

FROM EXPLOITATION TO EXPLORATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood (1939) occupies a central position in contemporary Canadian literature. Internationally acclaimed as a poet, novelist and short story writer, she has emerged as a major figure in Canadian women's writing. Her novels depict her women protagonists' journey towards survival and freedom of their inner selves from restrictive social conventions. She examines the role of fiction as one of the ways in which the interaction of people and society can be scrutinised. Margaret Atwood's aim is to explore women's inner psyche, their conflicts and the journey towards self-discovery. Her novels question gender roles and protest against dominant patriarchal structures of power and dominion that expropriate women's identity. Her writing- both poetry and prose- embark upon an understanding of 'female experiences'. More broadly speaking, though, Atwood attempts to explore questions of identity and consciousness. In her works, she voices strong feminist themes and portrays the strength and proactive nature of women as they struggle with inequality, victimization and minimization and most importantly their own psychic consciousness. However, she does not create a secluded women's world but sets her stories against a wider social and political backdrop. Atwood's female protagonists are unique in many ways as they do not conform to the stereotypical dictates of the society and share many similarities with each other; simultaneously they are obviously individuals in inimitable situations. Almost all the female protagonists of her works are initially victims but ultimately become survivors. They all undergo a restoration of the whole self as Atwood opposes the notion of a fixed or static self.

Key Words: Victimization, minimization, survivors, psychic consciousness.

Discussion:

The novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) is Atwood's maiden attempt at fiction writing which depicts woman as an edible product - one which is annihilated by patriarchal society that puts her in the category of an object to be manipulated and exploited. Marian's search in this novel is for a human identity contrary to that of an inanimate product designed for consumption by hegemonic power structures. The novel creates awareness about the subordinate status of women in an exploitative society that places women in the category of an 'edible' commodity. It deals with the symbolic cannibalism of women and how it takes a long time even for an economically independent woman to overthrow the stereotypical social roles ascribed to her by a dominant group, hence deconstructing the gender politics prevalent in the existing society. Marian is a young graduate who works for Seymour Surveys for consumer products. During her life, Marian comes in contact with many men who try to dominate her in one way or the other. She realizes different male strategies of exploitation/ domination and the actual causes of women's oppression. Eventually, she revolts against this patriarchal domination and refuses to be the "edible woman" (75). She endeavours to attain an independent identity. Thus, in the novel, Atwood exposes the hollowness of patriarchal structure of power and domination that acts as a source of perpetual trauma. As J. Brooks Bouson in "The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Character in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*" (1990) states, "Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined woman" (230).

All important and responsible positions are held by men. Since Marian's department consists of only women, she speaks about the treatment of women at the company. The men upstairs do the more 'important' jobs and are responsible for decision making, while an equally qualified woman like Marian works at the lower level, doing less significant work. Marian points out the discrimination between male and female workers at Seymour Surveys:

The company is layered like on ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men-who arrange things with the clients; I have caught glimpses of their offices, which have carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of Groups of Seven paintings on the walls. Below us are the machines-mimeo machines, machines for counting and sorting and tabulating the information; I have been down there too, into that factory- like clatter where the operatives seem frayed and overworked and have ink on their fingers (19).

Thus, the gooey layer in the middle where Marian and other women work itself indicates the inequality inherent in a male-dominated society. Marian soon begins to identify herself with the food she tastes and finds her employers evaluating the degree to which she can be exploited. The woman as- consumer is also consumed, like a cake prepared and made edible for male consumption. Hence, the woman as an edible product becomes the overriding metaphor in the novel. However, her quest is for a definite identity which she can call her own, what she strives to attain is a human identity and what she fights is to free herself from the category of an 'edible' commodity.

Marian's predicament demonstrates the victimization of women in a patriarchal hegemonic society which restricts her growth as an individual. Through Marian, Atwood expresses her feminist rejection of the sexual and gendered roles assigned to women. M F Salat in *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction* (1994) comments:

Marian's problematic of "becoming" constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mindless body (96).

She grows alienated from the society, but finally she turns from compliance to rebellion. Marian is attracted to Peter, a lawyer by profession. She gets engaged to him, a handsome man, whose hobbies are collection of guns and cameras. She believes that Peter is an ideal choice for her: "he is attractive and he's bound to be successful, and also he's neat, which is a major point when you are going to be living with someone" (102). What Peter wants is a partner who complements his collection of knives, guns and cameras. He likes Marian as she never demands anything from him. He sees her as a "girl who wouldn't take over his life. It was her aura of independence and common sense he had liked" (61). However, Peter assumes great significance in Marian's life who admires her for his superiority and derives all moral support from her. She always wishes to please Peter and hence devotes herself completely to him and accepts the traditional role of a wife. However, Marian slowly becomes conscious of his domination and what this entails for her identity. As time passes, Marian understands the real side of Peter- a manipulator and exploiter and questions her relationship with him. Peter's fearful description of hunting a rabbit terrifies Marian. She is shocked to hear about his hobby of hunting and discovers that Peter likes the hunting of rabbits and other innocent animals. The image of Peter as the hunter and herself as the hunted haunts her mind. Finally, she begins to distance herself from him. She realizes that he was only using her for his own benefit and he was dominating her – both physically and psychologically. The relationship proves to be a source of endless trauma and an intensifying sense of self-annihilation. Marian imagines:

Time eddying and curling almost visibly around her feet, rising around her, lifting her body . . . and bearing her, slowly and circuitously but with the inevitability of water moving downhill, towards the distant, not too distant anymore day they had agreed on . . . that would end this phase and begin another (112).

Now her innerconsciousness does not allow her to live with Peter anymore. Therefore, Marian does not wish to be caught in a married life with Peter where both her identity and individuality are at

stake. She wants to gain a distinct identity and hence denies being an “edible woman” (217) to Peter. She frustrates Peter’s design to command and dominate her life by fleeing from her engagement. She takes this extreme step in pursuit of freedom.

However, after being betrayed by Peter, she moves to Duncan. It is actually an escape from an unbearable situation. She hopes to get emotional security and true love from Duncan. But she only becomes a helpless victim of Duncan’s lust. He takes full advantage of her gullible nature. He calls himself a “virgin” (223) but she soon discovers that Duncan’s pose as a virgin is fake; it is, indeed, a trick to seduce and exploit her. He himself declares: “I like people participating in my fantasy life and I’m usually willing to participate in theirs, up to a point. It is fine; just as good as usual”(264). This statement clearly reveals that he is a seducer who has exploited many women and Marian too falls prey to his whims. Marian’s encounter with Duncan shatters her entirely. Her crisis reaches a crucial point when she identifies herself with the hunted rabbit and other edible commodities. She fears being consumed; hence she is unable to eat and undergoes anorexia. Marian denies food and meat. Christine Gomez comments: “food ironically becomes the subconscious rejection of the victim role of being consumed and assimilated” (78). More than a hungry woman, she becomes a starving woman, unable to eat anything- “she had been dying to go for lunch, she had been starving, and now she wasn’t even hungry” (114). She wants food, but cannot enjoy it. However, this protest is not voluntary as Marian repeatedly says that it is not what she wants. It is actually an involuntarily act of the psyche against any form of male domination.

Being extremely frustrated, Marian decides to leave both Duncan and his place as it only adds to her traumatic condition. She realizes that she has become a victim-in the hands of both Peter and Duncan who exploit her for their own purposes. It is through these traumatic experiences in her relationship with men that she understands the self-destructive consequences of her passive acceptance of the male power structure and gender roles. Both Peter and Duncan try to dominate her but eventually it is their exploitative and dominating behaviour which brings Marian’s subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role to the conscious level. Christine Gomez remarks:

Two events bring Marian’s subconscious rejection of the victim- wife role to the conscious level. One is Duncan’s brutally frank question: “you did not tell me it was a masquerade, who the hell are you supposed to be?” (265) this makes Marian realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. “The other is Peter’s attempt to photograph her in that guise. She finds this a threat to her real self, delimitation and a dehumanization of herself into an image . . .” (83).

Marian finally rejects the role of the edible woman. At last, she bakes a cake, in the shape of a woman, to expose both Peter and Duncan. She bakes the cake very close to her own artificial image at the cocktail party. By creating the cake, she symbolizes her traumatic experience with Peter and Duncan. Also baking a cake acts as a release of her trauma that kept haunting her from time to time. Ann Carol Howells in *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970’s and 1980’s* (1987) comments: “the woman-shaped cake is “Marian’s perception of woman’s condition and fate as decreed by the feminine mystique so that the cake baking is both a gesture of complicity in domestic myth and also a critique of it” (43). Further, it implies that she will no longer be Peter’s/Duncan’s edible commodity. Marian survives because she is able to change and transform. The transformation of Marian from being traumatised and neurotic to a self-conscious individual reflects her growth as a woman giving importance to the subconscious, revolting against patriarchal domination, identifying with the animals, denying being consumed by the patriarchal commercial social system and adopting a simple, less complex way of sustaining the self.

The novel explicitly shows that patriarchal domination and repressive social pressures cripple women’s individual growth and development. In this novel, Atwood maps out a strong journey from exploitation to exploration through Marian’s character. Her exploration starts when she rejects the steak which is chosen by Peter and she also rejects all the subordinate roles that are ascribed to her by

Peter. Thus, food and body become a language and source to reject Peter's domination. She bakes a woman-shaped cake and serves it to Peter and then comments:

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 marks the beginning of Marian's resurrection. The end of her relationship with Peter also ends her quest for her lost identity. Her anorexia is cured as she eats the cake voraciously. It dissolves the imposed stereotypical image thrust on her by patriarchy. The protagonist seems to suggest that submissiveness stagnates women's lives and cripples their identity. In this novel, Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the regulations and discriminations of patriarchy discover that they must reconstruct themselves as self-reliant individuals.

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