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LOSS OF SELF IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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Abstract:

Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, won the Booker Prize. She is known for unique investigation of feminist themes in her works. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is about women and their relationships to men, society, food and eating. The premise of *The Edible Woman* is that social expectations are rarely in tandem with our freedom of choice. It is through food and eating that Atwood discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. The novel explores Marian's questions of self-identity and her relationships with others, including her fiancé, her friends, and a man whom she meets through her work. Margaret Atwood's encrusted, whimsical style in *The Edible Woman* explores themes of sexual identity and consumerism.

The novel's design about consumption, work on a symbolic level. Affluent in metaphor, delightfully comic, and dazzling with insight, the story archives the fantastic and dramatic ego dissolution of Marian McAlpin, who appears to be an entirely conservative young woman with friends, a successful and attractive man in her life, and a reasonably good job working for a market research company. Everything in her life seems to fly out of control with her engagement, just as Marian seems ready to fulfill "every woman's" dream of trading in her troublesome job for marriage and a new life at home with children. *The Edible Woman* beholds a woman's inability to eat alongside with the dreariness in her relationship, albeit it was published at a time when the psychology of eating disorders was not normally discussed. Atwood begins the story with a first-person narrator, Marian McAlpin, telling the story from her own perspective, almost sounding as if she were talking to herself. At the end of *The Edible Woman*, Marian partially reconstructs new persona, through a rehabilitated relationship to food.

KEY WORDS:

fragmentation, feminist, objectification, consume, victimization, edible, appetite, identity

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is one of the most prominent Canadian writers and a major figure in contemporary literature. *The Edible Woman* is the first novel by Margaret Atwood, published in 1969. *The Edible Woman* was published at the time that feminism was experiencing a reformed popularity among political movements. The female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, struggles between the role that society has imposed upon her and her personal definition of self; and food becomes the symbol of that struggle and her eventual rebellion. The manner of her collapse and the startling ending make for often hilarious reading. It

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is often discussed as an early work of feminism

Theme of the novel:

The theme of the novel is the search for self-identity in a male-dominated society, where women are demoted to precise and restrictive roles as nurturers, servants, and followers. Marian, as a willing member of a mechanized, consumer-oriented society, has allowed herself to absorb the social mythologies that are destructive to her, thereby rendering herself a consumable object, that is, an 'edible woman.' This reinforces the central idea in Atwood's *Power Politics*: "You refuse to own/yourself, you permit/other to do it for you ..." (30). The more Marian fulfills the expectations of others the more she is 'normalized' the more she feels engulfed.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, the female protagonist, Marian MacAlpin, works to make herself acceptable or 'appetizing' to those around her. In spite of her will to maintain her usual behaviour, her body begins to reject the things she consumes, namely food—first meat, then eggs, and finally vegetables. The only alternative to this slow dissolution of self, is to engage in aggressive consumption—a consumption associated with men. Although some of the characters in Atwood's *Edible Woman* maintain essentialist beliefs, the novel's overriding objective is to show how culture is a significant and transformative force that shapes social roles, more particularly, gender and gender identity.

In *The Edible Woman*, an important aspect of Marian's attempt to escape the imminent, objectified fate of the animal, is her rejection of male practices (like hunting), feminine accessories (makeup and other adornments), and the 'specialized instruments' of eating and watching (rifle, cleaver, fork, camera). Woman's fragmented social identity enables the consumption and assimilation of all her parts, intellectual, emotional, and physical, into a cultural agenda. Atwood shows that this assimilation can be nonetheless averted or retarded through small acts of resistance.

Male dominance-An Exposure:

In *The Edible Woman*, the self and other dynamics is evident in the relationship between Peter and Marian. Atwood presents us with a female character who believes man has a fundamental need to "manipulate" and to confirm to himself, and the society that he represents that he is, for all intents and purposes, male. Peter's proposal to Marian is only signified through Peter's eyes. She is described as "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (Atwood 92), consumed by Peter's desire. In other words, Marian is now a "marked" woman, and Peter has signalled his "marker" status. The unequal relationship between Peter and Marian is the archetypal meeting between man as self and woman as 'other.' For Atwood, relationships such as Marian and Peter's, function within a patriarchal domain.

Peter is attracted to Marian largely because of her willingness to give in to his desires; it reinforces his feeling of being "the king of his castle" (19). She allows herself to be manipulated and seduced by the superficial props of brandy and hi-fi music and, as such, Peter is situated at the level of deceiver, while Marian becomes the deceived. Here Marian is losing herself, or as Iris Young puts it, 'she is "gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention" (Young 155).

It is Marian who believes she is deceiving Peter by acting as the deceived when she is fully aware that she is not. It could be said that Peter is "the king of the castle" only because Marian has provided him with the sceptre and throne. While Peter may think he can impose his desires on Marian, it is precisely because she deceives him into thinking he can. Similarly, Marian's roommate Ainsley, in the hope of being impregnated, manipulates Len into believing that he is the seducer when it is she. In the presence of the opposite sex, Atwood's characters function within their stereotyped social roles as it meets their personal interests. For Marian her conformity offers her the security of marriage and acceptance in the workplace.

Throughout the novel, Marian is both consciously and unconsciously aware that her values and belief systems are gradually being subsumed by Peter's own. Marian and Peter's imbalanced rapport is reinforced by art and cinema. Atwood's use of "chrome-plated," "bright," and "expensive" is meant to remind us of the language of consumer culture. Marian, in the process of submission to male desire, resembles a product, a consumable object.

On the one hand, she reduces herself to an object through her description of her smile, but on the other hand her discovery of her objectification reveals a very real subjectivity. Paradoxically, Marian not only identifies herself with animal victims, but starts "taking on the characteristics of her oppressors" (Sweet apple 51). Marian is valued for her "sensible" and "more normal than normal" qualities, since they complement the social order.

Atwood writes in *Murder in the Dark*: "He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged."

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This is the arrangement they have made" (Atwood 64). The woman has become the embodiment of culture acting upon its own nature. Her body subsequently evolves into a site of struggle. In the second part of *The Edible Woman* Marian goes from reforming to herself in the first person to the third person, "as if to indicate that during this period Marian has no self, no 'subjectivity' and thus cannot tell her story" (Lyons 182).

OBJECTIFICATION:

Atwood's female characters either produce their victimization or are equally prone to inflicting victimization on another. Marian, like many contemporary women, discovers that she is caught between the "half of the individual which wishes to express her individuality, her self" (McMullen 66) and the half that desires marriage and the socioeconomic privileges that go with it, but "often at the expense of individuality" (66). She senses that social forces threaten to pull her apart and reconfigure her into the form of an object.

In a struggle to maintain her individuality, she employs strategies to prevent her fragmentation. Aligned with the brutal dismemberment of an animal, her fragmentation would enable consumption and hence the fulfillment of oppression. Marian's red dress becomes a symbol, that she is a marked target. Early in the novel, Marian identifies herself with the victimization of the animal.

Identification with animal's fate:

Marian's identification with the rabbit's suffering also suggests that she has not fully implicated in the desires of her culture. By adopting the rabbit's trauma as her own, she is metaphorically shaken, cracked, whipped, and strewn. Marian's resistance evolves from an inner body politics that disagrees with the extreme subjugation inflicted on another being, whether it be human or animal. It reduces her to two-dimensional status, she recognizes the underlying danger of dominant discourse and its ideological constraints. She has adopted the rabbit's instinct and feels paralyzed by fear and longs to escape. There is no such thing as a male or female hero in Atwood's novel: "men victimize and women comply in their own victimization. But her female characters usually manage to come through for each other in ways that men do not" (Atwood 30).

Marian is at continual risk of losing her "authentic self" (Hesse-Biber 115), but is at even more risk when she starts to fragment. Marian is accused of rejecting her femininity twice in the novel—once after she escapes from Peter, Ainsley, and Len and another time when she bakes a surrogate cake and then consumes it. In both cases she is resisting womanliness and the feminine decorum that accompanies it.

Fragmentation of Self:

In Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Marian's loss of appetite signifies the eradication of her identity and an attempt, on her part, to exert some control over her fragmented life. Part two in the novel "seems to be told in the objective voice of an uninvolved narrator" (Nodelman 74). Marian's complete loss of appetite illustrates a point of departure. In the third part of the novel, Marian chooses to subvert her own consumption and reclaim her self in the form of a surrogate cake.

If in fact Marian is giving into the normal feminine regimen, her inability to eat could be identified as anorexia nervosa. In a brief synopsis about *The Edible Woman*, Anne Montagnes writes that "it's about a girl suffering from anorexia nervosa, a psycho-neurotic complaint seen mostly in young unmarried females and characterized by an aversion to food" (56). Certainly anorexia nervosa appears to be the only definitive term for Marian's illness, since it concurs with a femininity defined by "restraint, moderation, and self control, virtues of our Puritan heritage" (Hesse-Biber 4). However, it can be debated that Marian's inability to eat is triggered by an inability to consume another being's suffering.

Peter's hunting story is strategically placed in the first part of the book, so as to prepare the reader for Marian's confrontation with meat in the second part. The rabbit with the "guts dangling from the trees" (Atwood 75) reinforces her own sense of victimization to the extent that she adopts the characteristics of the rabbit

In the second part, she is at the restaurant with Peter and suddenly sees her steak as a "hunk of muscle. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed ..." (175). Marian does not manipulate her food; rather, she feels manipulated by it. But she feels even more betrayed by her body's rejection of food. Her fragmentation has initiated a fear within her that she is spilling over, losing her shape, and is no longer able to contain herself. So while an anorexic woman may fear spreading out physically, Marian fears spreading out emotionally and losing control.

In the first chapter of *The Edible Woman*, we see Marian as a healthy young woman who in

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posture, appetite, and moral attitude reflects her culture's notion of femininity. Marian embodies a split subject. On the surface, she appears together, but underneath, she has the desire to "dash about in dithering mazes of panic" (76). She feels caged by social constraints that forbid her to take control of her natural environment. She recalls a "frenzied armadillo" (108) she had seen at the zoo.

The cage represents the implementation of humanity's destructive forces, while the armadillo, taken out of its natural environment, expresses uncertainty. The cage is a symbol of environmental control in its cruelest form. Marian's inability to cope becomes a diseased condition, because she is not accepting the "everyday bodily requirements and vulnerabilities of 'femininity'" (Bordo 186), which are the very conditions of her existence. Throughout the novel, Marian restrains herself accordingly for fear that her fate will become like that of the rabbit. But in actual fact, it is her conformity to dominant discourse that objectifies, fragments, and threatens to consume her identity.

Her identity becomes divided between what Peter would like her to become and what she believes herself to be. Soon, the former usurps the latter and Marian senses that she is being pulled apart like an animal in a disassembly line, piece by piece. After her engagement, one of the first things to go is her language.

Marian's fragmentation benefits Peter, because he can assert his identity over her identity. Clearly, her fragmentation is a transitional phase that wavers between, and is overlapped by, her objectification and consumption. Her status is indeterminate and cannot be labeled, so perhaps it could be argued that her fragmentation is the most empowering development in her character. Marian's fear of losing control spawns in her a desire to escape. Her first escape challenges the social norms that try to assimilate her, but at the same time demonstrate how she is contained by them.

Marian's escape transcends Young's theory, in that she wishes to escape in the hope of protecting her bodily existence. In response to Marian's rebellious behaviour, she must be maintained, manipulated, mistreated if necessary, and redefined "as whatever doesn't disturb the pattern of what we already know" (Frye 35). For lack of a better choice, Marian gives into her capture with relief: "I felt myself caught, set and shaken. It was Peter who must have stalked me" (Atwood 81).

Resemblance with objects:

Earlier, it was established that Marian's inability to eat is not attributed to body image, but to her identification with another being's suffering. She initially rejects meat because it was once alive and then she rejects vegetables for the same reason. Soon, she turns to processed or artificial foods, such as canned-rice pudding or noodles. Vitamin pills become her next "alternative to organic food" (Mac Lulich 122). Here Marian's abstinence from food is not a rebellion against the society that Peter represents, but a rejection of her own body. Thus eating food at the Christmas party becomes a cannibalistic act. MacLulich suggests that Marian's is not only "fleeing from her own feminine or natural self" (124) and the "distressingly messy cycle of natural processes" (124). Marian, of course, is also escaping the fate of the rabbit in Peter's hunting story

At the Christmas Party, Marian fears that she will drown in the "Sargasso Sea of femininity" (195). Lucy's gold bangle becomes her life preserver, since it represents the "hard circle" (256) of her engagement ring, "a protective talisman that would help keep her together" (256).

Marian's vision of herself in between the dolls suggests that she recognizes a feminine lack, a failure "to fully identify with an image that can never be entirely her own her 'self'" (Radner 55). Her dolls represent her gender-role socialization as a child, but she has not figured into her respective social role as an adult. Indeed her self evaluation, through the doll's eyes, indicates that their identities have meshed together. She unconsciously spreads and assumes the image of the dolls, but in the process her identity is extinguished.

Marian's subconscious reveals her disassociation that threatens to pull her away from her identity (her centeredness), subsequently annihilating her will. The dolls become Marian's surveyors, their watchful eyes indicating their disapproval.

If we look at each character's relationship with Marian, it becomes evident that they are both using her. Duncan defines Marian's social self as "what has been expected of her and what she has accepted" (25). Peter and Duncan present fronts that evenly articulate the split Marian embodies. Peter's appearance is clean and intact, while Duncan is shaggy and unwound. Between Duncan's endless self revelations and Peter's playboy fantasies, Marian loses control over her own desires and needs.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude it can be argued that Marian's fragmentation is an inherent part of her experience as a

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feminine body, but if she rejects her femininity, then, she falls outside of classification. In observing Levi-Strauss's dichotomies, it becomes clear that Marian mediates between the masculine (subject) and feminine (other), characteristics of aggressor and victim, deceiver and deceived permanence and change. But unbeknownst to Marian, the masculine and feminine are both artificial and, therefore, equally destructive. In fact, the superficial representations of wholeness and togetherness pose perhaps the greatest threat to any claim Marian can make over her identity.

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