

Metaphor of Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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The Edible Woman was written in the 1960s, when the society was dominated by men. In this period of time, post-war feminist movements were trying to conquer the patriarchal model of family and femininity and to distance themselves from the position of consumers. Traditional gender roles such as mother, wife, housekeeper, or lover were improper for modern women. They looked for some options, but the only one which was delivered by the social system was a position of a worker stuck in a dead-end job. In the absence of any realistic possibilities to change their condition, women uttered their objections, frailty, and anxiety through their outlook toward food and, as a result, through their bodies. This condition led to the rise of feelings of frustration, anger, and unfulfilment among feminists. The novel's publication coincided with the rise of the women's movement in North America, but it is described by Atwood as "protofeminist" because it was written in 1965 and thus anticipated feminism by several years. The female protagonist, Marian MacAlpin 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. Margaret Atwood employs an eating disorder in her novel *The Edible Woman* as a metaphor of a revolt and protest. Atwood in an interview says:

It's a human activity that has all kinds of symbolic connotations depending on the society and the level of society. In other words ,what you eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from individual as well as from place to place. If you think of food as coming in various categories: sacred food, ceremonial food, everyday food and things that are not to be eaten ,forbidden food, dirty food, if you like- for the anorexic ,all food is dirty food. (lyons 228)

The main protagonist of the novel, Marian MacAlpin is a young, triumphant woman, working in market research. Her job, private life, and social relations seem to be idealistic, but when she finds out her boyfriend's consumer nature during a talk in the restaurant, she can't eat. Marian's initial lack of desire for food finally leads to an eating disorder, very similar to anorexia nervosa, which is her body's response to the society's effort of imposing its policy on the heroine. Moreover, the three parts of the novel propose the course of this eating disorder. Background causes are shown in part one, Part Two indicates the mind/body split and Part Three reflects the spontaneous declaration of the problem.

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." At the end of *The Edible Woman*, Marian partially reconstructs that new persona or concept of self through a renewed relationship to food. Non-eating in *The Edible Woman* is mainly a symbol of the

denial of the patriarchal model of femininity. Although the protagonist is an educated bright woman who lives on her own, she feels manipulated and unable to take decisions for herself. Her fiancé Peter, Ainsley, Clara, and three office virgins as well as her own friends believe in traditional values and try to make Marian think in an old-fashioned way and accept her gender role.

However, once Peter proposes to her, she loses this sense of self and becomes a victim to the male-domination that females in society are used to. Marian does not make decision anymore and relies heavily on Peter to choose what to do. Astonishingly, Marian actually loses her ability to control her own life. It is claimed that the heroine is doubtful about who she is and who she might become. Atwood uses a switch to the third person to show this change though the story still follows Marian through “she”, not “I”.

The kind of pressure that drives her towards the marriage institution is by no means imposed from above: “the pressure is rather psychological and cultural which have structured her subjectivity that constantly stops her from thinking or doing anything which is socially abnormal. Marian notes that she and Peter have never fought. There has been nothing to fight about because Marian’s social conditioning has helped her to accept the victim role. She does not understand her feelings initially because, according to the way she has been conditioned, she should not have these feelings.

Marian’s character is formed first by her parents’ plans for her future, then by Peter’s. Marian fears Peter’s tough personality will ruin her own delicate identity. This subconscious perception of Peter as predator is shown by Marian’s body as a lack of ability to eat. Marian’s rejection to eat can be seen as her struggle to being strained into a more feminine role. Following her engagement, the change to third-person narrative shows that Marian’s story is restricted by someone other than Marian herself; following Marian’s regaining of identity, Atwood returns to first-person narration.

Marian’s distancing from her body permeates the novel. It is perhaps most obvious in the disrupted narrative, which shifts from first- to third-person narration in order to convey Marian’s increasing distance from her somatic self. Marian’s disassociation is reminiscent of the attitudes of some early second-wave feminists, to whom it seemed necessary to minimize, or even ignore their bodies and their maternal possibilities. Theoretically, by erasing the body, women can evade patriarchal control. As Marian comes to learn, however, the body will not be disposed of so easily. In a scene symptomatic of Marian’s corporeal estrangement, her body is forced to make its presence known:

After a while, I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! (70)

Acceptance is what her body is crying out for; it refuses to be dismissed. In abstaining from certain foods, Marian faces ‘each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind’ (178). Her rejection of food acts as a metaphor for her rejection of the male-dominated society to which she belongs. Her whole life is run by men. When Peter proposes, Marian’s body starts to refuse food and she is unable

to eat. Because she feels like she is being consumed by Peter, she cannot consume food. Not only has she lost her appetite, but also she has lost her sense of self. In order to show how limited are the models offered by society to adult women, Atwood uses food imaginary. The menu, which appears when Marian goes to the restaurant with Peter, represents an illusion of choice. Even though Marian can choose anything from the list of meals, she cannot get anything else. This situation suggests that the heroine is trapped by the options presented to her at work and in her personal life. What is more, the fact that it is Peter who places an order in the restaurant emphasizes Marian's passivity and dependency on others:

“It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter made up their minds right away.” (147)

The moment, in which the heroine finds out that she is expected by society to adjust to the role of a wife and mother, she loses the ability to eat. The sudden and spontaneous reaction of Marian's body to the events happening around and to her are the first step on her way to regaining independence. As she slowly discovers the nature and causes of her eating disorder, she starts to understand her own needs and feelings. One of the symptoms of her unconscious inner rebellion against adjusting to the role of the mother that Clara embodies is her body's refusal to eat dinner with Peter, even though she is hungry.

Marian's both the body and the feelings have gained independence from her conscious intentions and that they will keep on behaving in an unpredictable way till she acknowledges and integrates them, in fact, it is just once Marian has assimilated mind and body that she retrieves her narrative power. Marian's reply to gendered binaries is to isolate herself from her body; by enabling Marian's body to protest against that detachment, Atwood denounces the repressive dichotomies that order society. In this novel we can see the oppressive control the female body endures under patriarchy. Atwood indicates that the solution is not to acknowledge and to become accustomed oneself to authoritarian culturally-defined conventions, but to re-write them.

Interestingly, Marian considers herself to be acting of her own free will, in spite of the fact that it is Peter's prompting that causes her to endeavor into the salon without regard for her own console. In this episode, female space is not a place for women to accomplish their own desires, but a space created for women to fulfill the desires of men. Atwood's clinical treatment of the beauty salon is a reflection of the scrutiny patriarchy inflicts on the female body. Arguably, the beauty salon episode is an example of patriarchy encroaching on female space to control the female body. Marian is extremely conscious of the heavy burden patriarchy forces upon her bodies. In this case Peter is pictured as a physician that inspects her body in detail. After making love, his visual approach is comprehend by the feeling of his hand “gently over her skin , without passion, almost clinically , as if he could learn by touch whatever it was that had escaped the probing of his eyes”. The distressing portrayal of Marian as a patient on a doctor's examination table clearly signifies the sexual politics at work within the relationship between the protagonist and her husband-to-be. Marian's body turns into a tangible space whose surface and visible elements are subjected to a medical glance that examine her in order to grasp her

deep and hidden psychological entrails to control and dominate her subjectivity. Peter's medical glance is an invasive, and violent, intrusion within Marian's selfhood. Thus Marian turns to a person who desire to please Peter's expectation and to embody the patriarchal idea of femininity. As Susan Bordo states, these practices of femininity may lead women to "utter demoralization, debilitation and death." As the feminine ideal becomes increasingly confining, she imagine herself disappearing. Sitting in the bath, Marian is suddenly overwhelmed by the fear that she is dissolving, 'coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle' (218). This image is initially introduced by a dream:

I [Marian] had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent. I had started towards the mirror to see what was happening to my face, but at that point I woke up. (43)

With profound perception, Marian imagines her colleagues as edible women: 'They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay.' (166-67)

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood disassembles the patriarchal concept of femininity and offers a new account of the female body. By re-appropriating the body, Atwood is able to articulate women's anxieties over her oppressive cultural experiences as well as confront that oppression. Her fiction exposes the falsities of mind/body dualisms that alienate woman from her body, and drive her from her somatic self. In so doing, Atwood proposes a transcendence of those falsities and the restricting boundaries they promote. For Atwood, the body is a means by which woman can assert *her* existence, and not a manipulated existence defined for her. In her fiction, Atwood employs a corporeal language of resistance. The female body manifests female powerlessness while simultaneously protesting against it, adapting the eating disorder to this purpose. Atwood's consideration of the female body as a site of power and resistance is one of the most crucial and profound statements of her work.

Typically, some critics have studied Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* as either an optimistic celebration of female "liberation" or a materialist-feminist protest. But the style which Atwood uses is primarily her manipulation of a shifting narrative point of view and her use of an unbalanced, tripartite structure--reflects a more complex picture of capitalism and female subjectivity in the 1960s.

The last part of the novel describes how the desire returns and at the same time Marian comes back to herself. This is illustrated by her choice to make a cake in the shape of a woman, a picture of herself? When Peter, the groom, refuses to eat the substitute for his bride and takes to flight, Marian devours it. The stomach of the hungry woman returns to normal. The edible woman can eat again.

Marian desires a classical, clean and proper body. She has mixed feeling towards pregnancy, motherhood and full female bodies. If we combine the feminist and the anorectic aspects of the story, it seems that the unconscious of the young woman protests against the conventional female role that Marian is expected to enter

by marrying Peter. When the relation with the lawyer becomes more serious and he proposes to her, Marian's reaction is pictured in these words:

"I drew back from him. A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes."
(83)

Step by step, the items that remind Marian of a human body become inedible and they seem to be reminders of her own bodily existence and her identity and position. It appears that food is too similar to herself, to her body: she is an edible like the foodstuffs she detests. She suddenly finds herself identifying with the things being consumed. She can cope with her tidy-minded fiancé, Peter, who likes shooting rabbits. She can cope with her job in market research, and the antics of her roommate. She can even cope with Duncan, a graduate student who seems to prefer Laundromats to women. But not being able to eat is a different matter. Steak was the first to go. Then lamb, pork, and the rest; next comes her incapacity to face an egg. Vegetables were the final straw.

After discovering that more than mere prevention was essential, Marian takes a fundamental step to win back her identity. A very brave move on Marian's part is symbolically showing Peter that she can no longer be controlled. She does this by designing a cake in the image of a male's ideal woman. In the end, Marian is able to eat again. She is free to hunger, no longer estranged from her own body Marian is absorbing the power of woman and her body that she has ignored till now. In fact, she literally eats herself and then the sense of self, and the "I" returns. The leading metaphor of the novel, an edible –woman in the symbolic shape of a cake, which Marian bakes and ices for Peter, is both the ultimate image of bodily dismemberment and also the sign of Marian's recovery and finding self-identity. The baked woman is a duplication of Marian as an item of patriarchal consumption. When Peter refuses to eat it, she suddenly feels extremely hungry and starts devouring the cake. Instead of being consumed by the male-dominated society, Marian chooses to consume herself, thus demonstrating that Marian is, once again, in control. She progressively becomes fully aware of the degrading effect these male-oriented cultural values have on her identity. She becomes her own person and her own decision-maker. With Marian McAlpin, Atwood is defying the conventional female figure and breaking the "wife" mould that most females were expected to play during the 1960's. Waugh observes: "by her act Marian has registered a voluntary and international protest which release her body from its involuntary rejection of food" (Waugh 181).

In this way Marian is saying no to the rigid form of femininity and curing her damaged female –self. She is capable of thinking for herself and making choices accordingly. She has become self-aware. Marian achieves self-knowledge by asserting against her passivity and rejecting Atwood's caricatures of the roles of the underpaid worker, the ideal of femininity, the mother \ wife oppressed by society, the lover alienated by her emotions. She decides to act and no longer be acted upon. However, though she is capable of expelling Peter from her life, she has not achieved independence from degrading effect on her identity. "I realized Peter was trying to destroy me. So now I'm looking for another job," (73) explain Marian to Duncan over the phone before she invites him for the tea. As Atwood states: "my heroine's

choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning; a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it. But these were the option for a young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the early sixties”(76).

Atwood suggests that in conventional society, women are edible. They are swallowed up by their male counterparts. Marian accepts this and decides that if she must be eaten, then she will take control of her own life and eat herself. The objective of this novel is to present female confrontation to social expectations and demands, which is inseparably associated with the female body. Eating disorders in Atwood’s works are therefore employed as symbols of women’s bodies’ responses to social pressure. Even before Marian returns to first-person selfhood, she sees that there might be a way out, that becoming trapped by a repressive or unsatisfying role need not be the end of the matter. In order to do that, they first have to realize that any act of patriarchal surveillance and control is learned, cultural, and ideological process that can and must be dismantled. Atwood is urging women to assert their right to eat and re-inhabit their own bodies:

Trough this novel, Marian examines and rejects the roles presented to her by society and also rejects domination of social conventions in order to achieve self –identity and self –knowledge and self-awareness. In the last part which is only five pages long Marian comments: “I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again.” (278)

This suggests that the narrator has been Marian all the time, but during the engagement she had distanced her former self into the third person narration. The cancellation of the wedding and the engagement changes the narration and perspective:

Before devouring the cake, Marian talks to her creation: You look delicious (...) Very appetizing .And that’s what happen to you; That’s what you get for being food(...) she felt a certain pity for her creature but she was powerless now to anything about it .her fate had been decided .(270)

The cake and Marian are delicious edibles, made for other people’s pleasure, not their own. The fate of cake and a bride are decided upon and determined beforehand. They will be consumed and eaten. At work, Marian is assigned the task of gathering responses for a survey about a new type of beer. While walking from house to house asking people their opinions, she meets Duncan, an English graduate student who intrigues her with his atypical and eccentric answers. The self absorbed English graduate also functions as another mirror image for Marian’s anxieties and bodily extinction.

To sum up, the novel reflects the constant theme of lack of distinct identity. In this case the character demonstrates the large quantities of strength necessary to protect her own individuality, which was slowly degenerating all because of the communities in which she lived. In the novel Margaret Atwood represents the inner strength that she believes is in all women. By recognizing the hardships that daily activities bring, the necessity for all women to be able to stand up for themselves is emphasized. Finally, women cannot give in to the distorted preconceptions that they must be gentle, soft-spoken and submissive.

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