The Psychological State of Mind of Female Characters in Margaret Atwood's Novel "The Edible Woman"

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Abstract

The Edible Woman, Margaret Atwood's first published novel, sparked a lot of controversy and established Atwood as the author who tackles the topics which were considered taboo at the time in an open and truth-revealing manner. The Edible Woman sheds light to a plethora of issues related to the women living in 1960s and 1970s, such as the influence of patriarchal institutions on them and how the female identity gets oppressed by men and the society.

In this paper I will attempt to explore the psychological state of mind of women who feel pressured to fulfil the role that the society imposes on them. I will look into the psychological transformations of the female characters and how they defy gender stereotypes. Eventually I will examine possible solutions to battling the traditional expectations from women based on the actions of female characters in the novel.

Key words: second wave feminism, patriarchal institutions, tradition, gender stereotypes, female identity.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood was born in 1969 and she did not have formal education at an early age as a result of which she spent a lot of time reading. She did go on to finish formal education, obtaining a Bachelor's and Master's degrees and she holds honorary doctorates from many prestigious universities. She grew up in a family who did not raise her in a traditional manner – she was expected to become an educated intellectual and not get married straight away like most of the girls growing up at the same time. Atwood is a unique author indeed, she is one of the rare writers whose books are a part of university literature courses worldwide and whose books are read by housewives at the same time.

Atwood is widely considered to be a feminist writer, even though she insists she is only describing the world as it is: “She is, she argues, not a propagandist but an observer; her work merely reflects the reality of an uneven distribution of power between men and women.”¹ Atwood herself experienced discrimination in comparison to her male colleagues. She was often criticised for her appearance, especially her hair. Would she receive the same treatment by the media if she were a man? I personally never encountered a man writer being criticised for his hair. Atwood remarks: “As writers, women writers are like other writers. As biological specimens and as citizens... women are like other women: subject to the same discriminatory laws, encountering the same demeaning attitudes, burdened with the same good reasons for not walking through the park alone after dark. They too have bodies.”²

Since The Edible Woman was published in 1969, it was considered to be a part of the feminist activity and the Second-wave feminism that was particularly strong at the moment. Even though Betty Friedan in her novel The Feminine Mystique addresses a lot of the same topics that are dealt with in The Edible Woman, Atwood insist that her novel should not be considered

¹ Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p.24.

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to be feminist: “The Edible Woman appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed that it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women’s movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I’m not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I’d read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors.”³ Atwood simply gave a portrayal of the female position at the time: “I don’t consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply reporting. It was written in 1965 and that’s what things were like in 1965.”⁴

Marian

Marian is the protagonist of the novel. She is a young, university-educated woman with a job, who does not seem to be preoccupied with the need to fulfil the traditional role of the woman until her boyfriend Peter proposes to her. She accepts the proposal: “Her rational mind has made a sound rational choice – Peter is a healthy successful provider – but her body recognizes the real limits to her choice and refuses to capitulate.”⁵ As soon as that happens, her inner struggle begins between doing what is expected from her and doing what she actually desires.

At first, Marian and Peter seemed to have been the perfect couple as neither of them was interested in getting married. Peter was sad and depressed when his friends would get married and he told Marian many times that he loved her because she was not forcing him into a serious relationship.

Marian showed panic whenever the predetermined future for her was brought up. When she was informed she had to start the pension plan, she became agitated: “I sighed, but after Mrs. Grot had left I was suddenly quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have. It wasn’t only the feeling of being subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making: you get adjusted to that at school. It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact

³ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. x.

⁴ Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood – Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p.2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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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."⁶ When she introduced Peter to her friend Len and Len looked at Marian in a way she knew he thought her relationship with Peter was more serious than what she presented it to be, she started panicking: "Suddenly the panic swept back over me. I gripped the edge of the table. The square elegant room with its looped curtains and mutated carpet and crystal chandeliers was concealing things; the murmuring air was filled with a soft menace. 'Hang on,' I told myself. 'Don't move.' I eyed the doors and windows, calculating distances. I had to get out."⁷

Peter is similar to Marion in a way that he also did not want to get married but ultimately he embraced his traditional duty. When Marian runs away, he tells her: "The problem with *you* is, you're just rejecting your femininity."⁸ If the woman did not act as she was expected to, it would be considered by men that she was not fulfilling her feminine role. Marian has a quiet and passive personality. She is never able to verbalise her fears, she keeps all of them to herself. While she perceives the life of her friend Clara, who fulfilled the traditional role of the woman by being only the wife and the mother, to be sad, Marian still keeps on going in the same direction, most likely to have the same kind of life. Perhaps the reason why she sees Clara's life so negatively is because she is subconsciously aware that that would be her path too since that is exactly how she sees her future. Marian is an intelligent woman and she realises that what she is doing is not rational, but she is unable to explain what is wrong and what triggers her actions: "Though I wasn't at all certain why I had been acting this way, I had at least acted. Some kind of decision has been made, something had been finished."⁹ It seems that running away was the way Marian rebelled. Since she was not able to express with words what was wrong, her body made a reaction.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

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“Marian’s protest is silent: it is manifested in terms of her body and we have to decode that body if we are to understand the language of its protest.”¹⁰ None of the people around her manage to see the protest of her body, only Duncan.

She believes that she still has to do what the society expects from her – get married, leave the job, have children. In her thoughts she is driven by tradition and not by her own opinion and emotions. She has a very unsupportive reaction towards Ainsley’s decision to have a child on her own. She is not open to anything that is unusual, out of the ordinary, different from what is traditional and patriarchal. Ainsley comments: “You’re a prude, Marian, and that’s what’s wrong with this whole society.”¹¹ In Ainsley’s words we can seek the more universal message of the novel. Because of the people who are so-called “prudes”, or simply too limited in their way of thinking about women, whenever women do something which is not following the unwritten set of rules that should guide their life, they are considered to be weird and rebellious.

After Peter proposed to her, Marian’s psychological state of mind completely changed and she had strong physical reactions to it. At first, her body was trying to run away from Peter. When this proved unsuccessful, her body started rejecting certain food, meat at first, but then it escalated to the point that she could barely eat anything. The food became a metaphor for her own life. She felt it is unfair that she should make a decision for meat or vegetables that are then deprived of their own choices and life. She sympathised with the food: “She became aware of the carrot. It’s a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn’t die right away, it keeps on living, right now it’s still alive...”¹² Perhaps Marian feels like she is being eaten up and consumed in the same way like the carrot, without her will. Coral Ann Howells concludes: “Atwood’s fictional female bodies become battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh.”¹³ Atwood is using Marian’s body to show that her mind is protesting the patriarchal ideas. In the physical construct of the

¹⁰ Coral Ann Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 61.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹³ Coral Ann Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 58.

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novel, the narration changed from the first person singular to the third person narrative, signifying Marian's loss of identity.

She also started seeing a man she met, Duncan. In regards to Duncan, she was free, she knew there were no strings attached, he did not want to be with her and he did not expect anything from her. "When she was with Duncan she was caught in an eddy of present time: they had virtually no past and certainly no future."¹⁴

However, despite all her physical reactions, Marian did her best to defy them. She was trying to do everything she could to please Peter and actualize the traditional expectations. When Peter organised the party, she dressed up and did her hair and make up in the way that would please him, even though she felt that was not her and she was only pretending for him. Duncan did not even recognize her, thinking she was dressed up for a masquerade. Perhaps the reason why Marian got so attached to Duncan is also that he saw the real her and did not expect her to change anything about herself unlike Peter. Macpherson comments: "Duncan acts as a foil for Marian, expressing her inexpressible desires. He fails to act as required by the society."¹⁵ Some critics, Macpherson including, saw Duncan as Marian's alter ego, as he could be perceived as the mirror of her subconscious, the representative of her inner thoughts and hidden personality. She would like to live her life the way he does, freely and without the need to justify her actions and decisions.

Eventually, Marian could no longer ignore her body signs. She hit rock bottom – she completely stopped eating food, she cheated on Peter and she ran away from his party. That was the moment she decided to free herself from him by inviting him over and baking a cake in the shape of a woman for him. "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you. You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork."¹⁶ The cake was a metaphor for Marian, it represented her as the object, and now she was offering it to Peter for consumption. That is exactly how she felt next to him, as the object that he wanted to eat up, consume and control. After this action, she gained hold of her identity again. She started eating, taking her

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.227.

¹⁵ Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 27.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.346.

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life into her own hands and the narration returned to the first person singular. Wilson suggests that Marian made a statement in this way: “By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food.”¹⁷

If we try to answer the question why Marian is acting the way she did, we could turn to Davey’s perspective: “In The Edible Woman, where the narrator’s childhood and adolescence (and with them her relationship with her parents) are unmentioned, the psychological perspective is shallow. We are given no understanding of the source of Marian’s fears, projections, and transference so. From what childhood dramas do the feelings come that cause her to see her employer as a heartless parent, her fiancé Peter as a predator, his apartment building as a steel and plastic monster. What has attracted her to “nicelypackaged” Peter, or to Ainsley, her self-important roommate? Marian’s own explanation that these seemed like practical or convenient choices only begs the larger question of why practicality should be important to her, or why she should have so little passion as to believe herself satisfied with the practical and convenient.”¹⁸ It is true that we do not receive any information regarding Marian’s upbringing, and the novel does not offer any particular reason to why Marian is rejecting the traditional roles of women. However, perhaps Atwood simply wanted to present Marian as a typical woman of the time, as many women felt the same way but were afraid to show it. Marian could simply be the symbol of the woman who refuses the patriarchal expectations and who wants to be the creator of her own life. Betty Friedan wrote: “Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist.””¹⁹ She wrote about this particular issue of the loss of identity that the women felt, and Marian embodies that.

Food is a very important element of the novel. Since the very beginning, Marian highlights the importance of food to her since she describes her every meal. Then all of a sudden she is unable to eat anything, which is a physical reaction to her psychological disarray. In the

¹⁷ Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p.96.

¹⁸ Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: a Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talonbooks), p.67.

¹⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), p.43.

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end she uses a cake as a metaphor for her relationship with Peter. It seems to me that Atwood gave so much significance to food and even started the novel by offering the recipe for the puff pastry, to draw attention to the society where consumerism is becoming more and more important. People have the need to consume everything, to own and control everything, to the point where they are trying to consume even the human beings. Perhaps Atwood uses all these food references to show how far the society has come and how something has to be done about it. Bouson remarks: "That women are defined by their culture as passive objects for male consumption is one of the central premises of The Edible Woman."²⁰

"The Edible Woman shows how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can lead not to self-fulfilment but to an intensifying sense of selfdiminishment."²¹ Marian represents the metaphor of a woman who, influenced by the society, is trying to force herself to fulfil her traditional role, but then comes to realisation that the cost for it is too much to pay and decides against it. Her struggle symbolises the struggle of many women in the 1960s who started challenging the public opinion and who wanted to choose a life of their own. Marian is the example for all the women out there, that you can rebel against the tradition and win.

Ainsley

Ainsley is Marian's roommate and a friend, but the two of them differ greatly in their perspectives on female roles in the society. Ainsley at first looks like a complete opposite to a conventional woman and believes she is eluding tradition when she decides to stay pregnant and raise the baby without a husband. However, her reason for it is completely patriarchal: "Every woman should have at least one baby."²² Unlike Marian who believes that having a job and having a family cannot go together, Ainsley disagrees: "What has having a baby got to do with getting a job at an art gallery? You're always thinking in terms of either/or. The thing is *wholeness*."²³ The way she thinks is very progressive and in complete opposite to most of the

²⁰ J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies – Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p.30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²² Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.43.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.43.

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women of the time who believed a woman cannot have a child on her own and keep a job with it. The “wholeness” that Ainsley is talking about is exactly what men do not want women to achieve, they prefer to have only half of the person next to them while they are free to go on and live their life as a whole person – person who is able to have a job and a family.

In Ainsley and Len’s relationship, we witness the reversal of the usual roles between a man and a woman. While usually men are the ones who are trying to seduce women and take advantage of them, something completely opposite happened in their relationship. Ainsley used him to get pregnant which made Len extremely upset: “All along you’ve only been *using* me. What a moron I was to think you were sweet and innocent, when it turns out you were actually college-educated the whole time! Oh, they’re all the same. You weren’t interested in *me* at all. The only thing you wanted from me was my body.”²⁴ This kind of speech is usually expected to be heard from women. Len is the representative of a goodlooking man who likes to use woman and does not want to settle down. He could also be a metaphor for many hypocritical men in 1960s who wanted to live life on their own terms but did not expect women to do the same. Just like the most of the men back then, Len does not think it is a good idea that women should be educated: “That’s what we get then for educating women. They get all kinds of ridiculous ideas.”²⁵ Men were actually afraid of educated women because they knew they had a mind of their own and could not be easily influenced by societal expectations.

However, even though Ainsley was determined not to follow tradition, the patriarchal influence changed her mind. After she was informed on a prenatal course that the father figure is important in every child’s life and that they might become homosexual otherwise, she became intent on finding a husband and eventually got married. Even though she is an educated woman, her mind becomes irrational at the stories she hears.

Ainsley is the representative of a woman who desperately tries to avoid tradition and live her life the way she wants it to and not the way the society determines her to, but finds herself unable to do so because she succumbed to the expectations of the society.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.195.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.193.

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Clara

Clara is Ainsley's friend and the perfect paragon of a woman living in the 1960s. Clara completely fulfilled her traditional role of being a mother and a wife. She finished university but she does not work in order to take care of her family, which is exactly what a woman was expected to do. However, even though everyone around Clara is concerned about her wellbeing, she herself seems blissfully happy with the life she has chosen. She has come to terms with it and accepted it. Marian felt bad for her, believing her life was not the way she had planned and Ainsley believed she should stand up to it and do something about her life. Her husband Joe was particularly concerned: "I worry about her a lot, you know. I think it's a lot harder for her than for most other women; I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university. 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..."²⁵ Sharing the same perspective, Betty Friedan also believes that women who are educated and then live a life of a housewife lose their identity: "It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness, in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or "I" without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive."²⁶ Clara's husband, Joe, seems to symbolise the typical man living in the 1960s. He is patriarchal, he wants a traditional wife who would leave her job and only be a wife and a mother, and he does not think that women should be educated: "Maybe women shouldn't be allowed to go to university at all; then they wouldn't always be feeling later on that they've missed out on the life of the mind."²⁸ However, he does not think that women should go to university because he is concerned about his wife mental state. He believes that after being educated it is difficult for a woman to accept that she is only a housewife.

²⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.297.

²⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001), p.350. ²⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.297.

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From the perspective of the public patriarchal opinion, Clara is the metaphor for a perfect woman. She is the representative of the most women living in the 1960s, leaving their careers to be good wives and mothers. And what was the most appreciated, she never complained about it and she reconciled herself to the life she lived.

Conclusion

The female characters in The Edible Woman offer the portrayal of different kinds of women, not only in 1960s, but today as well. By depicting their life stories, Atwood emphasises the influence that the society has on women and tries to teach women the lesson that they should challenge it.

Atwood said in the 1979: “The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject.”²⁷ Unfortunately, Margaret Atwood is right about this issue. If we look around ourselves, we would see plenty of people like Marian, trapped in the patriarchal situation unable to find a way out. Their identity becomes oppressed and even the rational, sane, educated women like Marian herself could slip from reality. We still live in the time when women are expected to get married and give birth to children regardless of their own plans, desires and emotions. And in case the women do not fulfil their traditional role, they are called selfish and spinsters, instead of being called brave and persistent. Our society is still patriarchal, our values traditional and everyone who lives their life differently is frowned upon. Bousoon correctly concludes: “As Atwood reads and interprets women’s lives, she compulsively tells a story that she wants her readers to hear and respond to.”²⁸ While reading the novel, we feel sad for Clara and for her uninteresting, unfulfilled life, but at the same time, we feel happy for Marian who managed to save herself and become a free woman who makes her own decisions. We should be inspired by her ability to do the right thing and follow her example.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.x.

²⁸ J. Brooks Bousoon, *Brutal Choreographies – Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p.13. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

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“A novelist with both popular and literary appeal, Atwood provokes her readers to confront issues that are of special importance to women, such as domestic and sexual violence, pornography, eating disorders, mastectomy, and problems with body-self image. And in all of her fiction, Atwood who is deeply concerned about the uneven and potentially damaging power relations that occur in the parent-child situation, heterosexual romance, and female friendship relentlessly focuses attention on the gender and power politics that govern women’s lives.”³¹ Atwood writes about women because she wants to draw attention to all the issues surrounding women’s lives and she wants to encourage women to take action about it.

Atwood is a shrewd observer of the world around her and in her work she portrays the social circumstances the way she perceives it.

Margaret Atwood is 77 years old. However, she still does not give up on her mission – to write about women and to educate them. She is still present on the literary scene through her work, defying the time and all the people who criticised her – her appearance and the pieces of art she created. She believes the women still have not got the spot in the society that they deserve and her novels are teaching the women around the world to stand up for themselves, defeat the tradition and acquire the positions that they so richly deserve. It is up to all of us, admirers of Margaret Atwood and her work, to fight for the right of the women, to ruin the patriarchal roles of the women and to build the discrimination and stereotypes-free society for our daughters. We owe it to Margaret Atwood and to ourselves. Atwood herself pointed out the importance of fiction writing and the lessons it teaches us: “I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. Especially now that organized religion is scattered and in disarray, and politicians have, Lord knows, lost their credibility, fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge ourselves.”²⁹

²⁹ Coral Ann Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.23.

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