

Pallavi Kaushik

Dept of English

MLNC, DU

India

kaushikpallavi13@gmail.com

Female Experience and Femininity in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Abstract

The Edible Woman deals with female experience and femininity and challenges the traditional notions of ideal female behavior. Marion subverts the traditional role imposed on her and resists the loss of self during her courtship period with Peter. Her inability to eat anything is a silent yet potent act of protest. Atwood is contesting the notion that marriage and motherhood is destiny and most desirous life choices of women. Atwood's notions intersect with Luce Irigaray's, who in her essay "This Sex Which is Not One" deals with commodification of women among men, women being mere props for fulfillment of male desire and women encumbered by traditional notions of female sexuality. Meanwhile, women are unaware of what they actually desire.

Opening lines of the novel has Marian declaring that she "knew she was alright" (Atwood 3). Not only it foreshadows that there is something that might not be alright with Marian in near future but she also asserts the fact that she does know what is going on with her. Despite the social and professional rut she thinks she is in, she does feel alright. In fact, she felt "more stolid than usual" (Atwood 3). From the moment Marion is engaged to Peter, she never feels calm. She feels agitated, irrational, crazy or doesn't feel anything at all. She

loses authority to declare that she is indeed alright. She ends up losing so much of her self that her narrative shifts from first person to third person in part two of the novel. She not only feels that she is losing authority over herself and identity but also cannot comprehend the multitudes of feelings she is suddenly experiencing. It seems that Duncan's obsession with algae is a manifestation of Marion's desire to return to a basic life form where she wouldn't have to deal with whatever is going on with her right then. Just as Duncan is trying to escape the multitudes of literature and literary criticism, it seems that Marion hopes to return to a basic life form and remould her 'self' or escape from this gruelling process all together.

Marion observes, "She had a hangover which put me in a cheerful mood it made me feel so healthy" (Atwood 3). One might argue that Marion's passivity and inability to eat anything at all are symptoms of a psychological disorder. But as we see in these lines, she does not only realise importance of good health but Ainsley's hangover put her in a cheerful mood. It makes her "feel so healthy" and puts her in a "cheerful mood". So it does not allow us to conclude that she has any chronic eating disorder.

Luce Irigaray her essay, "This Sex Which Is Not One" she talks about how women are not only commodities to be exchanged between men but also they are mere 'props' and their 'value' is evaluated on the basis of how useful they are to men. Irigaray argues that woman "is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (Irigaray 25). After their engagement, Peter tries to stifle Marion and ensures she fits into the mould of ideal wife he thinks he deserves. He looks at her in a way that Marion imagines him "sizing her up as he would a new camera" (Atwood) as if she is another of his treasured and acquired possessions. In the novel, Peter is often associated with a hunter.

As Peter continues to disintegrate her 'self' and control every aspect of her life, she feels alienated and disintegrating so much that she dreams of her body dissolving. For his party, he suggests that she visits a hairdresser and buy a dress that was not "quite so mousy" (Atwood 261) which she does. She goes out and buy a red dress which was "short, red, and sequined" (Atwood 261) which saleswoman convinced her was "really her" (261) despite her misgivings. Saleswoman convinces Marion that 'what Peter wants' is 'who she really is'. It shows how "women are trained in self Surveillance" (Davies 62) and exercise "surveillant gaze over other women" (Davies 62). Women "learn to see themselves and other women through men's eyes" (Davies 62) and become advocates of the very structure that objectify them. Marion returning from hairdresser receives lots of "appraising" glances from various women. Women playing an active role in subjugation of other women isn't an alien concept in Atwood's works. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Aunt's function is "to disseminate the doctrine among women, exercising a matriarchal power which is disguised as a spirit of camaraderie" (Somacarrera 53).

Marion's experience at the hairdresser's foreshadows her future with Peter. She specifically asks hairdresser to not put too much of hairspray but "they never did what you wanted them to. They treat your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (Atwood 261). This not only alludes to the cake that will represent her as a commodity and as a consumer but it also highlights the fact that women in fact are commodities to men which Luce Irigaray talks about in her essay, "This sex which is not one". Irigaray writes, "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 23). So the salesgirl, hairdresser, Ainsley with the makeup etc. are all moulding Marion to be a perfect and attractive partner for Peter. What she wants is irrelevant and inconsequential. She feels so entrapped that she feels "strapped" (Atwood 262) to the hairdresser's chair. Atwood will take this commodification of women to another level with *The Handmaid's Tale* where women will be exchanged among men. The narrator, Offred says,

“something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (HT 14). Not only women are willing to commodify their bodies but they don’t have autonomy over their own bodies. Having some claim on their own bodies was a ‘fantasy’.

At the beginning of the novel, it's only through some side remarks by other characters that we get to know little bit of Marion’s fiancé, Peter. Ainsley comments, “those professional men get so huffy if you know anything about their subject. You know, like Peter”. She is hinting that Peter takes himself very seriously and cannot tolerate a woman with superior intellect or knowledge. When Marion runs away after their engagement, she is literally running away from her life. But she’s caught. Later when she tries to hide under the bed, she stuck. When she tries to ‘find her way’ walking back home, its starts raining. Rain here represents the social environment not being conducive to her rebellion. All her desperate acts of self-expression and rebellion fail.

Next morning after her engagement, Marion feels nothing at all. Instead of celebrating, she is very passive and goes to do laundry. At Laundromat, her conversation with Duncan is simulating and we see Marion at ease. She is “surprised at my own detachment. My restlessness of the afternoon had vanished, I feel calm, serene as Stoneman” (Atwood 120). Later outside Laundromat, she “find myself kissing him, or being kissed by him, I still don’t know which” (Atwood 121). In chapter 12, Marion contemplates her engagement with Peter, “but although I’m sure it was in the back of my mind, I hadn’t consciously expected it to happen so soon or quite the way it did” (Atwood 124). She tries to justify it and convince herself that it was a good decision, “there’s no reason why our marriage should turn out like Clara’s” (Atwood 121). She does believe that “Peter and I should be able to set up a very reasonable arrangement” (Atwood 121).

Marion justifies her reason to marry Peter, “Peter is an ideal choice when you come to think of it. He’s attractive and he’s bound to be successful. And also he’s neat which is a major point when you are going to live with someone” (Atwood). Meanwhile, Peter probably thinks of her as an ideal partner for himself because she doesn’t demand of him anything unconventional. He can enjoy his conventional male privileges with her and at the same time completely monopolize her. So much that from then onwards, novel’s narrative shifts from first person to third person. The last thing Marion does, while still in control of her narrative, is cleaning out her room and throwing out her dolls which she has had since childhood. She has completely given herself up or anything which reminds her of herself before Peter and her narrative ends with, “I must get organised. I have a lot to do” (Atwood 126). Now Marion “will not say what she wants; Moreover, she doesn’t know, or no longer knows what she wants” (Irigaray 25). After this, the novel’s narrative shifts to third person as Marion has lost authority over her ‘self’.

Luce Irigaray writes, “in order for woman to reach the place where she takes pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the way of analysis of the various systems of oppression brought to bear upon her is assuredly necessary” (Irigaray 31). Marion’s refusal to eat is not similar to some women not eating in order to have a ‘perfect body’, which would render them more traditionally attractive and feminine but it is a silent protest against being forced into a ‘feminine’ role she clearly doesn’t want to play. Madeleine Davies points out in her essay, “Margaret Atwood’s female bodies” that lot of Atwood’s women “show marked sign of bodily unease”. According to her, female bodies “are never neutral sites but are always active articulations of territorial disputes”. Thus Marion’s inability to eat is socio-political in nature. Marion’s inability to eat is a silent but very powerful protest against her own consumption and commodification by Peter. As Bouson points out, Marion is a “potential victim” of sexual objectification and victimization but Atwood creates a “disruption to the process”. Marion,

unlike many women, is very conscious of her loss of self and autonomy over herself and her inability to eat anything is a very loud protest. Atwood subverts the traditional sexual relationship when Marion runs away from Peter's party and has a sexual rendezvous with Duncan at a cheap hotel. Instead of being the submission one, Marion is aggressive and passionate, "with tight-lipped determination she began to undress" (Atwood 318) while Duncan behaves "like a rebuked child" (Atwood 318). Marion in the later part of the novel bakes a cake and confronts Peter. she says, "you've been trying to destroy me, haven't you?... you've been trying to assimilate me". This knowledge has given her power. She has, in Irugaray's words, analysed the "system of oppression". She gives Peter an alternative which he refuses, so they call off their engagement.

The woman downstairs or the landlady represents the traditional and the conventional values. Not saying anything explicitly yet powerful enough to make presence felt. Marion is always conscious of the landlady. It doesn't seem normal. She constantly obsesses over what landlady 'might' say. The fact that Marion is so perturbed by this woman downstairs, always anxious to face her and careful enough not to cause any confrontation suggests that there is an ongoing tussle going on in the subconscious between traditional value system and modern values. She does realize the importance of having control over one's life yet is anxious to cause any ripple in traditional way of life.

Marion's office space constantly reminds her of being "sandwiched" between "men upstairs" and "below". Her job offers her no sense of security or any hope of upward mobility because as soon as she gets married and pregnant, it won't work out. It might appear that Marion lacks career ambition. There is inherent understanding that she can never reach the top floor. It's exclusive to men. Marion is very uncomfortable signing the document for provident fund. She tries to reason with herself that it is because of the salary deductions but it forces her to face the the inevitable question that she has been avoiding, 'What does she plan to do with

her in the future'. She wonders "what then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour survey" (Atwood). Gender normative professional environment doesn't allow her to become one of the man upstairs, nor she could step downwards. She doesn't see a future here. Her gender allows her limited career option. At this point of time, marriage with Peter seems like the only option to escape this situation. But the moment she agrees to marry Peter, she gets caught in the same gender defined role she wanted to escape. Peter wants a proper wife. This helplessness disturbs Marion.

Ainsley's and Marion's visit to Clara offers a deep insight into perception of women by other women and men. Clara has chosen a traditional lifestyle. Getting married, having kids. Instead of drawing a pretty picture how a motherhood completes a woman and how it is a very beautiful experience, Atwood tells us another story. Clara is miserable. So much that a heavily pregnant Clara declares that she is going on pill after this one. Interesting thing to note is that Marion remembers Clara being against pills. Instead of having 'the pregnancy glow' she looks like a "boa constrictor" that has "swallowed a watermelon". She is described by Marion's as "she lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had send out four thin white roots and a tiny pale yellow flower." Clara is stripped of all human traits and it just a baby machine. Clara, as Bouson points out, "de-idealizes the mother infant bond by comparing her baby to a leech".

Her husband Jo is the moral instructor. Quite literally, an instructor in philosophy. He is wary of "unmarried girls like Marion and Ainsley mixing up with the likes of of Len". He thinks of all unmarried girls as "easily victimized and needing protection". Marian also remembers how he had several times, "volunteered fatherly advice" to her.

Our concern is that how this visit to Clara's place affect Marion. Soon enough Peter is going to propose (though Marian doesn't know that yet). She, instead of being excited about the idea of starting a family and fulfilling her traditional role of a wife and a mother, could only

feel a “wave of embarrassed pity” for Clara. While returning from Clara’s house, it seems to Marion that her “skin felt stifled as though I was enclosed in a layer of moist dough.” Soon Enough she will identify herself with all things consumed.

After they return home, Ainsley announces that she is going to have a baby. In response to Marion's protests, she says every woman should have at least one baby. To Marion, it sounded like a voice on radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair dryer. Society’s indoctrination that a woman should have a baby even if she doesn't really want one is parallel to advertising and consumerism creating illusion that every woman must have a hair dryer. “It is even more important than sex, it fulfils your deeper femininity”. For her, baby brings purpose. she says to Marian, “don't you feel you need a sense of purpose”. She also asks that, “wouldn't you have your children while you're young?” (Atwood 43). Here, she is not the Ainsley who, in the beginning of the novel, was rebelling against old values of landlady. What she fails to acknowledge in this statement, assuming everyone wants to be a mother, is that not all women plan on having kids and even if they do, they might not want them while they are “young”. Marian tries to be as non-judgmental as possible, focuses on how society would constantly look down upon the kid and constantly harass him or her because of legitimacy stamp. For her, to bring a child into this world and subject him to this kind of torture is not fair to the child.

Ainsley constantly tries to justify her deep-rooted old traditional values and indoctrination with some vague scientific study or research, “besides they’ve proved they’re likely to be healthier if you have them between twenty and thirty” (Atwood 43). Now we never really get to know who are ‘they’. She doesn’t seem to be concerned about socio-economic condition, woman’s emotional, physical and psychological condition and more importantly, her ‘willingness’ to have kids. Irigaray in her essay also talks about child and how “maternity can fill gaps in a repressed female sexuality” (Irigaray 27). Ainsley, frustrated by inability to

find a suitable partner and burdened by stereotypical assumptions that a woman 'needs' a baby to fulfil her femininity, gets pregnant.

All this disturbs Marion deeply and the moment Peter proposes, she feels as if she is losing control over herself and she feels so consumed in 'what is expected of her' that she begins to identify with the food she consumes. Ainsley and Clara represent contrasting life choices to Marion. Clara has embraced the conventional life and is miserable. Ainsley wants to break the stereotypes and make her own choices. And she's equally miserable so much that she feels she needs a child to fulfil her 'self' and her femininity. To Marion, both these life choices doesn't seem to offer anything fruitful and fulfilling, so she ends up giving all the control and decision making power to Peter.

Atwood's novel is a brilliant representation of the female experience and femininity being commodified by patriarchal society. Marion's experiences a 'loss of self' which she is unable to come to terms with. Her subconscious rebels with everything it has and it becomes the battle of survival. The landlady, workplace and Peter etc. are representatives of the oppressive environment. Luce Irigaray's ideas intersect with that of Atwood's. Irigaray is concerned with oppressed female sexuality and how femininity is prescribed by masculine notions and is never at par with woman's desires. According to her, most women are not even aware of their own desires. What they think they desire is the reflection of a stereotypical image perpetuated by the patriarchal structure. Ainsley is coerced into believing that she needs a child to fulfil her femininity. But Atwood allows Marion agency to assert herself and push back all the stereotypical expectation which might have consumed her whole self.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. 1969. London: Virago Press, 1976.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. London: Vintage, 1996.

Bousen, J. Brooks. "The Edible Woman's Refusal to Consent to Femininity." *Margaret Atwood*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 2000, pp. 71-92.

Davies, Madeleine. "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies". *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Coral Ann Howells, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 58-71.

Somacarrera, Pilar. "Power Politics: Power and Identity". *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Coral Ann Howells, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 43-57.