

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Feminine Identity: A Critical Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

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Abstract

This article investigates the feminist themes in Margaret Atwood's book *The Edible Woman*. In this book, Atwood dismantles conventional gender discourses that seek to constrain women's choices, agency, and subjectivity. The book is a work of fiction that explicitly explores women's suffering confined by patriarchal systems. The story follows the heroine, Marian, as she embarks on a quest to define herself after experiencing tragedy. Women are seen as consumable commodities in a society ruled by males. They are required to conform to the roles dictated by masculine dominance. Atwood's story emphasizes the many challenges women face in a patriarchal society. It highlights the need to resist and achieve self-fulfillment in response to patriarchal attacks. 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."

Keywords. Deconstruct; Gender; Discourse; Agency; Subjectivity.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, born November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada, is a Canadian writer, poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is recognized as one of the leading female novelists in the world. Her writing profoundly influences the reader's thoughts, prompting contemplation on the relationship between reality and fiction after engaging with her stories and poems. Her fictional work combines historical and scientific settings with a strong, independent female protagonist. Her stories blend realistic and creative elements to create thought-provoking narratives with open-ended conclusions that significantly impact society. Her stories have been adapted into stage plays and movies and translated into over 30 languages. She is regarded as a literary genius for her skill in connecting her fictional characters with the profound emotions of the reader and society. She is a renowned author who has won international awards and is recognized as a prominent humanist. She is most well-known for her novels, in which she develops strong, often mysterious, female characters and excels at crafting ambiguous narratives while analyzing modern urban life and sexual politics. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), depicts a woman struggling with the inability to eat and the sensation of being consumed. Her novels have garnered several honors. *Alias Grace*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Cat's Eye* are all finalists for the Booker Prize for Fiction. *The Blind Assassin* won this medal in 2000.

The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood explores the connections between women and men, society, and food consumption. Atwood explores a young woman's defiance against a contemporary,

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male-dominated society via the themes of food and eating. Marian McAlpin, the female heroine, grapples with the societal expectations placed on her and her self-perception. Food symbolizes this internal conflict and her final defiance. Patricia Goldblatt argues in her article "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," "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." Marian partly reconstructs her new character after *The Edible Woman* by developing a new connection with food.

The Edible Woman was released, and there was a resurgence of interest in feminism across political groups. Darlene Kelly points out in "Either Way, I Stand Condemned" that the language used in political movements often does not align with the actual situation. The ideas of women's freedom differed from the reality of women's everyday life. Anorexia, although recognized in the medical field, was not often discussed among the general public. Eating disorders were identified in a medical setting but were not often addressed in women's publications. *The Edible Woman* was released before extensive debates on women's rights and health concerns, leading to reviews that focused primarily on the book's literary skills.

The novel *The Edible Woman* depicts a young heroine grappling with societal norms around gender roles and needing to liberate herself from these constraints to maintain her identity and self-respect. The title suggests that women are seen as objects for someone's pleasure. The protagonist, Marian McAlpin, is engaged to Peter, a young lawyer who expects her to adhere to conventional gender norms as a wife. Marian was first obedient but later realized that the planned future would limit her to a life as a nun. Her roommate, Ainsley, however, has a different goal. She is plotting to have a child with a man without being married. For a woman, this symbolizes freedom, but Maria perceives the flaw in the plan from the start. The individual grows more severe and recognizes the child's need for a father. Ainsley's attempt to achieve independence is hindered by little preparation and a lack of conviction in its viability. Marian undergoes a process of observation and learning that leads to substantial changes in her self-perception as a woman and a person. This involves rejecting conventional gender norms and pursuing a more authentic lifestyle.

What else can I do? Once you have gone this far, you are not fit for anything else. Something happens to your mind. You are overqualified and overspecialized, and everybody knows it. Nobody in any other game would be crazy enough to hire me. I would not even make a good ditch digger; I would start tearing apart the sewer system, trying to pick an axe and unearth all those chthonic symbols - pipes, valves, cloacal conduits... No, no. I will have to be an enslaved person in the paper mines for all time.

The work features several cautionary stories about women fulfilling conventional roles. Marian's friend Clara, expecting her third child, appears "aboa - constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (31). The artwork implies a symbiotic relationship where mothers and their kids feed on one another, creating a sense of confinement. Marian works for a market research agency that represents the patriarchal and capitalistic social structure, with CEOs on the top floor, female

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employees below them, and manual laborers on the bottom level. The female employees are seen as menial workers who gossip and excessively eat. Marian's three coworkers are humorously depicted as "the office virgins," young ladies eager for marriage, influenced by societal norms that see unmarried women as unsuccessful and outcasts. They are likened to carnivorous plants, anticipating a male to capture and consume. Marian's landlady is a vigilant monster, closely monitoring her tenants' actions. She is a woman who has accepted patriarchal beliefs and feels compelled to monitor and control the actions of other women. Marian develops phobic and anorexic behaviors as a sign of her protest against the mistreatment of women. She feels repulsed by both the traditional female gender role and a society seen as being controlled by males, characterized by greed and inherent violence.

Another instance of this kind of protest response is the passing mention of a girl in England who ceased bathing and changing clothing as a form of defiance against gender expectations—*American Studies in Scandinavia*, Volume 26, 1994. The patriarchal individuals have constructed a societal structure mirroring their beliefs, leading Marian to see Peter differently due to this newfound understanding. Initially seeming pleasant and attractive, he gradually reveals himself to be a predatory individual with a strong interest in hunting, firearms, and photography, displaying highly misogynistic attitudes towards women. Marian's rebellion takes on peculiar and semi-conscious shapes, as anticipated by a woman in 1960s Canada.

After dining at a restaurant, she abruptly leaves her group and runs away from them swiftly, like a rabbit fleeing from its predators. Subsequently, she conceals herself behind a bed to avoid detection by the others. Emerging from her concealment and facing Peter, she is aware of her emotions, "I had realized by this time what my prevailing emotion was: it was rage" (78). Marian is forging a new identity and innovatively reevaluating society's expectations of women. Duncan, an English graduate student, aids her in her pursuit of freedom, embodying a different aspect and approach to masculinity. Duncan spurns society's materialistic values and regards Marian as an individual. Ironing is his preferred means of relaxation. He is a rebellious outsider with sensitive and androgynous characteristics who serves as a mentor for her.

Like subsequent Atwood heroines, Marian exhibits apathy and paralysis regarding labor and creativity. This is a consequence of both personal shortcomings and societal oppression of women, which often diminishes their self-confidence and hinders the development of their abilities. She is overcoming her reluctance to acknowledge her abilities and strength. According to Duncan's fellow student Fish, creating is like giving birth, and Marian is, in a way, betraying or neglecting her creation. Marian and Duncan exhibit behavior akin to that of irresponsible children. Duncan needs care from his two housemates, but Marian is becoming disorderly and refuses to collaborate with Peter and other acquaintances. Both she and Duncan are experiencing a necessary and possibly healing condition of flux or disorientation. The roots of a new androgynous identity are there, requiring further flexibility regarding societal expectations of gender roles.

Male sexual violence is a prominent theme in Atwood's works and is also present in *The*

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Edible Woman. Marian contemplates if the obscene phone caller, known as the underwear guy, might be her sophisticated and courteous fiancée, Peter. It is suggested that underneath a man's respectable exterior, there may lie a hidden sexual predator, as the Bluebeard persona seen in later Atwood works. The essay has a symbolic framework that conveys the feminist liberal theme. The city's streets, buildings, and workplaces embody capitalism and sexist efficiency and harshness, yet there are also refuges where other ideals may be nurtured. One of these locations is the laundry, a gender-neutral space where Marian and Duncan sometimes meet. Another such area is a park near the institution, "A huge dimly - white island in the darkness of the night" (170).

Marian is finding an island inside herself, representing her self-determined identity. Initially, her learning process must follow its undignified path, such as when she feels compelled to wear suitable, excessively feminine attire and style her hair accordingly for her engagement celebration. The dress is short, red, sequined, and packaged in a pink box. This hue matches the one of a cake she purchased. Pink represents the traditional, submissive position assigned to women. Marian states: "They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (208).

She increasingly views the current gender position as a terrible infringement on her integrity. Clara's husband, Joe, expresses a widespread ludicrous image of women when he suggests to Marian that women should not attend university. They would not feel like they had lost out on intellectual pursuits after marriage and were confined to their homes. Ironically, Joe is kind and actively assists his wife with household chores. Marian rebels in the last portion of *The Edible Woman*. She leaves her engagement celebration, evading Peter, the hunter, and teams up with Duncan. The heroine demonstrates her newfound initiative and freedom by engaging in sexual activity in an inexpensive motel. Duncan, the guide to other worlds, leads her to a frozen ravine in the city, where she encounters another pivotal moment. The ravine symbolizes nature and the inner depths of the characters, as in earlier works. She faces her true nature in this stark, white, and chilly environment, reaching a point of extreme vulnerability where she encounters the potential for liberation. Initially, she avoids the situation, attempting to get Duncan to return to Peter and assist her.

Duncan refuses, prompting her to take action alone. The concluding cake-baking scene in the story is rich with metaphorical potential. Marian prepared a cake styled like a lady resembling a pink and white doll, symbolizing the traditional and restrictive portrayal of women in society. Marian transforms it into an item filled with sarcasm by painting its fingernails pink and highlighting other frilly, feminine features. She rejects becoming the kind of woman described and presents herself to Peter for his consumption. If this is his desire, she is now presented to him. Marian is straightforward about it:

'You have been trying to destroy me, haven't you,' she said. 'You have been trying to assimilate me. However, I have made you a substitute, something you will like much better. This is what you wanted all along. I will get you a fork,' she added, somewhat prosaically. Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She was not smiling" (271).

Peter is unwilling to eat the cake, whereas Marian is suddenly willing to eat it. She has

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conquered her food phobia by acting, asserting herself, and gaining new confidence. Baking is a creative process symbolizing the emergence of her abilities as an artist. The cake doll symbolizes the baby she has given birth to, with Duncan acting as the father's guide. Marian is overcoming her fear and aversion to pregnancy and gestation, as shown by the disturbing and hallucinatory sights of burgeoning life forms that torment her. The motif of resurrection, artistic expression, and creativity are fundamental elements in the evolution of several heroines in Atwood's works.

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