



MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*: A STUDY OF SUPRESSED WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

*This article attempts to present the characterization of women getting suppressed in Margaret Atwood's **The Edible Woman**. Analysing the mentality of three main women characters in the novel, this paper tries to locate the exact ideas of women in conventional Canadian environment. The chaos and stumbled decision making of women due to Modern Canadian moral values and the way they handle to get away from those conventions are well examined in this article. The idea of woman illusioning herself being eaten by the expectations of society was something unique in this novel but the strong feministic claims it makes was something extraordinary.*

Key Words: *Canadian morals, conventions, marriage, food, child-bearing, commitment, liberation.*

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian novelist, poet, feminist writer and a well – established critic. The social, cultural, economic and political plights of Canadian women both in and out of their houses was well described and criticized by Atwood in her novels and poems. The Edible Woman is Atwood's first novel published in the year 1969, the women liberation movement took place in the same year and Atwood's novel deliberately represented the

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movement. The novel actually deals with a woman who could not eat anything and feels herself is being eaten.

Marian Mc Alpin, the heroine of this novel, was an ordinary young college graduate woman who works for a consumer survey company. She is engaged to a handsome, young lawyer Peter who spends his time in hunting and photography. Marian is obsessed by the idea that she is just another object in the world of her lover. Thus, by these thoughts Atwood represents Mariam as the new woman who liberates herself from the clutches of marriage. As Peter considers the duty of woman as just conventional, he appears too ordinary for her and unconsciously fights against her forthcoming marriage. As Marian was brought up with Canadian moralistic values she is possessed by liberal social ideology. When Marian got engaged to Peter, she got to know her family's concerns about a girl's education and empowerment. She feels thus:

“their fears about the effects of her university education, never started but always apparent, had been calmed at last. They had probably been worried she would turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt... or that she would undergo some shocking physical transformation, like developing muscle and a deep voice or growing moss... But now, their approving eyes said, she was turning out all right after all. (174)

Marian shares her apartment with Ainsley who stands as a contradictory image to all of Marian's. On an occasion when both goes to Marian's friend Clara's home, they both got different ideas on seeing Clara's life. The duties that Clara had as a mother and the works shared by her husband in her household gave was seen in different perspective by both of them. Ainsley feels that beholding a child will make any woman to feel her femininity but husbands are not needed to lead a happy life. Husbands are meant only for begetting children and there is no need to stay with them all the life. Even though Clara's husband helps her in the all the ways he can, Ainsley's ideas towards having and living with husband remains the same. Marian sees Clara as an object meant only for begetting children. Even when they both visited her home, Clara is seen pregnant. Marian looks at Clara as an object that is being swallowed all the time in the demand of her body and thus becomes pregnant. She feels thus: “During the later, more vegetable stage of Clara's pregnancy she (Marian) had tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perspective faculties above the merely sentient and sponge-like, since she had spent most of her time being absorbed in, or absorbed by, her tuberos abdomen.” (130)

By describing Clara as vegetative and Sponge-like, Marian expresses her mind that considers the body of a woman as an object that is being eaten literally and ideologically. Even though Clara, deep in her heart feels herself fulfilled by giving birth to a child and feeling the exact

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deep femininity, Marian observes mind/body dichotomy in a woman through Clara. Marian feels the same thing when her co-worker announces her engagement in the office party and indirectly announces her resignation. This is because, when a woman is getting married, even without her knowledge she will be eaten by the patriarchy and the society and she must get pregnant. To the ideas of her chief Mrs. Bogue who wants her girls to be stable and steady at work but getting pregnant will not help to be steady and will make a girl unstable. Marian observes thus:

“Marian knew, from rumour and from the banishment of a typist just after she had begun to work at the office, that Mrs. Bogue Preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past. Newly-weds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable.” (168)

Marian in the beginning of the novel accepts to get married but in the course of the novel when a thought of herself being eaten, she decides to escape from the conventions. Marian considers herself as a victim while Ainsley and Peter searches for their prey. She tries to liberate herself from the social expectations and the conventional system of marriage. However, she accepts Duncan because even after consuming her he will allow her to be herself after that. But life with Peter will be filled with commitments and social expectations. Marian’s this individuality makes her remain single and destroy the cultural links between the society and her mind. Ainsley though opposes marriage and commitments, she wishes to have a baby of her own. Marian disagrees with her ideas and tries to stop her from doing this however, Ainsley’s ideas succeeds. After giving birth to a son she goes in search of a father for her son and ends up choosing Fischer as her husband.

Marian deliberately disconnects even eye contacts with Peter because she does not want to be a conventional woman. A woman’s relationship with the food is compared to her relationship with her mother in this novel. The image of Marian’s mother is placed her because without getting Marian as a child, her mother would not have felt femininity but Marian deliberately did not wants to feel that. Peter at an argument with Marian says that she is not feeling a female into her and that’s her problem. So, the mother-daughter relationship argument in this case could be understood with Chernin’s words thus:

“Indeed, the problem with female identity that most troubles us, and that is most disguised by our preoccupation with eating and body-size... has a great deal to do with being a daughter and knowing that one’s life as a woman must inevitably reflect on the life of one’s mother.” (1986: 37)



Thus, this novel is based on the structure of Psychic journey that goes deep into the landscape of the protagonist Marian. Even from the very beginning of the novel, Marian's ideas towards the life of women in Canadian society was exposed. Her friendship with Emmy, Lucie, Millie, Clara, Joe, Peter, Duncan and very especially Ainsley helped her to shape her ideas towards the society and life. The novel instantly changes its narration from first person to third person and then to first person. This change happens every time when Marian's notion towards liberation and psychic changes. However, the novel ends with Marian's strong refusal to be a victim of conventions and she decides to remain single. The cake she eats finally, depicts her development and clarity in realizing the difference between object and reality. Thus, Atwood's depiction of female characters and their mentality towards society was made clear.

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