



IDENTITY CRISIS AND EXISTENTIAL TRANSFORMATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

SHALINI MODH
Assistant Professor
Medi-Caps Group of Institutions,
Indore (MP) INDIA

PARTH KHARE
Medi-Caps Group of Institutions,
Indore (MP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The paper is an endeavor to explore the character of Marian in The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood. Atwood is a renowned name in the Canadian fiction. She is the mouthpiece of Canadian people and reveals the real problems faced by them. She is the literary giant who has presented the remedy to cure the problems faced by women all over the world and particularly in Canada. All through her career she has excelled in writing on diverse themes. In The Edible Woman Atwood has beautifully exhibited Marian's self-realization of distortion of her own identity. Marian understands that if she marries him her identity would be trampled. It is an attempt to understand the qualities and Crises of her characters and to underline the transformation that a woman has to undergo in order to reach her true potential. It also aims to highlight the kind of social barriers and limitations that a woman has to face and ultimately break so that she can be herself without any constraints.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a prolific writer of poetry, short stories, screenplays, literary criticism, fiction, non-fiction, e-books and operettas has cemented her place among the top women novelists not only in Canada but also around the world. George Woodcock, a distinguished Canadian critic and writer states in "Margaret Atwood as a Novelist", "No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use as Margaret Atwood" (327).

She is one of those Avant gardes in the world of literature who were feminists before it was an actual movement. She as a Canadian writer deals with the issues of oppression and survival of women both as a Canadian and as a woman. Rubenstein in "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*" says, "...Margaret Atwood has always been concerned with issues of survival- first as a condition of Canadian experience and, more recently, as a condition of female experience" (101). She has become a well-known feminist author of Canada, though her feminism was rather accidental as she wrote at a time when feminism



was not a movement. Her major themes are infertility and fertility, political influence on woman, multiculturalism, nature vs. human, search for identity and men-women relationship. However, from all the visible themes she portrayed, one stands out the most, and that is the search for one's identity. It has become a recurring theme evidenced in many of her novels. The paper focuses on *The Edible Woman*, in which foundation being laid, an ideological and philosophical foundation upon which the edifice of her work is based.

Marian, the protagonist of the novel in many ways symbolizes the psyche of the majority of women in Canada. Being subjected to colonialism and subjugation by foreigners, Canada as a whole suffered from a deep identity crisis and it is this journey from victimization to realization and further, from confrontation to actualization that has always been the great Canadian journey. Since her novels, especially her earlier ones tiptoe the line between feminism and existentialism; the paper considers both of these ideas and looks for them.

Atwood is different in portraying her characters; she often shows an ethical dilemma and a feeling of 'bad faith' with their decisions and choices in them. Marian in the novel tries to convince herself that she is like the stereotypical obedient and submissive wife and tries to be happy about it. One such instance is that of when she dresses up in a dress which she doesn't like and sports a hairstyle that Peter demanded. Another would be when she is in the parlor getting ready, and all she could feel was disgust at herself for not being brave enough to be what she truly is. This inner voice is the most important aspect of the search for one's identity in anyone's life. Human beings cannot learn without pain and this stab of pain starts the change from a victim to a rebel.

Nature plays an important role in forging a mindset in a community and a nation and Canada as a nation has been blessed both with an ethereally scenic beauty and a closeness to it. The people of Canada have always felt one with their country and its natural gifts. Marian also shows such tendencies when she hears that Peter, the man whom she is supposed to marry, enjoys shooting and killing rabbits. It is this ease and indeed pleasure with which he can kill an innocent being just for his enjoyment that disturbs her deeply. She empathizes with Nature and feels that there is no difference between Mother Nature and her, both being exploited and consumed by people like Peter.

Another excellent portrayal of the manifestation of this 'bad faith' is her anorexia which hinges on becoming an outright phobia. When she sees Peter eating a steak and cutting what was the flesh of a living and breathing cow in the recent past, she is filled with revulsion towards Peter. "Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes ... she looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed..... She set down her knife and fork" (190-191). She felt she could no longer partake in an act in which her fiancé derived such pleasure. Her feelings for Peter make her hate



eating meat, and not the other way round. Slowly, as her quest and her crisis deepens, so she starts disliking food. It is a good example of how serious and damaging an internal crisis can become if not handled, like a wound that never healed and festered into gangrene. It is in empathizing with nature and her produce that Marian searches for her own sense of self.

Her powerlessness has been shown when she stops eating and reveals her anger. Food here is the symbol of society as she revolts against eating food to show her protest against male dominated society. In “The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Character in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*” J. Brooks Bouson quotes, “Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian MacAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women” (230).

Marriage looms large on the psyche of Marian. Uncomfortable to begin with, her consent is more the consent of a person who chose because she had no choice. This metamorphosis that she undergoes, from being unable to hold her own opinion of marriage and being unable to reject it, when Peter says, “you can’t continue to run around indefinitely; people who aren’t married get funny in middle age,.....”(125). To become courageous enough to break it off herself, is what her search for identity is all about. Every quest and every search begins with anguish and rejection, rejection of long established and held morals and thoughts. When she rejects the role that society expects of a woman, her quest begins. When she understands the hypocrisy of the lines “life isn’t run on principles but by adjustments” (125), she gets enlightened that something is deeply wrong with the society. Atwood’s characters often do portray this devil may care attitude after pondering over a decision for a long time. This rejection of traditional roles is often the first step towards carving her own niche in the world. Instead of seeing Peter as ‘a rescuer from chaos’ she begins to see him in his true light, as a man who is grossly narcissistic and wants to consume and devour her like a piece of meat, and not just her body, but her soul, her entire self. Here the objectification of a woman from her own viewpoint has been projected by Atwood. As she realizes that she is turning into nothing but a thing for consumption and entertainment, and that Peter’s domineering personality would eclipse her own individuality, her sense of unease increases and reaches boiling point and she realizes that being married to Peter would be the ultimate pain that she will be suffering, a pain which has no end.

Marian’s contemplation is aptly told by Sunaina Singh in *The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminist Perspectives*, “...decorative life where both her identity and individuality would be killed mercilessly. She didn’t want to be caught in a whirlpool of life time claustrophobia. The restrictive forces that Peter represents are beyond her coping spirit” (50). She feels that Peter’s bold personality will crush her fragile identity. Consequently she mobilizes courage and breaks her relationship with him. She turns from a subdued woman to a daring woman. In “*Bodily Harm: Writing as Exposure*” M.



Prabhakar states, “As a woman, Marian has definitely changed from the meek, docile, traditional woman to the bold, conscious, rebellious feminist” (47).

The way which she decides to undertake is as deep as her pain and lack of identity. She decides to take revenge and bakes a cake that is in her own image and asks Peter to consume that instead of her real self. This is the confrontation part of her journey, the climax before the climax, her sending out a message in a way that breaks Peter down and makes him realize a little of what he was doing. As Sharon in *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* says, “By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake woman image...Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food” (96). This act succeeds in driving Peter away and the moment of victory is definitely when she starts eating the cake herself, and eats the legs first. In a way, it is fittingly anatomized. Whereas before she had been “evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing.” in this confrontation, there is no running away from Peter, from her friends, from the society, and above all, from herself. The cake woman or the edible woman did not need legs anymore, she could confront anyone without thinking of running away. She emerges from this entire fiasco not as someone who is whole and happy and victorious, but as scarred, wounded and incomplete, however, she returns with her own self, her own identity, she emerges with the knowledge that she as a human being is safe and no one will threaten her existence and identity anymore. Marian suffered through attacks on her identity and she overcame it to learn of her identity.

The aftermath of Peter going is also interesting, in that she is reinvigorated and does not feel like the victim any longer. She searches for a job, and most tellingly, her inexplicable anathema for food disappears. She can eat things she likes again without feeling the guilt of exploiting someone. It almost felt like she could see her own reflection in anything that was being exploited and seeing that made her feel so sick and nauseous. This liberation after confrontation almost completes her journey from a victim to an independent woman and more importantly, a human being. Atwood often gives out the message that women need to take control of their thoughts about themselves and not give too much importance to societal constructs surrounding them. How a woman ‘should’ be is a revolting concept, because every person is different, and it is this difference that makes them shine. Marian’s search for identity is an outright rejection of all the societal expectations laid upon a woman and a step towards just ‘being’ rather than ‘being like this’. In the process of revolting against someone, she found her own self, her authenticity. Her ‘bad faith’ gave her the necessary push and made her uncomfortable enough to accept what she actually is and not become what society wants her to be. This is a fairly common phenomenon especially in developing countries and the third world countries like India etc. a woman upon marriage is expected to change and morph into something else entirely. The carefree girl of before has to be bogged down and chained by the burden of what society expects her to be. They are held to an abnormally high standard in everything they do. Somehow, no matter the amount of effort, it is never good

enough. Atwood also seems concerned with the moral standards that a society wants its women to follow, particularly after marriage.

The paper aims to highlight the idea that a woman has to be ideal in all her conduct and never puts a wrong foot forward morally and ethically while the man can be Dionysus incarnate and immoral to the point of unlawful, yet just because the transgressor is a man, he won't be looked down upon. Thus in Marian's case she is disturbed by the double standards of the society and especially the fact that the society frowns upon a woman who decides to remain unmarried. It is almost as if the society is portrayed as a snarling and ferocious wild animal waiting to devour her identity and soul. It is a beautiful contrast that can be made that how Nature is shown as a protective and nurturing motherly figure with whom Marian can empathize, and Society is shown as a monstrosity waiting to destroy her soul and engulf her. Hence, through the character of Marian Atwood has shown the journey of a woman from asking questions to getting answers, from trying to fit into a mould to breaking it, from being rootless to finding her identity. All of this can be surmised from the events delineated in the book. Marian starts this journey as a representation of collective expectations holding back a woman, and comes out as an individual who is controlled by none.

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