



## POST COLONIALISM AND FEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper highlights close proximity with feminism and post colonialism in Atwood's novel, *The Edible Woman*. Woman's colonization, victimization, humiliation and silence disrupt or increase her pace towards survival and freedom. Women as well as countries are displaced and deteriorated incessantly. Weak bodies and fertile lands are raped and conquered. The complicated relation between consumer culture, the health and beauty industry, patriarchy and gender roles is made explicit. Unrealistic expectations imposed on women make her go through an ordeal of self assimilation and self resurrection.

**Key words:** patriarchy, gender roles, consumer culture, anorexia nervosa, pathological rejection, marginalized.

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### INTRODUCTION

Novelists such as Mordecai Richler, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Lawrence, Robertson Davies, and Margaret Atwood have permeated in Canadian literature. Their popularity is not confined to boundaries but has won acclaim all over the world. Margaret Atwood is an internationally renowned poet and novelist, illustrious for addressing serious issues and social problems with humour and wit. Loved and respected by feminists for her exploration of gender politics, Atwood also explores humanity's relationship to nature and often parodies many social and cultural conventions. She writes in the Introduction to her novel, *The Edible Woman*, "I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist; there was no woman's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965..."<sup>1</sup> The author of more than forty works, including fiction, poetry and critical essays, her books have been published in over thirty five countries.

Margaret Atwood is often described by critics as a writer concerned with the search for identity. But, for Atwood, the search for personal identity is often paralleled by the search for a universal one. She links her protagonist to the modern consumer culture and colonization. Loss, search and revival of identity play a major role in her texts, but, the submitting woman herself traces back her identity, freedom and survival.

### *THE EDIBLE WOMAN: AT A GLANCE*

Marian McAlpin works in a market research firm, writing survey questions and sampling products. She shares an apartment of a house in Toronto with her roommate Ainsley, and has an obnoxious yet sophisticated boyfriend, Peter. She thinks that Peter is the ideal choice to marry, as he is a successful lawyer. On the other hand, Peter also feels that their marriage will aid his career.

One day, Ainsley says she wants to have a baby without getting married. She is looking for a man who does not have any interest in marriage or

being a father. Ainsley thinks up a plan so she can experience motherhood without marriage.

At work, Marian meets Duncan, a graduate student. They two meet at a laundromat, talk and share unexpected intimate moments. This makes Marian feel confused and scared if Peter ever found out, but, simultaneously assures herself that it would never happen. She discovers that, she no longer can eat meat that has an indication of bone, tendon, or fibre. Gradually, this refusal spreads to other foods too. Leaving her unable to eat many of the things she used to enjoy eating. Her friend Clara assures her that she is not abnormal but normal. And, that her eating problem is simply a symptom of bridal nerves and she will soon get over it. Marian realizes that Peter is metaphorically devouring her. She thinks of herself as a cake, something to be carefully iced and ornamented. When Peter arrives she accuses him of trying to assimilate her and offers the cake as the substitute. He leaves without eating, and Marian starts eating it herself. The cake looks appetizing and delicious to her. Ainsley comes and remarks, "You are rejecting your femininity!"<sup>2</sup> She denies the same and later Duncan comes and eats the cake and they both feel that they are consumers. And, the last sentence of the novel is spoken by Duncan, "It was delicious."<sup>3</sup>

#### CONSUMER CULTURE

Marian's perceptions of herself as a hunted victim or tasty morsel about to be devoured are distortions of reality for which she is largely responsible. These perceptions carry a symbolic truth about the general nature of society and personal relationships. In a consumer society, people feed on each other economically and emotionally. Eating becomes, "a metaphor for economic and emotional cannibalism. Either you eat or are eaten, there are no other choices."<sup>4</sup>

The novel commences with first person narrative and focuses on the initial identification of the protagonist. Marian's uncertainty comes to the foreground as to who she is and her fears that what she might become. She feels trapped in her job of revising market survey questionnaires. And, besides, she also feels manipulated and unable to influence the development of her own life. Her life cannot be lived out of the consumer culture. She feels

monopolized by Peter, a term that suggests control and ownership and that is generally associated with goods and commercial activity and not personal relationships. The patriarch Peter looks like the colonizer and a ray of survival of femininity is hinted at, in the role of Duncan. He, all the while, traces the psychology of Marian like a clear path, where she can hunt down her desires easily. He is like a de colonizer for her, who brings in a psychological order to her psychological disorder.

Eating disorder is also a manifestation of troubled psychology. Psychologist Hilde Bruch connected the dieting pressures placed on young women to the explosion in the diagnoses of anorexia nervosa. All the main symptoms of eating disorder: a feeling of ineffectiveness, a fear of fat, and longing for autonomy appear in Marian. Even the structure of the novel is based on the three stages of the illness. Part one shows the background causes, which also highlight the compromised childhood development. Part two shows the mind and the body split that accompanies the onset of actual diet restrictions. The identity crisis takes place in this part of the novel, when after the engagement Peter wields power and authority with added restrictions on her. The connection between food and feminist consciousness is also brought to light here. Part three dramatizes the spontaneous resolution of the illness and also the identity reclamation. Eating disorder was a pathological rejection of femininity. Hence, eating disorders become a projected site for the enactment of woman's struggle for liberty.

The cake which she bakes is at once the therapy, a solution, self discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. Atwood thus comments in an interview with Gibson: "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."<sup>5</sup> The femininity is defined by male so it's not more than a cake of piece of delicious food, which can suit to its male consumer. Marian at the finale, starts thinking about herself as "first person singular again"<sup>6</sup> which establishes her naked self free from outer implications. She turns into "consumer" rather than consumed.<sup>7</sup>

### COMMERCIAL MANIPULATIONS

"Life isn't run by principles but by adjustments,"<sup>8</sup> Marian analyses. Throughout the novel, Marian repeatedly moulds herself into what others want and expect her to be. She thinks of marriage with Peter as a business transaction. "I must get organized; I have a lot to do."<sup>9</sup> Commercial nature of marital and material partnership is made explicit. She accepts being the victim of the commercial manipulations and accepts the choices that are offered to her. She does what is expected of her, as if, by some corporate planner.

Marian continues to keep her true feelings from breaking out of her artificially constructed shell, and as she continues to adapt herself according to the whims of others, she is gradually losing sight of herself. "She had been brought up to eat whatever was on the plate."<sup>10</sup> She wonders if this "inert" and "simply vegetable" existence is what she is being pushed towards. But, she understands and adjusts herself to the "necessity of endurance."<sup>11</sup>

Marian thinks that she is using Duncan as a substitute but does not know what he is supposed to be substituting. One possibility is that he allows Marian to forget, for a while that she is with him, the reality of the life that awaits her. When she first meets Duncan, she senses that in his presence, time seems to shift into slow-motion. She later, explicitly states Duncan's association with the present moment: "they had virtually no past and certainly no future."<sup>12</sup> Experience and enjoyment of the present is something that is lacking in her relationship with Peter.

### HUNTER'S PREY AND PHOTOGRAPHER'S SUBJECT

Marian dislikes the feeling of being treated like an object but fails to realize that the treatment she is undergoing at her workplace is of sameness. It is a little exaggeration of the standardization she allows herself to go through every day. Peter would like her to be other than she actually is- the realization of an ideal image read about in murder mysteries or seen in photography magazines. The image of the woman he wants to create is one that is, like the hunter's prey or the photographer's subject, under his control. She does not want to be captured in the photograph clicked by Peter. She

feels, if done so, her expression would be stifled, controlled, framed. And, her fantasies, instead of being her own, will be borrowed, internalized and unchallenged fantasies built on and maintained by the belief in a reality resting on nothing more than clay. She contributes towards her own exploitation by eating away at her beliefs and sense of identity. Such an internal division also helps to explain the shift from first person narrative to a third person narrative.

She wants to run where suggested paths and directions have not been mapped or charted, where there are no restrictions and guiding signs. She wants to make irregular paths. She appears to be looking away from the menu suggested options. Wearing the bits and pieces of other people's jewellery, make up, and taste in clothes, Marian is unable to see herself as a whole. And, she contemplates her future husband's clothes as costumes of authority. When Marian's attention returns to the present she sees herself as a "two-dimensional" figure, posing like a "paper woman in a mail-order catalogue."<sup>13</sup>

Duncan proposes another diagnosis. According to him, Marian's eating problems are "representative of modern youth." She is, in his words, "rebellious against the system."<sup>14</sup> Hers is a silent protest in the terms of restricting the intake of food. Her body is protesting against the fact that Marian consumes all that is fed to her. Marian's body reacts to the external events happening around her before she is even aware that something is wrong.

### POST COLONIALISM

Women and men are two victims of the colonial modern world. Women are not only oppressed by men, but by underdevelopment, racial segregation, imperialism and by women themselves. They cannot liberate themselves from men and seek reunion with them. In fact, modern feminism does not reject men and love making. But, they reject women viewed as sources of pleasure, beauty and seduction.

Post colonialism and feminism in Margaret Atwood's fiction are interrelated. Both struggle against injustice and oppression. They centre on

revolting against perils of patriarchal, societal and colonial subjugation.

Women in *The Edible Woman* are not allowed to keep their earnings in case of marriage and pregnancy. This is considered as an act of disloyalty to the institution. Marian knew that 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.

Atwood's women suffer from personal victimization which has its roots in the colonial pattern of domination and destruction. The women feel inferior to men and suffer psychological tension. This supports the view that women's life constitutes an experience of colonialism. Marian works for Seymour Survey, a market research company. This institution is portrayed as a trap for women. It also signifies that patriarchy symbolizes western domination via capitalism. As Marian remarks, "The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle."<sup>15</sup>

Marian's colleagues Emily, Lucy and Millie are also aware of being victims of a patriarchal society. They accept their society's definition of the role of women as lovers, wives, and mothers. They represent irrationality, wilderness and nurture. Their sole aim in life is getting a husband who is reasonable, civilized and cultured. They represent exploited typical female workers of the 1960's. They also embody virginity and sexuality. All of them are "artificial blondes" and "virgins."<sup>16</sup> Lucy always dresses well and visits expensive restaurants in town in the hope of hunting a well-off man. When Marian announces her engagement to Peter, they wonder: "How on earth did you ever catch him?"<sup>17</sup> Women according to Sanchez-Grant's view of the novel "are expected to adapt themselves to masculine desires, as exemplified by Marian's flatmate Ainsley....Those women who fail to adapt are, put simply, not women."<sup>18</sup>

Marian seeks a male alternative in Peter, her boyfriend, to fulfil her desires. She looks upon him as not only a rescuer from chaos, but also a provider of stability. She is attracted to him because

of his pleasing manner, impressing way of talking and his culture: "When do you want to get married? He asks, almost gruffly.... I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you. I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that before. The funny thing was I really meant it."<sup>19</sup>

Simon de Beauvoir strongly believed that "marriage...trapped and stunted women's intellectual growth and freedom."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Ainsley is against marriage because it distorts women's identities. She plays the role of an aggressive, devious and emancipated woman. However, she wants a baby in order to fulfil her desire of motherhood and femininity. "Every woman must have at least one baby. It's even more important than sex. It fulfils your deepest femininity."<sup>21</sup> She is a predator and both oppressed and oppressor. She tries to triumph over social norms and to guarantee her existence. However, she ultimately accepts the traditional role of a wife and a mother. She is worried about her baby who may suffer from homosexuality because of the absence of a father. She becomes edible in the marriage-market against which she has professed earlier.

The ending of the novel is the product of a mental study rather than the outcome of the end of the women's struggle against miscellaneous forces. The story ends as a circle in which the protagonist ends where she starts.

#### CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's novel highlights the question of identity from a postcolonial perspective. Her characters are colonized by patriarchy, cultural imperialism and geographical colonization. This leads to their displacement and disconnectedness from their own life. This study also shows two types of colonization: physical and psychological. Women suffer from double colonization, as her body is colonized by men and her psychology is victimized by society. Women and men are partially oppressed, silenced, marginalized and victimized through language, culture and history. Women sometimes react to their victimization by turning themselves in to predators. She gains her appetite back and the self dissolution is turned into self discovery. She develops a new awareness of self and of others. She

ends where she began, but, with a new learning and newly acquired liberty.

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