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RECONSTRUCTING FEMININE IDENTITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the feministic issues in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*. In this novel Atwood deconstructs the traditional gender discourses that intend to limit women's choice, agency, and subjectivity. The novel is a representative fiction focusing upon the pangs of the women trapped in the web of patriarchy. It traces the traumatic journey of the protagonist, Marian, in search of self-definition. In the male dominated society women are viewed as consumable commodities. They are expected to fit in the roles ascribed by the male hegemony. Atwood's novel highlights the myriad predicaments of the women in the patriarchal culture. It also emphasizes the necessity of resistance and self-actualization in the face of patriarchal onslaughts. In the essay, "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists", Patricia Goldblatt states that "Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive."

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INTRODUCTION

The novel focuses on the identity crisis of Marian MacAlpin in the male chauvinistic society with consumer culture that seeks to render women to consumable commodity. She comes to realize that the patriarchal society has turned her into an edible object and she is being devoured gradually. Beauvoir writes that a "woman's fate is bound up with that of perishable things" (567) In *The Edible Woman* Atwood uses perishable food as a metaphor for women's roles in the society. In Atwood's novels, writes Emma Parker, [a]ll the heroines interpret the world in terms of food and negotiate their way through life using food. For women, eating and non-eating articulate that which is theologically unspeakable. Food functions as a muted form of female self-expression but, more than that, it also becomes a medium of experience. Food imagery saturates the novels and becomes the dominant metaphor the heroines use to describe people, landscape, and emotion. (358) In *The Edible Woman*, Marian partially reconstructs the concept of self through a renewed relationship with food. Non-eating in *The Edible Woman* symbolizes the denial of the patriarchal model of femininity.

J. Brooks Bouson says in *The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to characters in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Women* that "Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women" (230) Marian is a young working woman in market research firm, writing survey questions and sampling products. She is engaged to Peter and this marks a significant shift of her life. Once Peter proposes Marian, she loses her essential self and submits herself to Peter's domination. She actually loses her control over her life. This gradually leads her to an identity crisis. She can feel the psychological and cultural pressure which has suppressed her subjectivity and snatches her capability of independent thinking. Before coming in contact with Peter Marian's life has been molded in the ways according to her parents and after her engagement with Peter her life is guided by his whims. Peter wants to impose an identity on her according to his norms. In the patriarchal norms women are considered emotional, sentimental and dependent on others. But Peter expects Marian to be practical and sensible and different from other women in her thoughts and attitudes. So to satisfy Peter's expectation Marian has to mould herself. Peter embodies the power of patriarchal ego which demands Marian's complete submission. She realizes that Peter represents male domination that seeks to subdue the feminine qualities of Marian.

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In her relationship with Peter she feels trapped. That is why in Peter's hunting story Marian envisions a hunter and a rabbit. Peter is the hunter and she is hunted. She feels that like a rabbit she is victimized by the hunter in Peter. Her world immediately blurs and changes. In the camera episode Peter is projected as a 'homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands' (246). The obsession of the possession of the camera symbolizes the act of effacing her subjectivity. The camera focusing in the 'zero hour' in the party on her red dress according to Marian is actually reducing her life zeroing into nothing. Marian gradually turns into a paranoid. She constantly thinks she is nothing but a commodity in the matrimonial market. She can neither surrender herself to the male domination, nor register any resistance. J. Brooks Bouson says: "as a realistic novel, *The Edible Woman* shows how female passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self". Marian's initial reluctance to eat finally leads to an eating disorder, very similar to anorexia nervosa, which is her body's reaction to the society's efforts of imposing its norms and policy on women. She becomes anorexic. Peter's patriarchal ego makes her view herself as an edible item to be consumed by the patriarchal society.

Several feminists critics share Gayle Green's observation that "Marian's starvation is both protest against and correlative to her repression of herself to fit a mold of 'femininity' that requires her objectification" (106). Parker concedes that non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness" (350). In the second part of the novel the point of view is changed from first person to third person. In this transition Atwood demonstrates Marian's growing alienation from her body. At the Christmas party, Marian looks around at the other women, thinking "You were green and then you ripened: became mature. Dresses for the mature figure. In other words, fat." Marian refuses to become fat or matured. Throughout the novel Marian fears her imminent social and physical maturation and visibility. Beauvoir writes how a woman's maturing body becomes grotesque to herself and object to others:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and to show her flesh. (288) In the final portion of the novel, Marian's connection with herself and with society changes abruptly. Throughout the novel, Marian shows her lack of subjectivity, referring to herself in the third person "she". However, in the end the narrative shifts to the first person "I", indicating her transformation to a self-actualization. Critics have discussed a lot on the implication of the female-shaped cake that Marian creates, Peter's refusal to eat the cake, as well as Marian's act of "symbolic cannibalism" (Bouson 15) when she eats the cake symbolizing her own image. Howell feels that the cake involves both "complicity" with and a "critique" (43) of feminine roles. She says to Peter: "You've been trying to destroy me you've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. That's what you wanted all along" (271).

When Peter refuses to eat the cake, Marian eats it in a fit of frenzied anger and retaliation. Marian's act of baking and serving a cake is a feminine gesture but her decision to make the cake as an imitation of her own image obviously has some deeper implications. By creating her image, rather than being created by it, Marian discovers her lost self. Throughout the novel, Marian has been afraid of becoming an edible woman, an object for consumption. Through the cake-image Marian mocks the male hegemony that views the woman as something consumable and perishable. As Beauvoir describes, Marian thinks that her body "escapes her control" and "betrays" her. Often she hides her body beneath "layers and layers of wooly clothes" (236) or clothes that are a "camouflage" (6). She internalizes the notion that a woman's body is a commodity. In the episode in the bathtub she visualizes her naked body as a vast stretch of land. Her body embodies her 'carnal contingency'. Yet, at the end, she gives her body an artistic form. The cake-lady implies feminine vulnerability yet springs from an urge to register agency and subjectivity in a social fabric that often denies woman both. She seems to regain her lost identity with full conviction. Emma Parker comments: 'by demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world' (350).

The cake which she bakes is a symbol of self-definition. Atwood thus comments in an interview: "Miriam performs an action, preposterous one in way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself" (25) Sharon Wilson says: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food" (96) To Glenys Stow the cake "is of course, a deliberate symbol of the artificial womanhood which her world has tried to impose on her," and with the "crazy feast" towards the end "Marian breaks out of the expected social pattern" (90)

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