

The Quest for Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract:

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian feminist writer and the representative of postmodern literature in Canada. Most of her novels are about women subjugation, survival and quest for identity. The paper attempts to study how Atwood presents the real picture of women in the male dominated society and how they fight against crisis. Atwood in all her novels raises the issue of women's identity from a feministic point of view. The protagonist of the novel *The Edible Woman* also faces male dominance and crisis of identity. The paper will investigate the journey of her quest for female identity.

Key Words: Margaret Atwood, subjugation, crisis, quest, feminism.

Introduction

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian novelist, poet, essayist and environmental activist. She is born in Ottawa on November 18, 1939. She is famous for her feministic perspective in her prose fiction. Her novels deal with the issues of feminism, their identity crisis and mostly their own individuality in patriarchal society. Her literary career begins with novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969).

The novel shows patriarchal culture, dominance and victimization of women. Marian MacAlpin is the protagonist of the novel who works for Seymour Surveys- a marketing organization. Seymour Surveys is the perfect example of gender discrimination where the top floor is meant for the work of men and is not accessible to women like Marian. The novel presents the halts in the development of women. Marian is more capable than any other man in the organization but has to do the less important job. She says:

Sometimes I wonder just which things are part of my job especially when I find myself calling up garage mechanics to ask them about their pistons and gaskets or handing out pretzels to suspicious old ladies on street corners. I know what Seymour Surveys hired me as – I'm supposed to spend my time revising the questionnaires, turning the convoluted and overlay-subtle prose of the psychologists who write them into single questions as the people who answer them.

A question like, 'In what percentile would you place the visual impact value is not useful (Atwood, EW 13).

Marian doesn't have access to the well furnished offices. The organization has layers just like an ice-cream. It presents the hierarchical structure of the company and the complete control of patriarchal hegemony. The protagonist explains it very well:

On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists -- referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men -- who arrange things with the clients; I've caught glimpses of their offices, which have carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of Group of Seven paintings on the walls. Below us are the machines -- mimeo machines, I.B.M machines for counting and sorting and tabulating the information; I've been down there too, into that factory -- like clatter where the operatives seem frayed and overworked and have ink on their fingers (Atwood, EW 13).

Marian is not the only woman in the novel. The novel is also about the sufferings and problems faced by her friends Ainsley and Clara at the hands of conservative society. Ainsley is completely different from Marian. She is fond of books of psychology and anthropology. Ainsley always wants to get pregnant without marriage. She has a different perspective towards society. She believes that it is not the husband that completes a woman but her motherhood. Marian disagrees with this thought of Ainsley and considers such relationships illegitimate and unacceptable in the society. These two female characters are contrasting to each other:

Ainsley doesn't come from a small town as (Marian) do, so she's not as used to people being snoopy; on the other hand she's not as afraid of it either. She has no idea about the consequences...hers (job) was more temporary: she had an idea of what she wanted to do next (Atwood, EW 7, 10).

Marian doesn't like Clara and her ways of accepting life. She sees that Clara has become the children producing machine for her husband. The novel explains the submission of woman in the male dominated society. Women face identity crisis because of their submission to the control by men. Marian loves Peter who controls her completely. She has no power over her decisions and choice making. She believes that marrying Peter provides her security but in the true sense she is losing her individuality and her real identity and behaves like all the other conventional wives.

Marian decision of marrying Peter is the typical example of Canadian women in late sixties to whom marriage has been the only option. It can better be understood with the Marian's

description of the company, ““an ice cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle...we are supposed to take care of human element” (Atwood, EW 13). It explains the professional growth and describes the social condition of female workers in 1960’s.

The first part of the novel explains the insecurity of Canadian women in 1960’s and Marian’s rejection of pension plan to Mrs Grot, who according to Marian, “would relish the chance of making yet another deduction from my pay-cheque”, asserts “it is obligatory, you see” (Atwood, EW 15) is one of the examples. The following lines explain Marian’s fear:

Isn’t it too soon for me to join the Pension Plan? I mean – don’t you think I’m too young? ...I was suddenly quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have...It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn’t think about it... I thought of my signature going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked (Atwood, EW 15-16).

It is in the second part of the novel when Marian starts to realize her mistake of getting engaged to Peter, who controls her completely. Marian begins to feel the loss of identity. Her relationship with Peter has brought her absolute confusion. She has a dream which indicates her physical loss:

The alarm clock startled me out of a dream in which I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and 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. I don’t usually remember my dreams (Atwood, EW 47).

The relationship has brought so much loss to Marian that she starts to give away food. It affects her psychic and she ought to see a psychiatrist. Robert Lecker suggests, Marian stops eating for two reasons – one that, “her job with an advertising research agency has led her to reject the artificial forms of sustenance provided by an artificial society” and, two, that “she equates the consumption of food with her feeling that she has been assimilated and exploited as a female object” (178-79)

The female protagonists of the Atwood’s novel are different from other feminist writers. They do not give up. They face victimization at the hands of patriarch culture but somehow they have that positive instinct that keeps them intact and keep going on for their female

identity. Marian realizes her loss of self and tries to be audible to the world in contrast of her previous passive behavior. Marian discomfort at her engagement feels to be a puppet in the hands of Peter. She confirms her victimization when Joe talks about Clara. He says:

She gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded... ‘Her what?’ Marian asked. Her core. The centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up; her image of herself... Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her...(Atwood, EW 296).

Though, at first Marian wants to escape from the rough realities of life but behaves like a dumb and deaf human, but once she realizes the other side of these realities she encourages herself for change. And the change starts from vocal opposition to revolt with actions. Marian liberates herself from the clutches of male domination and her journey is same that of all other Canadian woman. The first part of the novel shows Marian as a subordinate woman and obedient wife. The second part shows her self- realization and revolt against the male control and domination.

Two incidents that change Marian’ approach, first is the camera scene where she feels uncomfortable and is conscious of being captured in camera. She believes that camera may catch her and may confine her forever. John Moss, a Canadian novelist explains Marian’s fear of being photographed. According to him, “a camera can steal the soul... Identity is clearly a complex living thing, a static literal image... on film destroys intrinsic vitality and dimension, the qualities ultimately defining the soul, which thereby lost” (142).

The second incident is the refusal from Duncan. He completely denies Marian any sort of help:

“He grinned at her. ‘Don’t ask me, that’s your problem. It does look as though you ought to do something: self-laceration in a vacuum eventually gets rather boring. But it’s your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you’ll have to think of your own way out.’” (Atwood, EW 334).

Duncan’s rejection comes as a jolt to Marian but it has its positive impact also. It gives courage to her to cast away dependence and victimization and to know her true self. When Marian returns home and receives call from Peter, she replies casually although Peter’s

voice was ‘ice with anger’ (Atwood, EW 337), Marian replies, ‘with airy casualness, ‘I’ve been somewhere else. Sort of out’ (Atwood, EW 337). This verbal action explains that Marian is no more obedient and controllable to Peter.

Marian’s frank behavior is the proof of her action, her optimism and a step towards freedom. She handles the situation like a boss when she instead of answering Peter’s questions asked him for tea. She was preparing for something she was not sure about:

“She made her voice sweet, conciliatory. She was conscious of her own craftiness.

Though she hadn’t made any decisions she could feel she was about to make one and she needed time” (Atwood, EW 338).

It is the transition period for Marian. She decides to make a cake. She has not used oven for long and wants to give full attention to the cake. The attention is the truest examples of her changing approach and her positivity. She makes a doll on the cake and begins to eat again.

Conclusion

The bitter truth of the life is that sorrow and happiness are parts of it. Women are seen as domestic servants, second grade employs and victims of dominance and violence. Atwood has introduced the survival and rebelling nature of woman.

The end of the novel indicates an evolving independent sense of self for Marian. This is her moment of inspiration as she establishes a contact with her authentic self... Margaret Atwood has quite intentionally depicted a woman’s apparently successful search for self-assertion... Marian has not achieved transformation overnight but after a period of self-torment, she was able to assert herself.

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