



# Revolt Against System of Gender and Oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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## Abstract

While threads of various issues and conflicts run through Margaret Atwood's writing but the issues concerning women dominate. In her novels, we observe not only the issue of women versus men but it concerns women versus ideology of capitalism (*The Edible Woman*), women versus mythology of patriarchy (Power Politics), women facing environmental abuse (*Surfacing*). Almost all the female protagonists of Atwood are university educated, urban and are usually employed. Perhaps Atwood wants to show that her heroines are not dumb dolls, they are educated but even then, they become victims to the circumstances. No doubt, in Atwood's writings, we witness difficulties faced by a woman but there always remains a conflict between male and female interests. It is an attempt to reduce the priority our culture has traditionally granted to male traits made possible by biology. The present paper discusses about various female characters in her novel *The Edible Woman* and how they, especially the chief protagonist, raises her voice against oppression.

**Key Words: Gender, Oppression, Male domination**

## Introduction:

*The Edible Woman* deals specifically with the relation of sexes in consumer society. It shows how men view women as commodities or as property to enhance their social status. In 1963 when Atwood took job in a marketing research firm, she wrote some part of *The Edible Woman* there. As the novel proceeds, we gather that heroine Marian also works in a marketing research firm. The novel was completed in 1964 when Atwood moved to Vancouver where she had taught English at the University of British Columbia for one year. Atwood remarks: "As writers, women writers are like other writers. As biological specimens and as citizens... women are like other women: subject to the same discriminatory laws, encountering the same demeaning attitudes, burdened with the same good reasons for not walking through the park alone after dark. They too have bodies." (Macpherson) Atwood simply gave a portrayal of the female position at the time: "I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social

realism. That part of it is simply reporting. It was written in 1965 and that's what things were like in 1965." (Tolan, 2009)

## Discussion:

The company where Marian MacAlpine, the heroine of the novel, works is Seymour Surveys. It is a market research firm. Marian describes this company as an "Ice Cream Sandwich" because it has three floors. And the topmost is referred to as men upstairs since there are all men. There are executives and psychologists who arrange things for clients. The second floor, that is Marian's department, is a link between the topmost executive and machines that are below her department. In her department there are mostly housewives who are paid by piecemeal. As Marian's department deals primarily with housewives so everyone (except office boy) is female. Thus, it shows that the top management has only male members. Further, Marian finds a gap between married and unmarried coworkers in her company. There are Emmy, Millie and Lucy who are unmarried and when Marian labels as "artificial blondes." They are all fond of make-up. Marian says:

But Emmy, Lucy and Millie were all there combing their yellow hair and retouching their makeup. Their six eyes glittered in the mirror. (Atwood)

Emmy is a typist, "whisk tinted and straggly". Lucy has the job of public relations and Millie is Mrs. Brogue's Australian assistant "brassy from the sun and cropped." They are all virgins and Ainsley, Marian's roommate, labels them as "office virgins". They have different views for not getting married, Millie says that she thinks of marriage in the long run. Lucy does not get married because of husband-wife quarrels and Emmy thinks that if she ever gets married, she will become sick. But one thing that is common in all of them is that all of them are fond of travelling. Millie has lived in England; Lucy has been to New York twice and Emmy wants to go to Florida. Mrs. Bogue is the head of the department who is a motherly figure and Mrs. Grot is an accountant. The virgins do not try to mix up with married women as they think that the married ladies had different topics to discuss. Pregnancy in Seymour Surveys is regarded as disloyalty to the company. When Mrs. Bogue comes to know that Mrs. Dodge in Kamphoops is pregnant, she informs about it to Marian. She thinks she "will have to be removed." Marian considers Mrs. Bogue a friendly woman.

By portraying the character of Clara, Atwood describes the lives of those women who used to involve in diapers and drudgery only. Clara is an old college friend of Marian. She is expecting her third child. The formerly beautiful Clara seems to Marian like a "boa construct that has swallowed a watermelon," (Atwood, p. 30) because every time Marian meets her she finds her pregnant. Her pregnancy is a kind of mental "vegetation" symbolized by the stylized flowers. These flowers are more ominous than decorative. Children hang from her body like leeches. They scream as wet on the guests' clothing. They have bowel movements in inappropriate places. All in all, they behave in a piggish fashion. Clara characterizes her pregnancy: *Maybe it is not a baby at all but a kind of parasitic growth like galls on trees or elephantiasis of the navel or a huge bunion.* (Atwood, p. 117) Pregnancy like food makes one fat. It also represents a loss of autonomy. There is an alien presence in one's own body. Clara has been "dragged slowly down into the gigantic pumpkin like growth that was enveloping her body." (Atwood, p. 117) Due to repeated pregnancies Clara's body became thin. She calls her baby leech and sometimes thinks she is all covered with suckers like "an octopus"

Ainsley has been portrayed as a confident and dignified person. There is no "impossible" word in her dictionary. She plans everything in such a way that she is ready to fulfill her aim. That is why Marian says at the end of the novel that she manages everything with strict attitude and high seriousness. This is her tactful nature and managing attitude that lets her make all the adjustments. She is also a truthful and outspoken person. It may be the case of the birth of the child or the landlady, she tells the actual thing. She is also a careless person. She does not bother if landlady says to her anything in anger. Nor does she care what society will say about the child whose father is not known to the people. She takes things in her own way. In her the mother-instinct is so strong that it impels her to sleep with Len. She is ready to bear anything for her child. She plans to be ideal and caring and does not want any Clare type mother. She wants to provide every possible comfort for the child.

Ainsley upholds the liberation of women. She works for an electric toothbrush company and has the job of a tester of defective electric toothbrushes. The company does not pay very well, so she wants to open little galleries and wants to seek the guidance of artists. A woman of modern views, she rarely cares for a person who does not care for her. Due to this beer "the lady down below" says to her that she is creating unpleasantness in the house. Due to her smoke the landlady's child is getting disturbed. But Ainsley does not care for her complaints. Even she replies to her in the same tones:

I have always suspected you of being a hypocrite and now I know you're a bourgeois fraud, you have no real convictions at all. You are just worried about what neighbors will say. Your precious reputation. Well, I consider that kind of thing Immoral... I am going to have a child too and I certainly would not choose to bring him up in this house - you would teach him dishonesty. You'd be a bad example— moment I don't want you exerting any negative prenatal influences. (Atwood, p. 224)

Atwood has, to some extent, portrayed a similarity between Ainsley of *The Edible woman* and Anna of *Surfacing*. The names of both of them start with the letter 'A'. Moreover, both of them are fond of cigarettes and make-up. Both are heroine's friends in respective novels. Only this aspect shows a similarity between both otherwise there are also points of difference between them. Ainsley is a truthful and outspoken person while Anna wears a mask of unreality on her. Ainsley plans to be a caring mother while Anna does not want any children at all. But one thing is clear that both are close to the heroines-- Ainsley to Marian in *The Edible woman* and Anna to H. in *Surfacing*.

Atwood depicts Marian in relation to men. Marian MacAlpine is the heroine of *The Edible Woman*. She is a young woman just out of university and a drift to in Toronto. Like all her friends she has no real past but a nebulous future. Her all attention is focused on the present. Marian works in Seymour Surveys. She had been made to work in such a firm by Atwood knowingly. By showing her working in such a firm, Atwood has shown consumerism in society and voraciousness of the Indiscriminate masses. Actually, there is something in the nature of Marian that everybody shares his or her own problems with her. Atwood, perhaps, has made Marian a lover of kids. She is not ready to accept the view that, for any mistake, children should be punished physically. When she presents this argument before Peter, he rejects it with his one argument or the other. Time and again she is saying that they should

not be punished, rather they should be made to realize their mistake and should be given another chance to improve it. But she feels that she can never win over Peter:

Marian's serenity had vanished at her own remark. She looked intently at Peter trying to see his eyes, but he was glancing down at wine glass, admiring perhaps the liquid richness of the red against the white of the tablecloth. (Atwood, p. 150)

Marian divides the world by establishing polarities between the male and the female psyche, between the hunter and the hunted, between the eater and the eaten, between the victor and the victim and between the consumer and the consumed. Such division allows Marian to regard herself as powerless, as innocent and as childlike. She cannot eat or love or marry Peter. The most symbolic of Marian's friends is Duncan who serves as Marian's double. Early in the novel, Marian puts on Duncan's dressing gown and he comments that she looks exactly like him. She first meets him at the "laundromat" and Marian considers him as an outspoken natured man. After their conversation, she realizes that he is the man whom she met during the beer interview. Sometimes, she thinks that words do not come out of his mouth, Father they are thrown on the other person. He tells Marian. "Without that official shell you look sort of exposed."

Marian is also in search of her identity as a 'Woman'. Although her search is not a conscious one, she lives in the world of illusions. Like the heroine Alice of Fish's book, Marian is Incapable of performing any role in life. Although she is engaged to Peter but she does not want to accept him as her husband. Hence she feels fascinated by Duncan. But he does not accept her as his life partner. So, she feels confused and bewildered. Marian's body is subject to sudden metamorphoses, transformations which are symbolic of her mental state.

Marian gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoons herself upside down with a huge torso narrowing to a pin head at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled then receded. (Atwood, p. 150)

No doubt, Duncan can be called a projection of Marian's self, but he is also her alterego: He does point directions to her. He ultimately leads her to some form of understanding and frees her from her sense of considering herself as either nurse or victim. On the morning after Marian's engagement party and her night in the hotel with Duncan, he conducts her through the twisted maze of Toronto's streets and brings her finally to a great open pit "a gignatic hole scooped into the ground". Together they sit in the snow at the edge of the abyss which looks like nothingness, like absence, like death. Perhaps Duncan tells Marian that she had invented it. He suggests to her that she should conduct herself independently. With this exhortation to responsibility, Marian leaves the ravine, the pit, the burrow, the underground and moves back to the street alone, perhaps towards reality. Duncan remains behind "a dark s lope against the snow," crouched on the edge and gazing into the empty pit.<sup>1</sup> Since Duncan is described as Mariano's double she leaves Duncan and moves away. Perhaps it is her move from ignorance to reality.

After the above incident, Marian now feels a sense of self-autonomy. She returns to her apartment takes of the red dress which had made her such a good "target" for Peter. She washes her dishes, rest ores order in general and proceeds to bake a cake, an elaborate cake cut and decorated to look like a woman in a pink ruffled dress. As



Marian eats the cake, she sheds off all her grievances against her victimizers. Atwood remarks that Marian is a changed woman now:

Her creation gazed up at her, its face doll like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye. (Atwood, p. 283)

The cake is, of course, an effigy of Marian's self-absorption and of her identity as a consumable item in a consumer society. She invites Peter and tells "you've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a Substitute, something you'll like much better." (Atwood, p. 279) Peter is horrified and leaves Marian to eat the cake alone, which she does with great relish. Duncan sees in the cake same Symbolic significance. Duncan makes Marian realize her past mistakes in her behaviour with Peter. He says that Peter wasn't trying to destroy her but that was just something she made up. Actually she was trying to destroy him. Why has Atwood used cake metaphor in the novel, she explains that the Edible Woman was conceived when "while gazing...at a confectioner's display window full of marzipan pigs... Wedding cakes with sugar, bride and grooms were at that time of peculiar interest to me." (Atwood, p. 269) The Edible Woman could be seen as a case study describing different female roles. Marian's experience reveals that bride and groom eat each other.

We find that Marian in the novel feels that men view women as commodities or as property to enhance their social status. We know that Peter is fond of hunting and photography. Marian becomes observed with the idea that she is just another of the objects in this world to be captured and photographed and made into a trophy, a book title or something else to be consumed. In a hotel, she listens Peter telling his friends about shooting a rabbit released as a hunter's target. Linguistically, the prey is female.

So, I let her off and Wham. One shoot, right through that heart.... I picked it up and Trigger said, you know how to gut then. Just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts'll fall down. So I whipped out my knife, good German steel and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip, you see, and the next guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god, the trees were red for yards.... Trigger and we had the old cameras along, we got some good shots of the whole mess. (Atwood)

Atwood employs certain images to portray the sensibilities of women. The image of cake has been considered significant for the ending of the novel by many critics. According to Robert Lecker, Marian has been from the beginning a "packaged product of a male dominated corporate society." and her rejection of food is synonymous with her rejection of a culture which tends to exploit women and treat them as edible objects. Lecker says that her final act of eating the cake, is a form of reconciliation--a recognition that she is herself "a mixture of consumer and consumed." (Leckers) Catherine McLay holds that Marian's cake represents "a feast, the celebration of Marian's new freedom and even rebirth. She is released from the spell, from her identification of herself with the victim. No longer isolated and alien, Marian has rejoined society." (McLay) Kim Chernin holds "By eating up this cake fetish of a woman's body, she assimilates for the first time her own body and its feelings. It is a re-enactment of the ritual feast, in which the eating of an animal's flesh, or a piece of cake shaped like breast, signifies the coming

together of human and divine, individual with collective woman with own body and its feelings." (Chernin) In *Second words* Atwood remarks:

My heroines' choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning career going nowhere or marriage as an exit from it. (Margaret Atwood)

In *The Edible Woman* Marian's cake functions as a doll, a representation of Marian herself as both doll and infant. It is also, perhaps, her symbolic child, an indication of her recognition if not her acceptance of her identity as woman. When Ainsley explains "You are rejecting your femininity," She is correct in her observation but wrong in her interpretation. Marian does indeed reject the childish and doll like femininity of her former self but in order to become the adult woman, the human being, the reader can at least hope what she has become. Food is a very important element of the novel. From the very beginning, Marian highlights the importance of food to her since she describes her every meal. Then suddenly, she is unable to eat anything, which is a physical reaction to her psychological disarray. In the end she uses a cake as a metaphor for her relationship with Peter. It seems to me that Atwood gave so much significance to food and even started the novel by offering the recipe for the puff pastry, to draw attention to the society where consumerism is becoming more and more important. People have the need to consume everything, to own and control everything, to the point where they are trying to consume even human beings. Perhaps Atwood uses all these food references to show how far society has come and how something has to be done about it. Bouson remarks: "That women are defined by their culture as passive objects for male consumption is one of the central premises of *The Edible Woman*. (Brooks, 1993)

### Conclusion:

All in all, all the female characters in *The Edible Woman* represent different aspects. If Marian's co-workers are perceived as caged employees, "the lady down below" is a lovable character. Ainsley becomes an unmarried mother and fulfills the gap of the father of Ainsley's unborn child as Ainsley marries Fish. Marian learns a great deal about life and the processes of living and about being human. One word more, Marian is like the speaker in Atwood's poem 'All Bread' which urges a reconciliation between innocence and guilt. Atwood depicts how women like Marian learn and acquire understanding of life as they undergo hardships and victimization. Woman shed illusions and become realistic.

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