

Feminism in the Novel of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* - A Study

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Abstract

This paper examines feminism, movements of feminism, its influence on the society. Atwood's ideology, reflection of her thoughts, usage of metaphors in the novel. In this novel food represents major role. Atwood used food as an important metaphor for the protagonist. Marian Mac Alpin, weak minded person, welcomes her boy friend's marriage proposal. On the engagement day she loses hunger realizes if she is wedded to her boy friend, her identity would disappear. The protagonist experiences traumatic journey for her survival. She yearns for her identity. *The Edible woman* explores women agony in the patriarchal society. It portrays themes like quest for identity, gender politics, women alienation.

Key words: Mental pain, oppression, feminism.

Gender plays an important role in development. Number of women live in poverty than men. Men and woman experience poverty in a varied manner. If we wish to create intellectual society we should show reverence towards women. It leads to over all development.

Feminism: Feminism is a range of social movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social sexes. Feminist have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, hold public office, work, earn equal pay, own property, receive education, enter contracts, have equal rights within marriage, and leave. Charles, a utopian socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word "féminisme" in 1837. The words "féminisme" ("feminism") and "féministe" ("feminist") first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872. Great Britain in the 1890s and the United States in 1910. Feminists have also worked to ensure access to legal abortions and social integration. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1852 as the year of the first appearance of "feminist" and 1895 for "feminism". Depending on the historical moment, culture and country, feminists around the world have had different causes and goals.

In the Merriam Webster dictionary "Feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men."¹

Feminism is defined as women liberation from the shackles of male domination. The women's movement is work and fight to attain gender equality and to improvise the social conditions of women.

In most societies, women are traditionally stuck on to the domestic life as mothers, daughters, wives.

In 1818, Hannah Mather Crocker, an early feminist, stated that "God had endowed the female mind with equal powers and faculties to those of men and that it must be the appropriated duty and privilege of females, to convince by reason and persuasion."²

Feminism movement started in 19th century. In 1920's women got the right to vote in most European countries as well as in North America. Women were permitted into university education in the early 20th century, securing career and family. At the end of second world war women got equal political rights in most European countries.

Waves of Feminism: The waves of feminism emerged in 1960's, but its seeds related to Seneca Falls Convention, 1848. The women's movement was a long struggle to grab the right to vote for women in the USA. In the latter part of 19th century women empowered to gain right to vote, equal jobs, property rights for women. Voltaire de Cleyre, Margaret Sanger were actively took part for economic rights at this time. Florence Nightingale started female nurses organization.

Second wave feminism sprung after world war II. It showed impact on workplace, family and reproductive rights. Second wave feminists considered women's cultural and political inequalities as linked women to understand their lives as deeply politicized ones.

Second wave started in 1963. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* Book paved the way for second wave feminism. Black women organized an organization named as National Black Feminist organization. Famous author Alice Walker announced third wave feminism.

Fourth wave feminism started in 2012. The fourth wave promotes gender equality by showing focus on alienation of women in society.

De Tocqueville once remarked on the unusual tendency of Americans to give political and social controversies a legal cast."³

Margaret Atwood, the Canadian born author, was a match for any body. She is a poet, prose writer, prolific novelist. She portrayed Canada's quest for identity. Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is the first novel. It portrays edible woman as the major metaphor of the novel. The theme of the novel is woman's quest for identity. Marian is the central character, victimized, exploited. She protests against the subjugation of rights, asserts her identity.

Atwood defines feminism as "human equality and freedom of choice." She emphasizes that mere economic freedom is useless the woman is psychologically free. Her novels depict a search for the feminine self, a turning inward, freed from opposition dependence.

In *The Edible woman* novel, Marian is the heroine. She conducts a quest for identity and journeys through numerous associations with several male and female friends to arrive at an awareness as to be a woman in patriarchal society. Marian is pretty woman, liberal in her views. She is an employee in the Seymour surveys, a market research agency. She shares her relationships with peter wollander , Ainsley tewce. Marian accepts unreality of the society.

At first Marian does not realize that marriage to people like peter is a socially acceptable suicide. Marian's body intervenes and confronts her with the reality of the situation. The body carries out a rebellion in the form of anorexia, i.e., the body refuse to eat. The first symptoms of anorexia are noticed in Marian when she goes to a restaurant along with her colleagues.

On the day of her engagement to peter, the carefully and beautifully made up Marian is put the disturbing question, " Are you in Masquerade?" by Duncan. The question hastens the process of realization in Marian- realization as to her true identity. By refusing to eat the cake woman, peter is shown to be unprepared to accept the reality. But what triumphs is Marian's sense of determination, her recognition of the fact that she was being consumed by peter and her desire to remain intact as an individual. Once peter leaves her apartment and her life Marian's body returns to normality and eats the cake. Once the transfer of identity she has projected on to food disappears, she regains her identity and individually as a non-victim.

The Edible woman is a satire on marriage and materialism in Canadian culture. In the story, women are portrayed as commodities productive in numerous positions and bearing children. Protagonist of *The Edible woman* is Marian and Alphen , around whom structure of narration is depicted. Her companionship with peter, ends up being the biggest hindrance to her real identity.

The social structure of Canada approves male lineage and discrimination is more against women. The Canadian 1960s are captivated in *The Edible woman*. At professional organization's women were paid less for the identical job done by males.

Atwood used ice cream sandwich to portray organizations structure and exploitation. Marian monitors the three office virgins lives. To show impression, they wear feminine dress and makeup. They want to lead their spinster life up to their death.

The female body in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* by sofia sanchezgrant explains, " Atwood indicates that the solution is not to accept oneself to repressive culturally defined conventions but to rewrite them." (Sanchez Grant 82)

Marian is conscious of the fact that women she can not become either one of the men in the upper floor because convention does not consider that women possess the same quality of mind as men do or the machines in the lower floor. Though Marian's attitude towards her job in Seymour Surveys is uncomplaining she is annoyed when asked to sign in the pension plan because the pension plan makes her think about her future which appears to be quite bleak.

In the history of human beings women are considered low to men in the society. They are alienated from all spheres of society. Women are treated to be good house wives in lieu of pursuing education and dreams. They are confined to domestic sphere. Women raised voice

against all the injustice meted out to them. As a Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood highlighted major feministic issues in her fiction.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* emphasizes on the issues of motherhood, cannibalism, and body. This novel story centers women's agony in the male dominated world. It relates the tale of women subordination. Denial of freedom, oppression, pregnancy, marital relations, virginity are discussed.

Patriarchal society creates marriage as one of the barriers to women's growth stops women from attending school and attaining their goals. From the childhood onwards girls are taught of behavior with their future hobbies and matrimony is their final goal in life.

In the novel, Clara character portrays marriage as a impediment for women's education. Atwood depicts the school drop out's consequences at the early age. Clara gives up her education to uplift family and fulfills her duties. Atwood describes clara's disordered house, women's role as a wife, and as a mother takes control over her life, she always complains as tired, helpless woman.

Due to lack of education , clara moves away from outside world feels lonely confines to the house. Marian considers clara's life sad and out of her control she becomes pregnant many times. Marian feels sorry for her.

She says that ,” the babies had been unplanned, clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her and her second with dismay, now, during the third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism.”⁹

In *The Edible woman*, heroine Marian is treated as passive woman, known for gentleness in daily life. She obliges peter's words although she dislikes the behavior of peter's peculiar behavior. She experiences mental pain, as she states: “ I was hurt. I considered this unfair. I was about to make sharp comment, but repressed it. “¹⁰

Atwood uses various types of imagery to drive home the split in Marian's personality between her subjective self and the objective self. In patriarchal societies women are viewed as images in men's eyes. When peter proposes to Marian she sees herself as small, oval, mirrored in his eyes. At the engagement party, when peter comes with his camera to capture her image, she is scared of peter. She does not want to be captured in the posture of a divided self. Peter and

Marian thus represent the hunter and the hunted. *The Edible Woman* explores the different victim positions imposed on women in patriarchal societies. In the male dominated world Marian opts eat- or get eaten.

Conclusion:

Atwood's novel depicts modern woman's problems, who strives hard to attain her aspirations. Her female characters are not repulsive but deny the human society and turns to barbaric world. She portrays women feelings, thinking and act. Heroine Marian overcomes mental trauma for her survival. She becomes a victim in the hands of selfish male will. *The Edible woman* is a satire on

modern society. The novel is tightly structured and as tightly as a lyric. It explores the different victim positions imposed on women in patriarchal societies.

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