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The Politics of Eating: An Intertextual and Feminist Reading of *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract

This study explores *The Edible Woman* through an intertextual and feminist lens, examining how Margaret Atwood engages with cultural and literary discourses on gender, consumption, and identity. Among postmodern writers, intertextuality is the most prevalent rhetorical device, showcasing the influence of previous works and the author's ability to integrate it into literature to effectively convey meaning to readers By employing intertextuality, Atwood situates her novel within a broader literary and ideological framework, drawing on feminist thought, social critique, and narratives of bodily autonomy. The novel's protagonist, Marian McAlpin, embodies a resistance to societal expectations through her evolving relationship with food, symbolizing the consumption and objectification of women within patriarchal structures. Marian's shifting relationship with food serves as a powerful metaphor for societal expectations of women's bodies, autonomy, and roles. This research highlights how Atwood's work dialogues with feminist theories of the body, agency, and power, while also engaging with literary traditions that critique the commodification of women. By tracing intertextual connections and feminist themes, this paper underscores *The Edible Woman* as a pivotal text that challenges conventional gender norms and interrogates the politics of eating as both a literal and metaphorical act.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Feminist, Food, Postmodernism, Patriarchy, Rhetorical

Introduction

Intertextuality, a concept that gained prominence in France during the 1960s, explores the idea that texts are inherently connected and influenced by other texts. According to Ross Murfin and Supriya M. Ray, Intertextuality is "the condition of interconnectedness among texts, suggesting that any text is a blend or amalgam of others." (Murfin and M. Ray 219). This interconnectedness can manifest through various literary devices such as allusions, quotations, genre conventions, stylistic choices, and more. In essence, when analyzing a text, one can identify traces or influences of other texts, reflecting the idea that no text exists in isolation but rather in a network of relationship with other texts. "Meanings in one kind of discourse are overlaid with meanings from another kind of discourse (Cuddon 454)."

The Bulgarian-French philosopher, psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva who popularized and is often credited with coining this term in the 1960s, views any given work as a part of a large fabric of literary discourse. Julia Kristeva, the literary critic and feminist psychoanalyst, introduced the concept of Intertextuality in her seminal essays "*Word, Dialogue, and Novel" (1966) and "The Bounded Text" (1967*). Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, she explored how texts are interconnected and how they shape meaning through their relationship with other texts. In "*Revolution in Poetic Language*," Kristeva introduces the concept of Intertextuality to describe how texts are shaped by and shape other texts. She explains this through the notion of "*transposition*," which she describes as the way one signifying practice is transferred or transposed into another "transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another" (Kristeva 111). This means that any given text is influenced by various other texts, cultural codes, and social practices, making it impossible to consider it in isolation.

One of the most influential critics of the 20th century has been Michael Bakhtin a Russian literary critic and theoretician. His concept of *heteroglossia* can be taken as the starting point of the notion of Intertextuality. Bakhtin believed that a novel is a "dialogic amalgam of different voices, by which he meant that it referred to different discourses" (Zengin 312). Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of hybridity is a key idea in his analysis of language and dialogue. He uses the term to describe the way languages—and by extension, utterances—can be

double-voiced, containing multiple layers of meaning and intention. Bakhtin's concept of hybridity is crucial to understanding his theory of dialogism, which emphasizes that all language and communication are inherently dialogic, involving a constant interplay between different voices, contexts, and meanings (Zengin 312). This idea of double-voicedness and hybridity has had a profound influence on literary theory, especially in the analysis of how texts engage with multiple perspectives and social forces simultaneously. It is clear that Julia Kristeva propounded the concept of intertextuality on the basis of Bakhtin's theory.

Another great personality in the field of Intertextuality is, Roland Barthes, in his story, "*Theory of the Text*", remarks "*Any text is a new tissue of past citations."* Barthes' idea of the text as a "*woven tissue*" (Barthes 1973) underscores the concept that texts are never isolated or self-contained. Barthes' perspective, particularly his idea of the "death of the author," shifts the focus from authorial intent to the interplay of texts within a larger cultural and linguistic network, where the reader plays a crucial role in constructing meaning. T.S. Eliot's essay "*Tradition and the Individual Talent,"* published in 1919, does anticipate some of the concepts which further becomes the base of Intertextuality. While Eliot is typically associated with modernism and is seen as advocating for a new, innovative approach to literature, his ideas also reflect a recognition of the interconnectedness of literary works. For him, the poet must engage with this tradition, not by passively imitating the past but by actively incorporating and transforming it. While Eliot may not have explicitly used the term "Intertextuality," his argument that new works of literature are always in dialogue with a larger tradition suggests an intertextual view. "There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition" (Eliot 2005).

Gérard Genette, a prominent structuralist critic, developed a comprehensive framework for understanding the various relationships between texts, which he introduced in his works such as "*The Architext: An Introduction," "Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree," and "Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.*" Genette coined the term *transtextuality* as an umbrella concept to describe all the ways in which a text can relate to other texts, encompassing both explicit and implicit connections (Malik and Batra 182). He also differentiates five types of relationship between texts as *architextuality, intertextuality, paratextuality, hypertextuality and metatextuality.*

Intertextuality has not been restricted to discussions of the literary arts only. It is also applied to other art forms like cinema, painting, music, architecture, photography almost all cultural and artistic productions. But apart from this there is also a sort of criticism by some critics, like Linda Hutcheon**,** a notable postmodern theorist, critiques the excessive focus on intertextuality for its tendency to downplay the role of the author and the communicative intention behind the text. Hutcheon argues that if intertextuality is seen as something that exists primarily "*in the eye of the beholder,"*. Thus, Intertextuality necessitates a compulsory reader response—the reader must actively make sense of the text's relationship with others, rather than passively receiving a singular, author-determined meaning. "The intertextual references merged with the theoretical discourse in an ongoing dialogue that assumes the involvement of the reader who might alter their views and take a stand (qtd. in D'antonio 12)."

Some famous and important examples of intertextuality are as William Shakespeare's works which are frequently used as sources of intertextuality in contemporary media. The film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) creatively blends historical fiction with elements from *Romeo and Juliet* and other Shakespearean works. Similarly, the TV series *Upstart Crow* (2016-18) is a comedic take on Shakespeare's many plays. *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding is an excellent example of intertextuality in contemporary literature, specifically in how it engages with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. However, intertextuality can also be meant as a parody. *Shrek* (2001) is a great example of intertextuality, as it actively engages with and subverts the traditional fairy tales popularized by Disney, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937).*

Intertextuality and Postcolonial Narratives

Postcolonial literature, which includes works by authors from formerly colonized regions, explores the historical, cultural and psychological effects of colonialism. This genre aims to reclaim and reinterpret histories, identities, and cultural narratives that were often suppressed or distorted by colonial powers. It emerged as a response to the urgent need for decolonizing literature and reasserting the voices and perspectives of those who lived through colonialism firsthand. By challenging colonial narratives and asserting their own stories, postcolonial writers seek to restore dignity to cultures and identities that were marginalized. They confront

issues like cultural dislocation, identity crisis, racial discrimination, and the enduring impact of colonial oppression.

In postcolonial literature, intertextuality is a crucial tool for challenging colonial narratives and amplifying indigenous voices. By engaging with and reinterpreting established Western texts, postcolonial authors reveal the biases and limitations of these works, bring marginalized perspectives to the forefront, and offer alternative narratives. This approach often involves rewriting or reimagining well-known texts to question their fundamental assumptions and propose new viewpoints. Postcolonial authors may reference historical documents, literary classics, and cultural myths to critique colonial ideologies and convey the experiences of colonized peoples. Through this process, intertextuality allows these writers to reclaim their cultural heritage, oppose dominant narratives, and express new forms of identity and resistance. By engaging in a conversation with canonical texts, postcolonial literature not only dismantles colonial discourses but also contributes to a more expansive literary and cultural dialogue.

Postmodern intertextuality is indeed a key feature of postmodern literature, film, and other forms of art. It involves the use of parody, irony, pastiche, and other techniques to engage with, reinterpret, and critique existing texts, genres, and cultural narratives. By borrowing, referencing, and reworking elements from earlier works, postmodern intertextuality allows authors, playwrights, and filmmakers to create layers of meaning and engage in a dialogue with various discourses, political ideologies, and social practices. This approach can be seen in works like Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's *Rainbow* or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which rework existing texts to provide new perspectives and critique historical or social contexts.

According to Linda Hutcheon, “historiographic metafiction may apply to discourses in society and challenges them (Hutcheon 2004 133). Hutcheon discussion of Lyotard's "pagan vision" which highlights the postmodern idea that originality in literature is a myth, aligning with the broader postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives and foundational truths. Lyotard, a central figure in postmodern theory, uses what Hutcheon describes as the "limitation theory" to argue that no author can be seen as the sole originator of their work.

Intertextuality in Canadian Women’s Writings

Canadian literature was historically seen as secondary to British and American writing, often focusing on themes considered quintessentially Canadian, such as the wilderness, wildlife, and key events in Canadian history. However, in the second half of the 20th century, the landscape of Canadian literature began to shift due to the intermingling of cultures and significant social transformations, facilitated by improved communication and globalization. This period marked the emergence of a distinct Canadian multiculturalism, which gave rise to literature that not only acknowledged but embraced the country's cultural diversity. This literary evolution expanded the definition of what it means to be Canadian, reflecting a more inclusive and multifaceted national identity. From this evolving literary landscape emerged one of the major themes of Canadian literature: the struggle for survival and the search for identity. Against this backdrop, Canadian women writers became a significant force, exploring these themes from their unique perspectives. These Canadian women writers have frequently employed intertextuality as a feminist strategy to challenge dominant narratives, reclaim female voices, and critique patriarchal ideologies, through rewriting myths, engaging with historical and literary texts, and subverting traditional narratives, these writers have created a powerful feminist discourse within Canadian literature. These writers—like Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence and Carol Shields —used their works to examine the unique pressures faced by women, delving into issues of gender, autonomy, and belonging. As Howells discusses, “There is no essentialist definitions of women of feminism of even Canadian but instead representations of the endless complexity of human behavior which exceeds ideological levels and the explanatory power of theory (Howells 19

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a renowned Canadian novelist, poet, short story writer, essayist, critic, and author of children's books, she was born in 1939 in Ottawa. She was educated at Victoria College, University of Toronto; Radcliffe College; and Harvard University. Her diverse body of work spans across genres, and she is celebrated for her imaginative and thought-provoking explorations of themes such as feminism, environmentalism, dystopian futures, and the human condition. Her work often employs literary devices like irony, symbolism, and self-conscious narrators to explore complex themes such as the relationship between humanity and nature, the darker facets of human

behavior, and the dynamics of power in gender issues, loss of identity, religion, mythology and political roles.

Margaret Atwood's books have been translated into over 30 languages, including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic, and Estonian. This highlights the global reach and impact of her work, resonating with readers from diverse cultural backgrounds around the world. Margaret Atwood works seems to be focused on the struggles of women in Canadian society and the impact of patriarchy. It discusses how her writings reveal the longstanding effects of male dominance and the resistance of the "male ego" to accept gender equality. At the thematic level, Atwood's novel examines themes related to the politics of gender, such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of women as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual craving out of female space by the woman through various strategies and women's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy… not only at the thematic and structural levels but also in the organization of women characters (Gomes 74).

The Edible Woman is Margaret Atwood's first novel, which established her reputation as a major writer and firmly rooted her as a feminist voice in literature. Over the years, she has authored more than a dozen novels, with some of her most popular works including *The Handmaid's Tale, Cat's Eye, The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, The Blind Assassin, and the MaddAddam Trilogy*. Her novel *The Testaments, a sequel to The Handmaid's Tale*, became a global bestseller in 2019. Margaret Atwood is known for her ability to pierce into the reader's subconscious by tackling complex and often challenging issues. Her fearless exploration of controversial and taboo topics, handled with clarity and insight, has earned her the reputation of being a bold and courageous writer in Canadian literature. *The Edible Woman* highlights the role of the body as a site of resistance and self-discovery, the protagonists body communicates a language that is distinct from her conscious mind one that defies societal expectations and the exterior stereotypical female roles imposed upon her. In this case we see the problems like-

Body vs Mind, Sexual Exploration, Opposition to stereotypes, Alternative identities, Awakening and self-discovery in her work effectively and elaboratively.

Intertextuality, Resistance and the Politics of Consumption

The Edible Woman is shaped as a complete social realism novel through its exploration of various themes, including relationships, marriage, love, self-discovery, sex, cultural attitudes, food, and victimization. The connection between the novel's title and the cake symbolism underscores its central message: the protagonist's journey toward self-realization and resistance against being metaphorically "consumed" by social norms and expectations. Anti-marriage is a central theme in *The Edible Woman*. Margaret Atwood portrays marriage as a societal trap designed to impose patriarchal control over women. The protagonist, Marian, finds herself ensnared by these expectations, but her body and mind eventually resist, allowing her to break free from the constraints that marriage symbolizes. In contrast, characters like Clara and Ainsley represent the more conventional victims of this system, highlighting the different ways women can be subjugated by traditional marital roles. This conflict is further deepened by her memories of childhood, when she would leave food for her doll and return to find it uneaten, highlighting her early awareness of control and autonomy. Now, as an adult, she begins to see herself as a lifeless doll manipulated by Peter, losing her agency in a patriarchal society. She starts thinking of herself as woman who expresses herself as "commodified as sexual creatures to serve male desire (Lim 817)."

As Simon De Beauvoir says, "marriage normally subordinates wife to husband". (Beauvoir 480). Margaret Atwood critiques the traditional institution of marriage by portraying how it often subordinates the wife to the husband. The protagonist, Marian MacAlpin, gradually realizes that her engagement to Peter symbolizes a loss of autonomy, as she feels increasingly consumed—both figuratively and literally—by societal expectations of women in marriage. Atwood critiques how marriage, in its traditional form, can strip women of their individuality, forcing them into predefined roles as wives and caretakers rather than autonomous individuals. Throughout the novel, Peter represents the idealized, dominant male figure, and his relationship with Marian follows conventional gender norms. He expects her to be passive, accommodating, and ultimately molded to fit his needs. Marian's growing discomfort is mirrored by her struggle with food—she starts rejecting. The novel, however, ends with Marian reclaiming her agency, symbolized by her ability to eat again, rejecting both Peter and the expectations imposed on her.

The cake Marian bakes and eats at the end of *The Edible Woman* is a powerful symbol of her transformation and rejection of victimhood. Throughout the novel, Marian struggles with a growing sense of being consumed—both by societal expectations of women and by her engagement to Peter. Her refusal to eat food mirrors her internal resistance to being metaphorically devoured by marriage and traditional gender roles. By presenting him with the cake, she symbolically transfers the role of the passive, consumable object onto something external, demonstrating that she refuses to be devoured by marriage. In the final scene, Marian bakes a woman-shaped cake and offers it to Peter, inviting him to consume it instead of her. This act represents her realization that she was being molded into an object for Peter's satisfaction. Marian says "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you wanted all along, isn't it?" (The Edible Woman 344). At this very transformed behavior of Marian, Margaret Atwood says that, "by doing so Marian, is trying to depict: an action, a 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" (Gibson 25). After Peter leaves, Marian eats the cake herself. This moment signifies her reclaiming control over her own body and choices. Unlike before, when she rejected food because she unconsciously felt like she was the one being eaten, she now actively consumes the cake, asserting her autonomy. It marks the end of her victimhood and her decision to live on her own terms.

One of Atwood's key feminist themes is the way women are treated as objects—commodified, controlled, and "consumed" by societal expectations. Throughout the novel, Marian unconsciously rebels against this by losing her ability to eat, symbolizing her fear of being absorbed into the role of a submissive wife. The cake, shaped like a woman, represents the societal expectation that women should be sweet, decorative, and available for consumption. Marian's refusal to be that cake (by offering it to Peter instead) highlights her rejection of passive femininity.

Her final act of eating the cake signals a reconciliation with herself: she is no longer rejecting nourishment, nor is she allowing herself to be metaphorically consumed. This is a significant feminist moment, as it represents self-acceptance and the rejection of external control. Unlike other female characters in the novel, such as Ainsley (who embraces

traditional roles in a different way), she thinks that, "the thing that ruins families these days is the husbands". (TEW 42), while Clara (who is completely absorbed into the role of wife and mother), Marian ultimately chooses to define herself on her own terms. She feels sorry for Clara and 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 her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism". (TEW 37). The cake scene encapsulates Marian's refusal to be a passive participant in her own life. Instead of allowing herself to be metaphorically consumed by Peter and marriage, she externalizes that pressure, rejects it, and takes control. This moment aligns with Atwood's broader feminist themes by challenging traditional gender roles and affirming a woman's right to define herself.

Intertexuality and feminism are deeply connected in literary studies, as feminist writers often engage with existing texts -both colonial and cultural- to challenge, reinterpret, or subvert traditional narratives. In feminist literature, this intertextuality often serves as a tool for critiquing patriarchal ideologies and reclaiming women's voices. Many feminist writers rework classic myhs, folktales and fairy tales to highlight the oppression of women. They also often reimagine biblical and classical stories to critique patriarchal narratives. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* does indeed have intriguing intertextual connections with Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid.* Like Alice, Marian finds herself in a world that becomes increasingly surreal and difficult to navigate as she confronts the pressures and contradictions imposed by a patriarchal society. Both the heroine Alice and Marian faces problem like existentialism, both Alice and Marian don't know who they truly are. Alice, the first time she grows, she asks herself:

> "I wonder if I have changed in the night. Let me think; was I same when I got up this morning? Who in the world am I? And that's the great puzzle, when the Caterpillar asks Alice who are you? Alice replies, I _ I hardly know Sir, just at present- at least I know, who I was when I got up this morning but I think, I must have been changed several times since then (Caroll 53)."

Similarly, references to *The Little Mermaid* echo Marian's sense of voicelessness and her struggle to reconcile her desires with the expectations placed upon her. Like Hans Christian Andersen's mermaid, Marian experiences a gradual erasure of her own voice, autonomy, and desires as she becomes entangled in a relationship that seeks to reshape her. In

Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, the mermaid gives up her voice in exchange for legs, believing that becoming human will help her win the prince's love. However, her sacrifice ultimately leads to suffering and rejection. Similarly, Marian gradually loses her ability to express herself and her desires as she becomes engaged to Peter. She becomes increasingly passive, allowing Peter to dictate their relationship while she suppresses her discomfort. Marian's disordered eating symbolizes this loss of agency—just as the mermaid loses her voice, Marian loses control over her body and its basic functions. The little mermaid's transformation is physically painful—every step she takes feels like walking on knives. This reflects how women often suffer in their attempts to conform to societal expectations. Marian, too, experiences discomfort as she tries to fit into the role of the perfect fiancée. Her body physically rejects food, showing her subconscious rebellion against being "assimilated."

Both characters undergo these painful transformations in the hope of achieving romantic and societal acceptance, only to realize that they are losing themselves in the process. In Andersen's tale, the mermaid ultimately does not win the prince's love, and she chooses to dissolve into sea foam rather than kill him to regain her old self. While she does not reclaim her voice, she finds a form of transcendence. Marian, on the other hand, has a more empowering ending—she finally breaks free from Peter's influence, realizes she has been "assimilated," and reclaims her autonomy.

Atwood describes her first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), as "proto-feminist" rather than explicitly feminist. She explains that when she was writing the book in 1965, the feminist movement had not yet fully emerged, and authors like Betty Friedan were read discreetly, "behind locked doors." This term suggests that the novel anticipates feminist themes but was written before the feminist movement became mainstream. Margaret Atwood says that "When I read Betty Friedan's *The problem without a name* I felt: I'm not only a woman. I'm not only mother. I'm not only a wife. I'm not only a female. I'm a human being with a mind. It gave me a lot of unhappiness that my intellect wasn't being connected to my female self."

Atwood explores how traditional gender roles and the institution of marriage can suppress personal freedom and self-expression, portraying these societal structures as harmful. Through this lens, Atwood critiques how societal norms can impact personal identity, and

underscoring the complexities of navigating social relationships and expectations. Margaret Atwood uses Marian's journey to highlight the broader implications of these issues, suggesting that personal identity and autonomy are deeply affected by societal norms and relationship dynamics. By portraying Marian's fight for self-discovery and autonomy, Atwood calls for a social reformation, advocating for more equitable and authentic man-woman relationships that allow individuals to maintain their personal identity and agency. After reading *The Edible woman* J. Brooks Bouson claims that "Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women (Bouson 230)".

An interesting parallel between Bakhtin's concept of laughter as a deconstructive force in epic literature and Atwood's use of similar techniques to reformulate traditionally legitimized literary genres. According to Bakhtin, laughter challenges the monologic nature and authority of the epic by introducing a dialogic element that undermines its seriousness and hierarchical structure (Lisowska 25). In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood employs humor, irony, and satire to subvert and critique established literary forms, particularly those that have historically excluded or marginalized women's experiences.Many of Margaret Atwood's writings, including *Susanna Moodie's journals*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Surfacing*, are considered examples of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by contemporary cultural critic Linda Hutcheon. Historiographic metafiction refers to works that blend historical narrative with metafictional elements, questioning the nature of history and storytelling.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's exploration of the difficulties faced by Canadian women in the 1960s, as seen in her works such as *The Edible Woman*, reflects the impact of the social, political, and economic changes that were rapidly occurring in Canada during that time. Atwood's writing delves into the ways women's identities and roles have been shaped to serve a patriarchal society, which aligns with the themes discussed in Sophia Sanchez-Grant's essay, The Female Body. Sanchez-Grant critiques how feminine characteristics are often socially constructed to maintain patriarchal power, a theme that resonates in Atwood's works."Femininity is supposedly the 'natural' essence of womanhood: to be feminine is to be

a woman. Conboy et al. argue that femininity is another social mechanism based on male desires that curtail women's freedom (Sanchez-Grant 79).” The novel *The Edible Woman* problematized female roles in society and suggest options that are open to further developments and are in progress. The complex intertextual references in Margaret Atwood’s novels include both tangible intertext and created intertext in a conversation that goes beyond the ending. This confirms the polyvalent characteristic of the Atwoodian novel i.e. the novel as Polylogue, as Kristeva claims (D’Antonio 12). Hence Atwood’s attempt to rewrite traditional narratives suggest alternatives is her political and artistic response to the incongruities and flaws of our system.

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