

FEMALE SELF-ENSLAVEMENT IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. Marian Mc Alpin, the protagonist of the novel, is shaped first by her parents' plans for her future, then by her fiancé, Peter. She fears that Peter's strong personality will obliterate her own fragile identity. The unconscious mind of Marian protests against the conventional female role that she is expected to enter by marrying Peter. As a matter of fact, Marian voluntarily gives up her position as a free and independent individual. She becomes symbolically an egg inside her shell and totally dependent on her future husband--an egg which is being eaten, an individual who is being consumed. While being consumed she is not able to consume, while being eaten she is not in the position to eat. She struggles to embrace normalcy, she is often being pursued by it, so that the searcher becomes the victim of her own hopes, which seems to be an appropriate description of the situation Marian finds herself in. Because she has no clear concept of herself or her future and desperately wants to fit in, she is accustomed to giving people what they want. It is this tendency to be submissive to the demands of others which eventually causes her to accept the conventions of society. She has internalized the values of her culture to such an extent that she has become her own prison.

Keywords: Inner conflict, Femininity, Rebellion, Fragile personality.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* revolves around Marian McAlpin, a young woman just out of university. She is not certain for what she wants in her future. Depressed because she feels exploited at the consumer survey institute where she is working, she is considering marriage. But as she sees what marriage has done to her old school-friend Clara, who immerses herself in diapers and drudgery, she is convinced that marriage is just another trap. Her individualistic, independent-minded and calculating roommate Ainsley does not seem to be a suitable role model either. A feminist manipulator, she exploits the roles women play to her own ends, for instance by wanting to trick her boy-friend Len Slack into making her pregnant and then keep the baby for herself. All of her women friends and acquaintances embody, indeed almost parody, traditional female roles in which Marian finds no satisfactory place for herself. The women in her office with their artificial stereotype of femininity - dyed blond virgins with identical opinions who will travel and then settle down to marriage - are no help either. At the same time, however, while rejecting the standards of the culturally defined ideals, she feels excluded because she is different and more than anything else wants to be conventional. We see how important it is for Marian to be normal in every way, and how rigorously she tries to guard herself against any sign to the contrary as she prides herself on functioning with a coolly dexterous responsiveness at all times to what situations and people seem to expect of her. It was suggested by Jane Rule, however, that "while characters struggle to embrace

normalcy, they are often being pursued by it, so that the searcher becomes the victim of her own hopes"¹, which seems to be an appropriate description of the situation Marian finds herself in. Because she has no clear concept of herself or her future and desperately wants to fit in, she is accustomed to giving people what they want. It is this tendency to be submissive to the demands of others which eventually causes her to accept the conventions of society. Telling herself that "life isn't run by principles but by adjustments"², she agrees to marry the young lawyer Peter. Although she recognizes the need to escape from a world over which she has lost control, she ignores the demands of her subconscious mind and instead of acting positively, Marian embraces passivity, relinquishing decision-making to Peter: "I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you."³ Marian's decision to marry Peter is clearly a mistake and subconsciously Marian knows this, though she is unable to act upon this knowledge. However, her subconscious awareness is reflected in various ways. She increasingly begins to exhibit strange forms of behaviour. When she hears Peter telling his hunting story to Len, she assumes Peter as hunter and herself as rabbit.

Little by little, Marian starts moving away from the normalcy, the practical sensible young woman, and towards the world of her fantasy which draws her energy away from her social life. She begins to lose her sense of reality. As she herself points out: I had broken out; from what, or into what, I didn't know.⁴ That her subconscious is rebelling as she moves closer towards captivity and imprisonment is furthermore indicated by her bizarre acquaintance with the rather peculiar graduate student Duncan. From the beginning, Duncan is dehumanized, even grotesque, a being from the underworld caves. He is the guide who accompanies Marian on her downward journey, her descent into the dark side of the self. Duncan never gets anywhere and never finishes anything. But as already suggested by Sherrill Grace in *Violent Duality*, he is not only a "foil for Peter" but also an "Atwood double, a kind of mirror self, an objectified part of Marian herself with whom she can commune but who also embodies "her" narcissism and ruthless egocentricity". He is "a symbol of Marian's inner life or subconscious; he represents her fantasies, her attempt to escape".⁵ A projection of Marian's other self, he is her shadow self dwelling beneath the eminently civilized, eminently rational self, a Double who may assert its anti-social tendencies at any time.

This subconscious awareness of something being utterly wrong is also reflected in the eating disorder she develops, a disorder which is remarkably similar to and exhibits almost all the main characteristics of anorexia nervosa. Anorexic girls furthermore tend to have a weak sense of identity, low self-esteem and introspective, shy natures. Because they look outside themselves for value and guidance, their perception of internal signals - whether physical or emotional - is limited or distorted. Put at its simplest, anorexics have from an early age learned to be more responsive to others' perceptions of their needs than to the needs themselves. The anorexic thus grows up viewing her body as a reflected image of the desires of others. It is not herself, it is something exterior and foreign, and at the same time more relevant to others than to herself. The "vigilance" anorexics develop over their own actions. They experience themselves as observers rather than participants in their own physical being. One answer, then, to the question why some women become anorexic and others do not lies in the peculiar over-sensibility of anorexics to the wishes of those around them. They are unable to distinguish between their own desires and the perceived wishes of those around them. According to Bruch, anorexics grow up confused in their concepts about the body and its functions and deficient in their sense of identity, autonomy and control. In many ways they feel and behave as if they had no independent rights, that neither their body nor their actions are self-directed, or not even their own. Because of their helpless hyper obedience to the wishes of others, anorexics typically consider themselves powerless. Refusing to eat is supremely obedient and supremely defiant at the same time.

1 Rule, J.(1977). *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy: The Novels of Margaret Atwood.*- In: Malahat Review 41,p. 42

2 Atwood, Margaret. (1969). *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, p.100.

3 Ibid., p. 87

4 Ibid., p. 75

5 Grace, Sherrill. (1980). *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood.*- Montreal: Véhicule Press. p. 144

To refuse, literally, to 'take in' from the environment gives many anorexics the opportunity to take control over their own bodies for the first time. Traditional as well as feminist psychotherapists generally argue that women's anorexia nervosa arises from their need to control their desires and to reject their femininity in the process.

Viewed from this perspective, it seems only appropriate that Marian should exhibit such symptoms. But there is more to it in her case. As she regresses through previous stages of human development, identifying with lower forms of life, she refuses to eat, and therefore prey upon, first steak and all meats, then eggs, then carrots. Eventually, she is even unable to destroy the lowest form of life, mould. Marian's revulsion finally spreads outward from the thing eaten and the act of eating to the body which lives by ingesting and regurgitating. She sees with detachment and even alienation the women of Seymour Surveys as they celebrate her engagement:

“What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, hair, babies, milk, excrements, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears and garbage...”⁶

Although Marian's perceptions of herself as a hunted victim or tasty morsel about to be devoured are distortions of reality for which she is largely responsible, these perceptions carry a symbolic truth about the general nature of our society and personal relationships. In a consumer society, people feed on each other economically and emotionally. Eating becomes "a metaphor for economic and emotional cannibalism. Either you eat or are eaten, there are no other choices"⁷.

The shift from a first person to third person narration for the duration of her food restriction emphasizes Marian's psychic disintegration and the split in her personality under the pressures the situation has exerted on her ego. She has not merely lost her appetite, but her voice as well. Although Marian tells herself quite frequently to get a grip on herself or not to act foolish, she has to discover that not being silly is a frail bulwark against her fears. The competent facade is her protection against dreams and hallucinations that she is "dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle. [...] She was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer". Against this fear, the idea of marriage seems at times a safeguard: "She slid her engagement ring back onto her finger, seeing the hard circle for a moment as a protective talisman that would help keep her together". But the engagement ring and what it stands for is in fact the centre of the spell which holds her imprisoned. She is unable either to integrate these identities within one self or to accept the existence of multiple selves, and has thus been "closed in a sudden formless unhappiness that seemed now to have been clogging her mind for a long time"⁸. As the story progresses, mirrors and reflections become the primary means through which Atwood expresses the split between the conscious and the unconscious aspects of Marian's personality. In the bathtub, Marian contemplates herself split into three different beings in the reflections of the taps:

“How peculiar it was to see three reflections of yourself at the same time, she thought; she swayed herself back and forth, watching the way in which the different silver parts of her body suddenly bloated or diminished”⁹.

The attempt to reconcile the demands of her conscious and unconscious nature nearly destroys her. The climax for Marian comes at her engagement party. With an altogether different and glamorous hair style, a dress unlike any she has ever worn, her make-up done by Ainsley, she looks into the

6 Atwood, Margaret. (1969). *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, p.171.

7 Grace, Sherrill. (1980). *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*.- Montreal: Véhicule Press. p. 94.

8 Atwood, Margaret. (1969). *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, p.228.

9 Ibid., p. 227

mirror and sees "a person she has never seen before"¹⁰. The falseness of her appearance reflects the falseness of her role and she cannot help asking herself "What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?"¹¹ Clearly, Marian is threatened by a loss of self, a diffusion, a splitting, which she fears may be irreversible. Still, all of her friends and associates, beginning with Peter, comment on the beauty of the artificial self and suggests that she should always dress in this manner. Only Duncan dissents, observing the incongruity between surface and reality as he remarks on his arrival at the party: "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade [...] Who the hell are you supposed to be?"¹² It is the party situation as a whole and a vision she has where, instead of seeing herself beside Peter as a contented middle-aged wife, she has disappeared, which finally enables her to make a decision about Peter. The vision most clearly makes her aware of the fact that if she stays with Peter, he will invade her core and destroy her. She runs from the party looking for Duncan who, "has no intention of interacting with her real problems".¹³

Marian recognizes that she has always been a passive reactor to the demands and needs of other people afraid to act on her own. It is this discovery that drives her to reject both Peter and Duncan in the hope that without anyone whom she can rely on, she will be forced to become productive by relying on herself. Since Marian has freed herself from the burden of playing a role others set for her, she must now start to take responsibility for her own life and make choices from the 'core' of her personality. She bakes a cake in the shape of a woman who looks the way she did when dressed for the party at Peter's, "obviously making is a substitute of herself"¹⁴. Her motivation for preparing the cake is that it is designed to be a test for Peter. If he passes the test, that is, if he can accept Marian's claim, "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you?"¹⁵ and her offer of the cake-woman as substitute, he will have recognized his own dark side, his need to exploit, and she will marry him. However, already severely disturbed by her sudden disappearance the other day, he thinks she is crazy and leaves for good.

When Peter refuses to eat the cake, Marian eats it which means that she alludes no longer woman is to be treated as a base object in the society in the consumer- ridden world; she knows her limitations. Now she knows her stand which means she regains her lost identity with full affirmation.

Marian eating the cake-woman, a substitute of her own-image in a fit of frenzied anger and angst of retaliation after Peter's refusal to partake it, shows that she would rather rebel and survive than subjugating to selfish male domination. 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. The cake which she bakes is at once a therapy, a solution, self discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. Atwood thus comments in an interview with Gibson: "Marian performs an action, preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself"¹⁶.

Yet even if her future is left unsure, she at least refuses to be a victim. And although she is faced with the same decisions as before and must search for a new job, new accommodation and a new lover, she has gained a sense of identity and a new knowledge of the self. And, in a world seen as alien and threatening, she has discovered the need to integrate not only mind and body but also multiple aspects of the self.

10 Ibid., p. 232

11 Ibid., p. 239

12 Ibid., p. 250

13 Ibid., p. 275

14 Gibson, Graeme: Margaret Atwood.- In: Eleven Canadian Novelists.- Toronto: Anansi, 1973.- p. 25

15 Atwood, Margaret. (1969). *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, p.284

16 Gibson, Graeme: Margaret Atwood.- In: Eleven Canadian Novelists.- Toronto: Anansi, 1973.- p. 25

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