.

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

Atwood's first novel *The Edible Woman* was published in 1969. The book has been viewed from diverse perspectives by many eminent scholars. In Lilburn's words, "*The Edible Woman* established Atwood as a writer of fiction and is now a highly respected work that has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Funny, perceptive, and thoroughly entertaining, *The Edible Woman* is a remarkable first novel by one of North America's finest contemporary authors." According to Carla D'Antonio, "Its cannibalistic undertones menace and force people into prescribed roles, threatening their integrity. Furthermore, in Atwood's novels, the concept of cannibalism is linked to postcolonial discourses in the sense of the colonisation, exploitation and objectification of women's bodies."

(36) The paper attempts to study how Atwood uses the act of writing in *The Edible woman* in association with food, gender and feminist consciousness. According to Moi "By 1970 there were already many different strands of political thought in the 'new' women's movement" (22) The publication of the novel in 1969, corresponded with the rise of female consciousness raising movements of the second wave of feminism. In Atwood's words, "...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." (Staines 23) The representation of female subject position in fictions contributes to the hypothetical analysis of women in society. Cheri Register, in an essay published in 1975, succinctly sums up this demand: 'A literary work should provide role-models, instil a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are "self-actualising, whose identities are not dependent on men"'(qtd. in Moi 46) Atwood portrays Marian in exactly the fashion that has been described by Register. Furthermore, the fragmented structure of the novel itself is linked with the change of the protagonist's (Marian) perspectives of her selfhood. The novel is divided into three major parts and marked by the change of voice from first to third person narrative and then back to the first person account of Marian's experiences. The change in the narrative voice foregrounds the existential angst that Marian feels in the middle section of the novel before achieving her liberated self-actualisation. Atwood describes the novel as "protofeminist" because it was written in 1965 with a perspective that foresaw the rise of second wave feminist movements. (Atwood X) After a decade, the Post world war society was struggling to keep the order of the age old patriarchal ideologies due to the growing awareness of the female members of society who were dismantling the falsely held notions associated with their competencies as human beings. With the success of suffragette movements and the growing number of women in the previously male-centred workplaces, the conditions of society were ready to call for the arrival of consciousness raising movements of the second wave of feminism. The protagonist of the novel is situated in such an age and depicts the plight as well as the disappointments felt by the sensible women of her society. The women in the novel represent the typical conditions and life-styles of the women of 60s while the protagonist seems to voice the inner conflict felt by the many women of her age through her writing. As Cixous encourages women in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Marian tries to write "out of the world men constructed for women" and puts forth in her writing the "unthinkable/ unthought" from which they have been forcibly driven away by patriarchal ideology. (qtd. In Tong 276). The fictional world that Atwood created depicts women as creatures that are not only passive and vulnerable but also metaphorically edible in the North American consumer society during 1960s.

The protagonist, Marian is a single but independent woman living in an apartment with her friend Ainsley. Her close acquaintances include a dependable and soon to be successful lawyer named Peter, a friend from college named Clara, an eccentric college student called Duncan. Marian is viewed as a sensible and intelligent woman with a job at a market research firm but is expected to quit it and settle down with marriage and domestic responsibilities in the near future. The firm where Marian works shows "the multifaceted sources of patriarchy and sexism" faced by these women. (Bottici 1)The firm is divided into three separate sections based on a hierarchy where men work as executives while the working class employees doing manual work remain in the ground level and the female employees are kept in the middle floor dealing with survey questions and sampling products.

Atwood is an author who has always voiced against the essentialist concepts of female identity. She is heard commenting: "Women come in all shapes and sizes, ages and stages, heights and colours, and different parts of the world," and "to expect or demand that they be angelic and perfect is very Victorian. There's limited space on a pedestal. You don't get to move around a lot" (qtd. in Masterclass, n pag.). In *The Edible woman* Atwood depicts the different shades of womanhood in the

form of several chosen female figures. The text is provided with a limited number of female characters and each of them foregrounds diverse possibilities of "becoming a woman" (Beauvoir). Atwood introduces a few stereotypical characters along with those who defy such orthodox ideologies. Characters like Peter, Joe and Lucy adhere to the gender stereotypes while characters like Duncan and Ainsley defy such constrictions. Marian's friend Ainsley is an anrcha-feminist who decided to protect herself from the ossification into orthodoxy by declaring that she plans to have a child but not enter into matrimony because she believes "The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands." (42) Clara is Marian's friend from school and college who is now a house-wife that can hardly manage anything on her own without the assistance of her husband. Usually Clara can be viewed as a docile and suppressed woman who ought to be pitied but an apt observation by Ainsley in the following words shows how many woman adopt patriarchal ideology willingly while they may not be the ones who suffer by doing it. As Ainsley argues:

> "How can she stand it?...'She just lies there and that man does all the work! She let's herself be treated like a thing!'...'She's not well!... 'She's flourishing; it's *him* that's not well. He's aged ever since I've known him and that's less than four months. She's draining all his energy.'... 'Well, she should *do* something; if only a token gesture. She never finished her degree, did she? Wouldn't this be a perfect time for her to work on it?..."(39)

Contrastingly, Marian appeared as an independent woman to the people around her. She was considered as a sensible woman by everyone and was ready to take the subject position of a docile social bride which is reflected in her words: "of course I'd always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does..." because she thought that marriage is the only system that will let her be accepted as a woman in society.(125) Her submission to the patriarchal norms is evident when at the occasion of peter's marriage proposal she succumbs to an acquiescent and vulnerable state of femininity and says: "I'd

rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions to you. I was astonished at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was that I really meant it."(107) Marian was trying to assimilate a female subject position which would affirmatively respond to Peter's image of a wife in her which resulted in creating a break within her personality. She unconsciously divides herself into two female selves. One of the selves remains on the surface by assimilating the behaviours expected from her while the other dormant self rebels unconsciously and becomes lost. Marian's perplexed identity can be aptly defined by Toril Moi who comments:

> "The speaking subject that says 'I am' is in fact saying 'I am he (she) who has lost something'- and the loss suffered is the loss of the imaginary identity ...To speak as a subject is therefore the same as to represent the existence of repressed desire: the speaking subject is lack, and this is how Lacan can say that the subject is that which it is not." (97)

The relation between Marian and Peter was established on the basis of a pre-formed obligation to societal norms. From Marian's perspective Peter who was to pursue his career and life as a successful lawyer was an ideal man and it was only sensible for an average woman like her to accept his proposal and start depending on him for the important decisions in her life. Peter had similar ideologies when it came to his position as a capable and successful individual in society. He expected to live a standard life with a sensible woman like Marian, a woman who will not be unpredictable to him. He was hoping the marriage to aid his career and professional image also. And Marian indeed proves to be the kind of woman who will let herself be guided and succumbed to the demands of society. She is warned by Duncan against blaming others. Throughout the novel he kept on making Marian realise herself as a strong and independent individual who should use her own intellect to comprehend her situations. But it has been apparent from her actions at the beginning of the novel, "Marian continuously lets others dictate her actions...escaping the truth of Duncan's words: Marian will return to the world of consumerism and

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will continue to be a victim of its manipulations and injustices." (Lilburn) Marian admits that she "probably wanted to marry Peter all along" but as soon as she agrees to his proposal she succumbs into a sort of dependency upon him. (101) As the would-be wife of a successful and capable individual like Peter, she was expected to quit her job as soon as possible. Her identity as a female office worker was to be vanished completely and the firm where she worked was also not supportive of Marian's stay in the office after her marriage because Mrs. Bogue "regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company" (107) Marian further elaborates and says, "Mrs. Bogue preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past. Newlyweds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable" (107) The fact that Marian subconsciously was not willing to quit her job later on adds to the feeling of discomfiture within her. Despite Marian's idealistic image in front of her family and friends, there remained a dormant self which was not as predictable and undivided as Peter had thought of it to be. And it is because of this divided personality in her character that Marian started engaging with Duncan who shared the similar kind of eccentricities and disbeliefs as her dormant self. Her encounter with Duncan makes Marian increasingly conscious of her own retaliations which were now materialising in her constant refusal to food.

Her identification with food grows even further when Peter asks her to change her appearance to his taste for their engagement. Beauvoir criticised the fact that society propagates the idea that women are supposed "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*). Atwood portrays a chauvinistic character in the form of Marian's fiancé, Peter who forces the above mentioned expectations on Marian. Gradually her association of food and prey with the condition of woman makes it impossible for her to eat. On one occasion when Peter discusses the gruesome act of animal hunting, Marian begins to identify herself with the animal and runs away from the party by mistaking the camera

for a gun. Later on, she gives up on eating meat completely at the sight of Peter cutting his steak in a dinner. Her cibophobia and growing identification with food were only the initial symptoms of her retaliation against Peter's subjugation which later becomes more conspicuous when she leaves her own engagement party and spends the night with Duncan.

The change in the voice of the narrative indicates the movements of Marian's subject position from a sensible woman to a subjugated female figure and then moves towards her liberation as an individual. The movement from first to third person narrative foregrounding her detachment from reality shows her gradual submission to the stereotypically expected femininity. At the end of the novel, when the narrative voice once again changes from third person to the first person point of views, it highlights Marian's liberation as a woman who was now ready to take control of and be responsible for her own actions. Throughout the novel we see Marian go through an existential angst before being in sync with her individualist spirit. Atwood portrays Marian's anxiety state in the form of the sudden changes that she associates with her dress and food. Many factors including the external appearance, the diverse conversations that the characters engage themselves in, the people they prefer to form friendship with etc., contribute together to show the construction and sometimes even the marginalisation of their identity.

Clothes have a voice of their own. They can be used as a symbol of status or a means to represent the personality of an individual. Sometimes, clothes are used to hide or reveal the closely held values and even beliefs of a person. Marian's clothes were described by Peter as something 'mousy' and dull which made him to prompt Marian to buy something different than her usual preferences when it came to her dress for their engagement. Peter's preference for a bright coloured attire and flashy hairdo on a woman, spoke for his own hypocritical and pretentious personality. He wanted to change Marian into the sort of woman that he could handle and rule over. He had no intention of being an equal partner in their marriage. Atwood created Peter to show how chauvinistic men

use patriarchal ideology to dominate and demoralise their female partners with their indulgences. The threat of patriarchal ideology and Peter's role can be understood better when they are read in association with what Smith explains in the following words:

> Essentializing male and female difference at the same time that they essentialize the idea of an autonomous, unitary "self," patriarchal ideologies of gender secure the authority and priority of phallogocentric discourse; for "it is," as Elizabeth L.Berg remarks, "the double move of a reifying a diversity of traits into a determination as masculine or feminine... (Smith 49)

According to Tuan and Sack, the place in which an individual is situated highly contributes to the identity formation of an individual because "For a child, --- the world is the world of one's parents, --- a home, a street, a park and the like. The world, one's place, is small in scope and scale, yet one identifies with it intimately." (qtd. in Cecil & Cecil 244) Atwood situates her characters accordingly and the places convey a lot about the personality of these individuals. Duncan who is an eccentric English literature college student is bumped into either in a humdrum Laundromat, or a dismal theatre or in a grubby hotel. Peter on the other hand, is found either in a refined bar or a dirt-free apartment. For Marian both of them stood in contrast to one another. Duncan with his straightforward and honest oeuvre of a man was actually linked to the wild, unsophisticated but naked truth. Peter with his adherence to the stereotypical role of a gentleman is portrayed as a conventionally ideal but a narrow-minded chauvinistic male figure. Marian is always surrounded by such contrasting men and women. She unconsciously simulates diverse female and even male subject positions. But she gradually starts losing her sense of an authentic self while she tries to fulfil others' expectations from her. In Lilburn's words:

> Throughout the novel, Marian attempts to define her identity in a world where the models, plastered on advertisements and decorating the covers of magazines, have all been manufactured by men. Expected to

conform to a societal ideal of femininity, Marian struggles to break free of what she initially views as her inevitable fate.

Observing the conditions of the women surrounding her, she fears similar possible futures for herself. She hates the idea of becoming a bothersome old lady in the basement that she often encounters. She could not identify with Ainsley's radical and short-sighted visions about future either. Even though, she agreed to the marriage, she did not want to end up in the similar manner as her friend Clara who almost seems to have become crippled and utterly helpless without her husband. Her concern with all the possible confusions in the future enhances the anxiety state within her which materialises in the form of cibophobia. With her refusal to take food she was unconsciously trying to take control of at least one thing in her life and this resulted in worsening her physical health.

It has been pointed out by Smith 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 portrays Marian exactly in such a fashion. Her suppression starts fading the moment she comprehends the fact that she must fight for her own integrity. Her condition can be aptly understood by how Millett defines 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) In the end, when Marian decides to solve her situation, she plans out the path to recovery by analysing her degraded condition. When she figured out that her association with food and the animals of prey were all linked with Peter, she ponders over their relationship and her role in it as a woman. She accepts the retaliation forming within her against being devoured by patriarchal hegemony and meticulously prepares her work toward self-actualisation. She prepares a metaphorical image of herself in the form of a cake and offers it to Peter as her substitute. The offering was meant as her declaration of resistance against the conventional

submissive female role. At the end of the novel, she emerges as an independent woman who has embraced her individuality and is sufficiently ready enough to take control of her future actions. Marian throughout the novel "appropriates her voice and writes her untold story, thus becoming a subject that shapes instead of remaining an object that has been shaped by patriarchal assumptions" (Koyuncu). The personal account of her writing is endowed with non-linearity as "she examines her unique life and then attempts to constitute herself discursively as female subject" (Smith 47). The fact is universally accepted that "Women's autobiography presents "visible formerly invisible subjects" and woman speaking from this position of Universal man proffers authority, legitimacy and readability."(qtd. in Arora Rachna et. al) Atwood through her portrayal of the protagonist shows how Marian as a woman unconsciously is narrating her autobiography and "Using autobiography to create identity, she 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."(Smith 151) In the final scene Marian prepares the cake which symbolises her suppressed and vulnerable self and offers it to Peter as her replacement. With this dramatic closure she resists the dominance imposed upon her and gains her emancipation through an affirmative self-actualisation.

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