

Journey from Exploitation to Exploration in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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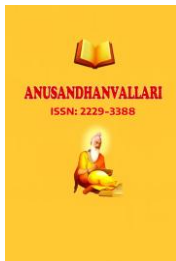
Abstract

Historically, literary masculinity has been characterized by tropes such as the stoic hero, the rough explorer and the authoritative leader. These representations usually accentuate traits such as emotional control, physical strength and the ability to create dominance. However, in the twenty-first century, these depictions have sparked criticism, with many modern writers highlighting concerns about the flaws and ramifications of these outmoded ideals. The argument that traditional masculinity's detrimental beliefs cause emotional repression and broken relationships is a prominent criticism. For example, it is becoming increasingly clear that the belief that "real men" should never express vulnerability or ask for help is harmful to their mental health.

Keywords: weak, sexual exploitation, victims of males, selfhood, identity, male domination

Introduction

Canadian literature has evolved dramatically in the twenty-first century, reflecting quick changes in gender roles, cultural expectations and societal norms. One of the most intriguing research subjects is how masculinity is portrayed. In Canadian literature, masculinity, which has traditionally been defined by strength, stoicism and power, is increasingly being analysed and redefined. Canadian literature has a long history of stressing masculine characteristics like bravery, power and leadership. These ideas are rooted in religious and cultural traditions, from the heroic protagonists of colonial and postcolonial literature. Power, control and emotional self-control have long been associated with masculinity. The history of any nation in literary form serves not only as a documentation of the nation's history, but also as a script of evidence for future generations. If the paperwork is completed in chronological order, it will make more sense to the reader and may even pique the reader's interest in learning about the nation's history with passion. Shakespeare's historical plays serve as an excellent example for future generations to learn about their forefathers' pasts in order to picture their own future.



About the Author

Margaret Atwood was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, to parents of Nova Scotia heritage. When she was seven, her family relocated to Toronto, but she spent the summers in the isolated northern provinces of Ontario and Quebec, where her father, an entomologist and zoology professor, investigated tree-eating insects. Atwood's interest with the Canadian outdoors, which pervades much of her writing, began during this time. She was eleven years old when she began attending school full-time.

Atwood married Canadian writer Graeme Gibson in 1973. After several years of working professionally for the Toronto-based publishing business of Anansi Press, as well as occasional teaching engagements, she and Gibson purchased a farmhouse outside Alliston, Ontario, where they lived intermittently for many years. In 1976, the year she released her third novel, *Lady Oracle*, Atwood gave birth to a daughter named Jess Atwood Gibson. Over the next few years, she experimented with television screenwriting, wrote a history book, *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (1977) and released a collection of short stories, *Dancing Girls* (1977).

Atwood is praised for her writings' outspoken feminism. From her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, to her dystopian masterwork, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which cemented her international stardom, Atwood has displayed a keen interest in society's limitations on women and the facades they develop in reaction. *The Handmaid's Tale*, which Atwood refuses to call "science fiction," envisions a society in which women are stripped of all rights except the ability to marry, keep home and reproduce. Following her international success with *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood wrote a series of novels on women's relationships, including *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993).

Review of Literature

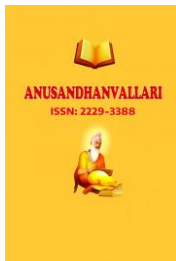
Margaret Atwood is one of the most important Canadian writers of the twentieth century. She is a literary critic, poet, novelist and essay writer. She wrote a book on Margaret Laurence called *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. It was published in 1972 and consists of twelve chapters focused on Canadian literature. It focusses on individuals' struggles for survival. Clara Thomas wrote a book titled *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. It explores Laurence Manawaka's imagined landscape.

Mathanavalli S and Dr. C.S.Robinson says that Margaret Atwood's book, *The Edible Woman*, highlights the complexities of cultural gender norms. Atwood analyses the obstacles encountered by Canadian women in the 1960s. The book was written during a moment when Canada's social, political and economic landscape was rapidly changing. The transformation in Canada challenged women's traditional ideals of femininity. They faced the gender difference, which has limited their ability to exist. *The Female Body* by Sofia Sanchez-Grant, which examines feminine features tailored to suit patriarchal society, can be found in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.

Naadiya Yaqoob Mir points out that The demise of her connection with Peter brings an end to her search for her lost identity. Her anorexia has been cured as she consumes the cake voraciously. It breaks down patriarchal stereotypes about women. The protagonist suggests that submissiveness limits women's life and undermines their identities. Atwood's work depicts women overcoming patriarchal restrictions to become self-sufficient.

Objective

The objective of research is to find Margaret Atwood's internal conflict and attempts to maintain a sense of self in the face of forces that reduce women to "consumable" things, to demonstrate the psychological impact



of cultural pressures on women's mental health by emphasizing concerns such as alienation, identity crisis and anxiety and to provide insights on women's liberation efforts in the past and present, as well as the importance of recognizing and overcoming systemic inequities that limit individual freedom through this paper.

Canadian Literature

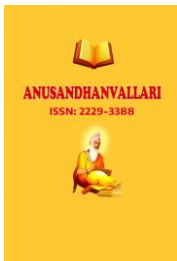
The Indigenous culture of Canada is diverse and varied, involving permanent habitation, agricultural methods, distinctive architecture and a complicated social class system. However, with the introduction of European invaders, Indigenous civilizations began to adopt aspects of Western culture. The Metis, for example, began marrying Europeans in the 17th century, resulting in a civilization of mixed heritage. In contrast, the Inuit kept a certain distance from European settlers, with limited connection. Despite several laws, contracts and treaties aimed at guaranteeing Indigenous peoples' autonomy, the obstacles and discrepancies remained.

Historically, literary works from numerous regions throughout the world, such as Asia, Africa and the Aboriginal populations of Canada and Australia, have frequently been de-historicized due to the influence and interpretations of North American and European perspectives. Colonial powers have undertaken policies intended at destroying indigenous cultures within their colonies, reducing them to a supposed primitive state. As a result, numerous literary works have been displaced and integrated into dominant domains of literary debate. As a result, the cultural, historical and literary contexts surrounding linguistic utterances in these excluded regions might be used to predict the responses evoked by colonialism. In contrast, the presence of orators in various indigenous languages, as well as the rising practice of written expression in these languages, establish indigenous writings as a body of literature that not only acknowledges but also transcends colonialism's influence. It is feasible to develop an alternative method that relies directly on a marginalised area's indigenous literary and cultural expertise, focusing on building lateral perspectives on these literatures through comparative literary studies.

The dual ancestry of the Native woman writer allows her to author her work while reaping the benefits of her dual position. Indigenous writers effectively use their linguistic and cultural adaptation to resist, employing metaphorical tools of a skilled craftsman. Writing in English does not imply subservience to a specific culture or diminishes one's intrinsic "indigenous" identity. Critics believe that feeling guilty when using English as a medium of communication is seen as a control mechanism intended at silencing rebellious voices that question the established social order within both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. English, as a language, demonstrates the power to aid healing, rejuvenation and rebuilding by correcting misinformation and removing preconceived notions that have historically been promoted by external parties. Lee Maracle says:

I aspire to get visibility, recognition and a lasting impression. Primarily, my objective is to contribute to the historical trajectory of Native communities. I did not evade selfinterested motivation to a greater extent than those individuals whom I critique. The reader is encouraged to embrace the tagline, "One must doubt all things," whether engaging with this book or any other literary work. (89)

Cultural strategies refer to the methods in which characters in novels traverse their cultural identities and traditions. The research looks into how characters use cultural methods to assert their identities in the face of external constraints. Each of these categories and concepts is critical to the research, providing lenses through which to evaluate and interpret the novels' themes, storylines and portrayals of Indigenous cultures and identities. They provide a theoretical and sociopolitical framework for comprehending the intricacies of indigenous Canadian literature.



Victim versus the victimizer

Atwood explores the issue of a woman's role in society, particularly in a male-dominated culture. The women in her stories are separated from their true selves, and the realisation happens throughout the novels, eventually leading them to their authentic selves. In her search for herself, the protagonist needs a guide and that guide is within her. To locate it, she must delve deeply into her own awareness and experience life from a different perspective. Atwood's novels are extensively read because of her acute sensibility. Readers can identify with the characters. They are average, lifelike folks who are quite strong and determined to achieve their goals. Life, according to Atwood, revolves around the psyche, soul and consciousness of man. Atwood's female protagonists experience a form of personal victimisation that has its roots in the colonial pattern of devastation.

Atwood's fundamental preoccupation in all of her writings has been the weak versus the powerful, the victim versus the perpetrator. Her protagonists are either victims of males or the authority of a specific societal structure. Atwood is concerned with women's roles in modern society, as well as an investigation of her own identity in a highly commercialised technological age. Atwood does not present an answer or solution to the issues highlighted in her novels. She leaves the reader to imagine. Her early characters appear only in the final chapters of the novel. This study looks at how Atwood portrays her heroes' journeys to real selfhood, namely spiritual freedom.

Atwood has accomplished a great deal as an excellent advocate, campaigner for women's rights, indigenous rights and the preservation of the Earth in its natural ecological balance. Her excellent literary voice has complemented her work and helped her gain global fame. Her writings have been translated into over seventeen languages, demonstrating their international popularity. One of the criticisms levied against Atwood is that she unduly sympathises with women and their issues while turning a blind eye to their male counterparts. However, while championing the plight of women, Atwood is also a humanist, as she states in *Second Words*:

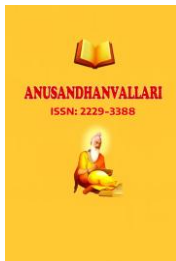
"Women have to take the concerns of men as seriously as they expect men to take theirs..., one 'cannot deprive any part of humanity of the definition "human" without grievous risks to one's own soul'" (Salat 62).

Atwood's works are deeply concerned with the struggle of women to keep their identities. Even though the heroes do not achieve anything tangible at the end, they do uncover an epiphany and are ready to begin the path of self-realization or self-actualization. The protagonists are preparing to evolve and assert their actual identities. Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, tells the story of women fighting with their identities in a disorganized, chaotic and patriarchal structured world.

Through their battle, they transform into "new women" by rejecting their fabricated identities as someone's daughter, wife, or mother. However, the process of evolution is painful since individuals must discard their old life in order to begin a new one. They consider and attempt suicide at some point, but are saved after much anguish. They do, however, reject the idea of suicide since they have an option. They retreat from interpersonal ties. The protagonist of *The Edible Woman* locks herself in a room and refuses to come out for a while. The protagonist passes through stages of denial, awareness and realization. When people become aware of their problems, they work to resolve them. "introspections, self- analysis and an attempt to come to terms with one's self both through isolation and social interaction are featured" (Monkman 32).

Discussion

Atwood masterfully conveys their determination and courage, as well as a clear vision to focus on their new identities and achieve their goals. *The Edible Woman* is formed and unified by a single image, the eating metaphor, which continues throughout the narrative, from the first page to the last. Though the narrative language



is rich in symbols and metaphors, it is the “food metaphor” that serves as the primary vehicle for presenting the heroine’s feminist tendencies, allowing her to protest against society’s dehumanizing tendencies and save herself by rejecting her inauthentic self. Atwood depicts girls as a metaphor for a revolt. In an interview, Atwood says:

It’s a human activity that has all kinds of symbolic connotations depending on the society and the level of society. In other words, what you eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from individual as well as from place to place. If you think of food as coming in various categories: sacred food, ceremonial food, everyday food and thing that are not to be eaten, forbidden food, dirty food, if you like- for the anorexic, all food is dirty food. (Lyons 228)

Marian, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, is on a journey to find her own identity. She is a fairly smart, clever young woman who holds moderately liberal beliefs and is quite defensive of her personal uniqueness. She works for Seymour Surveys Company, a market research agency. Faced with an identity dilemma, she is presented with several options. Marian must first confront and overcome the challenge at work. Marian works for a corporation with a highly stratified, three-tiered hierarchy. The upper floor is occupied by men and is inaccessible to her. The bottom is largely supervised by elderly housewives and she does not want to go there. On the floor above, the executives and psychologists referred to as males.

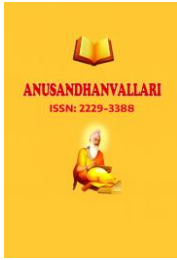
Clara and Joe present Marian with another option a completely other side of love and marriage. Their marriage is fairly good and they have three children. Clara is content to stay inside the confines of family. Marian is aware of Joe’s contemptuous attitude towards women. “He tends any way to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection” (131). Clara, impractical and non-assertive as she is, tends to be rather leaning on Joe and “lets herself be treated like a thing” (35) much to Ainsley’s annoyance. In this regard, Marian agrees with Ainsley that “the power of the wife declines as the number of children grows and Clara “wasn’t able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time ... her own body seemed beyond her, going in its own way without reference to any direction of hers” (35). According M.P.Ganesan, “Clara is a typical Woman as per the expectation of men. (84-85)

Margaret Atwood’s protagonist’s relationship with her fiancé, Peter, effectively depicts masculine dominance. Peter is a person who wants everything from Marian based on his own desires. Marian’s every action is directed by him and she becomes a victim of Peter’s authoritarianism. He values her simply for her physical looks, ignoring her emotional and psychological needs entirely. He considers Marian a reasonable girl because she delegates all important and minor decisions to him. In fact, this is evident shortly after she accepts his proposal of marriage. When Peter asks her when she would like to marry, she wants to respond “Groundhog Day,” but instead, she gives Peter the permission to take the decision. He rationalizes his sudden surrender to marriage. He says:

A fellow can’t keep running around indefinitely. It’ll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you’ve got a wife, people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you’re a queer or something ...And there is one thing about you, Marian, I know I can always depend on you... you’re such a sensible girl. (91)

Marian accepts Peter’s proposal and despite her misgivings, she tries to defend her decision. “I’d always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does ... I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is ... she is against it on principle and life isn’t by principles but by adjustments.” (100)

Marian needs to have a strong relationship with Peter, but he doesn’t understand her desire. She is obligated to follow Peter’s activities without objection. Peter frequently ignores her and expects her to agree with



him all the time. Marian's resignation makes him even more nasty. She realises that her relationship with Peter isn't flawless or satisfying, so she strives to make it fruitful. In her novel *The Edible Woman*, Atwood tackles the dilemma of women's reliance on men. Through Marian, she portrays how the weight of gentility turns Lady into a persecuted figure and Marian's personality into an accommodating follower to her life partner, Peter. Her accommodation recognizes his superiority.

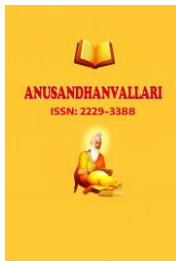
Marian feels Duncan is an alternative, but when she discovers Duncan's desire to seduce and sexually exploit her, she realizes he is not the alternative. Marian meets Duncan, but it's like diving into the flames from a pan. Duncan's function in the narrative is vague, as he appears to be more of a symbol than a true character. Marian is not outraged at Duncan's actions; rather, she is slightly comforted because her connection with Peter is fraught with uncertainty regarding his personality and motivations. She sees Peter and Duncan for who they are and she realizes how she has enabled both of these men in her life to use and consume her in the process of victimization.

Marian asserts that she cannot be manipulated by persons like Peter and Duncan. Marian is able to demolish society's notions of femininity with the cake's ingenious mirrored system, allowing her to realize her actual identity. When Marian serves Peter the cake, she consciously and verbally refuses the roles of mother oppressed by her reproductive function, wife, over submissive female, underpaid worker and ideal controlled woman. Her body no longer needs to display her internal turmoil and revolt. As Peter flees, her appetite returns and she regains her independence by consuming the cake. Using culinary images, Atwood emphasizes Marian's taking control of her own life. Marian searches for her identity throughout the narrative and eventually finds herself.

Atwood's attitude to gender in general and masculinity in particular, is more complicated than the extant secondary literature would suggest. Indeed, her characters function under a heteronormative gender system (with very few exceptions) based on a binary power structure, with power play taking place between men and women. Atwood, on the other hand, does not reaffirm the fixed binary gender structure, but rather describes how masculinity and femininity are stratified in relation to one another and inherently along the line of difference inside. Most significantly, she sees gender as part of a complex web of circumstances that form individual identity, rather than as an independent state. These are both tangible aspects, on the one hand. On the other hand, there is individual subjectivity, for which Atwood has received widespread praise for her brilliant representation. The most shocking twists in Atwood's characters emerge from this basic subjectivity and they frequently result in more or less radical assaults to societal convention. As with female figures, the author is particularly interested in the workings of subjectivity and its function in forming and maintaining the character's identity and integrity. The representation of the father in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Images" exemplifies such nuanced masculinity.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is about women and their connections with men, society and food and eating. Margaret Atwood uses food and eating to discuss a young woman's rebellion against a modern male-dominated society. Marian appears to be struggling not only with her eating habits, but also with her social relationships and love life. In the novel's final chapter, Marian switches from third-person narration to first-person narration, indicating that her search for identity is complete and that she is no longer "an Edible Woman."



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