



GENDER DISINTEGRATION AND EQUALITY: AN EXPLORATION THROUGH MARGARET ATWOOD'S '*THE EDIBLE WOMAN*'

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the thematic intricacies of gender disintegration and equality as portrayed in Margaret Atwood's seminal work, *The Edible Woman.* Published in 1969, Atwood's debut novel is a pioneering exploration of a woman's unraveling psyche against the backdrop of societal expectations and shifting gender dynamics. The study aims to dissect the narrative's nuanced portrayal of the protagonist, Marian, as she grapples with a disintegrating sense of self amid a consumer-driven world and explores the metaphorical cannibalism embedded in gender roles. By examining characters adhering to or defying traditional gender stereotypes, the research illuminates Atwood's commentary on gender inequality. The shifting narrative perspective and symbolic use of food and clothing further unravel the complexities of the characters' personalities, emotions, and motivations. As the protagonist reclaims control over her life, the study analyzes the implications for gender equality. Placing the novel in its socio-historical context, this research also explores how *The Edible Woman* anticipated and contributed to discussions on gender equality, making it a poignant precursor to the feminist movements of the era. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to deepen our understanding of gender dynamics, disintegration, and the pursuit of equality as intricately woven into Atwood's groundbreaking literary exploration.

Born in Ottawa, Ontario, on November 18, 1939, Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author most recognized for her feminist viewpoint and prose fiction. When Atwood was a teenager, her family lived in Toronto, but she also spent time in the sparsely populated northern Canadian bush land, where her father, an entomologist, was conducting research. She started writing when she was five years old and picked it up again ten years later. Atwood graduated with a master's degree in English literature from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1962, having attended Victoria College at the University of Toronto.

In Margaret Atwood's early poetry collections, including "Double Persephone" (1961), "The Circle Game" (1964, revised in 1966), and "The Animals in That Country" (1968), she explores human behavior, celebrates the natural world, and critiques materialism. Throughout her novels, recurring themes involve role reversal and new beginnings, with a focus on female protagonists navigating their relationships with the world and those around them. Notably, "*The Handmaid's Tale*" (1985) presents a dystopian narrative centered on a woman's written account of living in sexual slavery within a repressive Christian theocracy. This novel has been adapted into various forms, including a film (1990), opera (2000), and a TV series that premiered in 2017, co-written by Atwood. Her Booker Prize-winning work, "*The Blind Assassin*" (2000), intricately weaves together the memoir of an elderly Canadian woman, addressing her sister's suicide and her involvement in publishing a posthumous novel attributed to her sister. Other novels by Atwood include the surreal "*The Edible Woman*" (1969), "*Surfacing*" (1972), exploring the relationship between nature and culture, "*Lady Oracle*" (1976), "*Cat's Eye*" (1988), "*The Robber Bride*" (1993), and "*Alias Grace*" (1996), a fictionalized account of a real-life murder trial. Additionally, Atwood's 2005 novel, "*The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*," draws inspiration from Homer's *Odyssey*.

"*The Edible Woman*", Margaret Atwood's debut novel published in 1969, played a pivotal role in establishing Atwood as a significant prose writer. This narrative revolves around Marian, a young woman whose, consumer-driven world begins to blur after her engagement, leading her to perceive a growing disconnect between her body and self. As Marian grapples with metaphorical cannibalism and endows food with human qualities, she finds herself repulsed and unable to eat. Atwood, in a 1979 foreword for the Virago edition, described the novel as protofeminist rather than explicitly feminist.

The exploration of gender stereotypes is a central theme in *The Edible Woman*, with characters like Peter and Lucy adhering strictly to these stereotypes, while others like Ainsley or Duncan defy societal constraints. The narrative perspective undergoes a shift from first to third person, emphasizing Marian's gradual detachment from reality. As the story concludes, the return to first-person narration aligns with Marian's reclamation of control over her life. Atwood skillfully employs symbols such as food and clothing to delve into themes and offer insights into the personalities, moods, and motivations of the characters.

The novel's setting plays a crucial role in distinguishing characters, with Duncan found in mundane places like a laundromat or a gloomy theater, while Peter frequents genteel bars and a modern apartment. These varied environments also serve to explore different facets of existence, contrasting a freer, wilder life with the confines of a civilized, gilded cage. The changing settings highlight the challenges faced by women during this era, where freedom was synonymous with uncertainty, and marriage presented its own set of problems. Published during the emergence of the women's movement in North America, *The Edible Woman* is labeled by Atwood as "protofeminist" due to its 1965 origin, anticipating the themes and discussions of second-wave feminism."

The first novel by Margaret Atwood, "*The Edible Woman*," published in 1969, marked a significant milestone in Atwood's literary career, establishing her as a prominent writer of the late 20th century. Known for her exploration of socially conscious themes and issues related to social justice, such as feminism, women's autonomy, and nationalism, Atwood's work emerged during a pivotal moment in the feminist movement. As second-wave feminism gained momentum, women advocated for breaking free from restrictive gender norms that confined them to domestic roles. The protagonist, Marian McAlpin, embodies the frustrations of this era, trapped in a stagnant role at Seymour Surveys with limited opportunities for advancement.

The novel delves into themes of gender identity, societal expectations, and stereotypes, illustrating how individuals can either conform to or challenge these norms. Marian's stifling experiences within societal structures, from friendships to her engagement with the stereotypical Peter, showcase the constraints imposed on women. The narrative's turning point occurs with Marian's engagement, leading to her loss of appetite. The title, "*The Edible Woman*," alludes to the concluding scene where Marian presents Peter with a cake shaped like a woman, symbolizing her realization that he has consumed and molded her into a restrictive feminine identity.

While often considered a proto-feminist work due to its exploration of women and identity, Atwood has resisted this label, emphasizing the novel's nuanced treatment of gender complexities. In a time when the concept of a "feminist" work was less prevalent, Atwood clarifies that she did not consciously set out to write a feminist novel. The absence of straightforward feminist characters underscores the novel's focus on the internal conflicts women face as they navigate competing desires and seek their own identities.

Fresh out of university, Marian McAlpin is busy at Seymour Surveys, where her job involves rephrasing psychology-based survey questions into more conversational language. Her roommate, Ainsley Tewce, is a fellow psychology graduate, and Marian maintains a casual relationship with the lawyer Peter Wollander. At this stage in the novel, Marian's life is defined by her aversion to marriage and her reluctance to commit to a lifelong career at Seymour Surveys. Upon embarking on a survey to gather opinions on a beer commercial, Marian encounters Duncan, an English graduate student absorbed in a codependent relationship with his roommates. Duncan's self-absorption leaves Marian intrigued, as he remains oblivious to her thoughts and emotions during the interview. Unable to reconnect with Duncan after the survey, Marian grapples with her experiences.

Following a visit to her pregnant friend Clara, Marian and her roommate Ainsley delve into discussions about the significance of motherhood in defining femininity. Ainsley, determined to raise a child on her own, plans to seduce a man with desirable genes. In an effort to keep Ainsley away, Marian socializes with her friend Len Slank, but Ainsley unexpectedly flirts with Len during a night out. Overwhelmed by the realization of her deepening relationship with Peter, Marian retreats to the bathroom to cry. Despite her intention to convey a desire to break up, Peter catches up with her, leading to a surprising marriage proposal that Marian reluctantly accepts.

As Ainsley schemes to manipulate Len using her psychology training, Marian, now engaged, spends more time with Peter. However, a moment of horror during a dinner when Marian realizes the origin of her food leads to an aversion to meat and other foods. Ainsley becomes pregnant with Len's child, revealing her calculated plan. When Len rejects marriage, Ainsley decides to find another suitable man.

Marian announces her engagement at work, prompting expectations of her resignation due to potential pregnancy. Encountering Duncan at a laundromat reignites a connection, culminating in a kiss and spontaneous encounters. Despite Duncan's proposal for a casual relationship, Marian's engagement complicates matters. Meanwhile, Ainsley commits to Fish after her plan with Len falls through. Approaching the wedding date, Peter's party becomes a turning point for Marian. Dissociation and lack of autonomy intensify as she alters her appearance drastically. Seeking solace with Duncan, they share a disappointing sexual encounter, leading to the realization that Duncan cannot aid in her quest for individual identity. Returning home, Marian bakes a woman-shaped cake for Peter, signifying the end of their engagement. Ainsley, now committed to Fish, solidifies their relationship. As Marian begins to eat the symbolic cake, her ability to consume meat is restored. In the novel's final scene, Duncan finishes the woman-shaped cake.

Margaret Atwood has distanced herself from the explicit "feminist label" and shown a tendency to shield her texts from "unauthorized interpretation," her fiction consistently delves into women's issues, their oppression, and the scrutiny they face within the suppressive patriarchal system (Tolan, 2007, pp.9-10). In her debut novel, "The Edible Woman," Atwood explores themes of identity with the concepts of body and gender. What sets this work apart is how Atwood intricately links the loss of self to the loss of body and the diminishing desire for food. The protagonist, Marian, an ordinary market research company employee, embarks on an Atwoodian quest to redefine her identity. Atwood's heroines often commence their stories conforming to stereotypical female characteristics while resisting heterosexual gender norms.

These powerless heroines strive to reclaim their lost selves and challenge what has been withheld from them in patriarchal societies. Marian, ensnared in this system, struggles to unveil her identity and individuality. At the initial stages of their narratives, Atwood's heroines, including Marian, lack awareness of their conditions and resemble victims. Similar to Offred in "*The Handmaid's Tale*," Marian is ignorant of the factors defining her individuality. Dissatisfaction with her job and her relationship with Peter, her fiancé, propels her into a state where she cannot recognize her own self (Tolan, 2007, p.13).

At the outset, Marian, serving as the narrator, presents herself as the epitome of a conventional woman. What's crucial in this narrative is Atwood's depiction of her characters, their culinary preferences, and various materialistic but inseparable aspects of human existence. To illustrate Marian adhering to social norms, Ainsley characterizes her clothing choices as "camouflage or protective coloration." Through Marian's self-description and the ensuing comparison with Ainsley, the reader discerns her conservative side, aligning with the controlled steps dictated by societal norms (Atwood, 1969, p.12). Confronted with the question of "what one is expected to want," Marian grapples with cultural oppression from her norm-following fiancé, Peter (Boynton, 2002, p.58). Handsome and well-dressed Peter, as Ainsley notes, is a 'nice package' making decisions "effortlessly" (Atwood, 1969, p.150). Once engaged, Marian becomes akin to a puppet in Peter's hands, relinquishing the narrative power and finding herself "letting him [Peter] choose for her" (Atwood, 1969, p.150). Atwood skillfully maneuvers through Marian's loss of power by linking it to the loss of appetite for food. Notably, the shift from Marian's voice in the first person to third person aligns with the standards of womanhood, marking a formal and serious turn in her relationship with Peter, coinciding with the intensification of her eating disorder.

In alignment with Butler's perspective, Marian is portrayed as a woman undergoing a transformative "process" of selecting her gender. This process involves recognizing oneself and subsequently confronting societal limitations that impose defined categorizations. Contrary to suggesting infinite possibilities for a subject's actions through choice, Butler posits that the "choice of gender style" is inherently restricted from the outset during this process of self-recognition (Salih, 2002, pp.45-46). Marian's internal conflict, indicative of a binary opposition manifesting in her encounters with the "Other," becomes overtly evident in the novel's structure.

Initially narrated in the first person—a reliable style aligning with the character—Marian's account shifts after her engagement to Peter. The narrative perspective, controlled by an outsider, meticulously scrutinizes Marian's thoughts with detailed imagery. The novel, as implied by its title, is saturated with food and eating imagery, serving as symbols laden with connotations and objectification to the external world.

Atwood's intricate depiction of a meal shared by Marian and Peter in a restaurant marks the inception of conflict. Marian perceives Peter's choice of her meal as an assertion of power, interpreting it as a way to eliminate vacillation. In their conversations, Peter's perspective aligns with Butler's idea of the body as a "reiteration" in culture. Advocating for consistent punishment, even physical, he views it as the appropriate means to shape a child's behavior. As a lawyer, Peter assumes the role of the controlling agent, describing Marian's life as "sheltered" and conforming to accepted cultural norms. This portrayal reinforces the concept of an "I" against an "Other" where adherence to standard rules undermines those outside the norm (Butler, 2006, p.197).

Marian's response to Peter's authority is characterized by silence, a passive reaction despite her secret conviction of Peter's judgment being flawed. Peter's desire to regulate the entire community in a patriarchal society, as explained to Marian, reinforces the "heterosexual matrix." Marian's silence, akin to Peter's judgment, becomes a practice of this regulatory system. Butler argues that heterosexual hegemony assigns "a sex and a gender to a body

that can have no existence outside discourse." While recognizing the absence of a stable notion of gender, Butler emphasizes that gender rules have historically prevailed and continue to uphold the world through "reiteration" and the persistence of the "heterosexual matrix" (Salih, 2002, p.89).

Challenging the societal definition of normal and accepted identity necessitates a formidable struggle. Going against entrenched norms established over centuries represents a daunting task, given the deeply ingrained system of control. The patriarchal structure wields superior power, and this authority permeates through discourse. Margaret Atwood's diverse yet intricately layered novels serve as a testament to the arduous journey to attain voice and the discourse that women have historically been denied. Despite the preexistence of body and gender constructs before the emergence of a "subject," there exists the potential for individuality through personal desires, even if it entails the "subject" facing exile and being labeled as abnormal.

In her novels, Margaret Atwood portrays the contemporary woman's yearning for goal attainment, expressing impatience in the process. Her female characters refrain from blaming others; instead, they reject human society and turn to a more primitive world. Atwood's heroines acknowledge their mistakes and strive for recovery. Throughout their quest for survival and identity, they endure significant hardships, ultimately overcoming great challenges. Atwood's aim in her novels is to delve into the process and possibilities of challenging hegemonic power structures.

Patriarchy, characterized by male control and dominance over women across all aspects of life, stands as the obstacle to be eliminated, according to Atwood. However, dismantling patriarchal ideology, as Millet notes, is not an easy task. Millet emphasizes that men tend to favor dominant roles, conditioning women to accept subordinate roles. Contemporary feminism, Millet suggests, seeks to dismantle the sex/gender system, envisioning a society where gender equality is firmly established.

Margaret Atwood emerges as a bold voice unafraid to reveal the harsh realities and cruel faces hidden beneath societal masks. Beyond actively contributing to the creation of a female tradition, she also offers insightful commentary on it in her works. At a fundamental level, Atwood's focus revolves around women as characters, exploring their feelings, thoughts, and actions. In "The Edible Woman," the narrative reveals the constant struggle women face between social control and self-assertion concerning their bodies. The protagonist undergoes a traumatic journey in pursuit of a viable survival route, contending with the commodification of her flesh in the matrimonial market driven by a selfish male will. Despite an uncertain future, Marian rejects victimhood, maintaining optimism and achieving a new self-identity as a woman. Thus, "The Edible Woman" serves as a representative work addressing the theme of female suffering ensnared in the web of obnoxious male domination, reducing women to consumable objects.

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