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CONSUMPTION OF WOMAN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINISTIC READING  
OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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**Abstract**

The philosophical movement "Ecofeminism" is born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking. It is based on the fact that the social mentality which leads to the domination and oppression of woman is also connected with the abuse of the natural environment. Both women and nature are life sustaining and life giving forces, but their roles are often neglected in the society. Degradation of land and environment by misuse of science, results in the sterility of Nature and the sterility of society comes from Man's hostility towards Woman. Throughout history, nature is portrayed as feminine and women are often thought of closer to nature than men. In a social sense, childrearing and domestic caretaking has kept women close to the hearth and thus close to nature. The contribution of women towards preserving the environment is immense. Margaret Atwood deals with the issue of woman and nature in many of her novel. This paper tries to analyze the theme of ecofeminism in the novel titled *The Edible Woman* of Margaret Atwood. In *The Edible Woman* Atwood exposes how men and their most sophisticated ways exploit both women and animals (nature).The novel explores how men silently consume women and nature (animals) to fulfill their endless greed. The title itself screams out the pathetic condition of a woman as an object for pleasure and consumption.

**Keywords:** Feminism, embodiment, ecofeminism, vegetarianism, eating habits, body, animals, capitalism, patriarchy, consumerism.

**Introduction**

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism. The term "Ecofeminism" is believed to have been coined by French writer Françoise de Eaubonn in her book *Le Feminism ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)* in 1974 (Carolyn 184). Ecofeminism strongly emphasizes on the importance of inter-relationship between humans, non-humans and the earth. It connects the

exploitation and domination of woman with that of the environment and argues that there is a connection between woman and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by patriarchal society. Françoise explains the term by stating that how human race could be saved by woman initiating an ecological revolution as a way to counter the oppression and destruction of nature

(Carolyn 184). In Ecofeminism, the preservation of ecosystems is the prime objective. It offers ways to recognize and counter male hegemony in all matters. Ecofeminism is “ecological” because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and “feminist” on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favoritism.

### **Patriarchal Dualism**

In western society, women are treated as inferior to ‘men’, ‘nature’ is treated as inferior to ‘culture’ and humans are understood as being separate from and often superior to the natural environment. Ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structure justifies their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/ non-white. One concept in each pair is deemed superior to the other. Ecofeminism posits that as long as any of the dualism exists as an integral component of societal structuring and justification, they will all continue to serve as starting points to justify patriarchy. Therefore all dualism and binary oppositional forms must be dismantled.

### **Ecofeminist Spirituality**

An important strand of Ecofeminism retrieves older myths and religious beliefs in which Nature is revered. They argue that pre-modern cultures have always treated Nature with respect; they learnt that all human and non-human lives are embedded in Nature; they give importance to woman’s knowledge, they legitimize female powers, female bodies and female sexuality. The spiritual strand within Ecofeminism therefore turned to Native American religions, goddess worship in Hinduism and other native cultures.

### **Women and Animals**

Another area of Ecofeminism that needs to be addressed is its connection with animal rights activism. In this sphere, Carol Adams, a renowned ecofeminist, has made explicit links between androcentric, patriarchal treatment of other-than-human animals, particularly focusing on the meat producing industries of U.S.A. and the exploitation of women. Her study, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*

(1990) provides the foundation for this field of inquiry. Greta Gaard and Marti Kheel are also recognized as leading ecofeminist voice.

### **Ecofeminist Movements in Literature**

The early ecofeminist literature canonized movements such as the *Chipko Movement* (1970s) in Himalayan, India, *The Green Belt* (1977) in Kenya, *Love Canal* (1978) in New York state have drawn attention to the role of women in dramatizing the links between environmental damage, the human impacts of this, women’s relative lack of power and the strategies this lack of power has necessitated. Early publications that analyze the woman-nature connection in light of the environmental crisis include Ruether’s *New Women/New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980).

From the work of Griffin, Daly, Ruether, Merchant and others in the 1970s, grew a dramatic expansion of Ecofeminism in academic circles during the 1980s and 1990s. Activist movements also increased in the 1980s. Several conferences focusing on Ecofeminism were organized: “Women and life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the Eighties” (1980), U.N. conference on women in Nairobi in 1985, “Ecofeminist perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory” (1987), a group at the National Women’s Studies Association (1989).

Margaret Atwood, one of the most prolific writers of the present time, was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Her father, Carl Edmund Atwood, was a Zoologist. Her mother, Margaret Dorothy Killiam, was a former dietician and nutritionist. Atwood was the second of the three children. In 1968, Atwood married Jim Polk; they divorced in 1973. She formed a relationship with her fellow novelists Graeme Gibson soon after. Atwood has three decades of literary career to her credit. She is known for both the quality and quantity of her writing. She is a B.A. with honors in English language and literature from Victoria College, University of Toronto (1961), and has studied with Northrop Frye, Jay Macpherson, Kathleen Coburn and many other Canadian literary scholars of repute. As a poet, novelist, short-story writer and essayist, Margaret

Atwood holds a unique position in contemporary Canadian literature. Her books have received critical acclaim in the United States, Europe, Asia and her Native Canada. She has taught English and has been writer in Residence at several Canadian and other Universities. With her work published in more than fifteen countries, she has achieved an international repute. Her prominent place in Canadian literature rests as much on her published works as on her efforts to define and give value to her nation's literature.

In *The Edible Woman* (1969), the protagonist of the novel, Marian MacAlpin is a young, triumphant woman, working in market research. Her job, private life, and social relations seem to be idealistic. Atwood depicts how in the early days, women suffered inequality in relation to job opportunities as compared to men. They had a limited scope of working. They had to work under men which represent oppression. There were differences in their wage rates. Women were discriminated against in their work environment. Regardless of their capabilities to work, their knowledge and willingness to flourish, they were never encouraged: this situation is also faced by Marian on her workplace Seymour Surveys Company. The company has three tier system, (as the company works at three levels with three type of employees) she could not work at the upper floor as only men work there, neither could she work at the lower floor as only wives and old ladies work there. She finds herself trapped in between the office structure. M.F. Salat while commenting on the symbolic structure of organization puts forth, "The three layers represent the three plains of reality: mind, body, and matter. The men are minds and women are bodies" (Salat, 67). Therefore, the office described in the novel also represents patriarchal control of the social system. Marian says, "I couldn't become one of the men upstairs: I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire making ladies, as that would be a step down. I might conceivably turn into Mrs. Bogue or her assistant, but as far as I could see that would take a long time, and I was not sure I would like it anyway (119). The next hierarchical structure of her office as she mentions, "on the floor above are executives and

the psychologists – referred to as the men upstairs since they are all men – who arrange things with the clients...our department is the link between the two" (18). As Lori Gruen has also clarified about hierarchical order in *Ecofeminism* that, "Constructing, and then naturalizing hierarchies has been one of the more insidious justifying mechanisms for the oppression of both women and animals. Ecofeminists will thus focus on the elimination of all institutionalized hierarchy as another principle force for ending oppression" (*Ecofeminism*, 80). Marian's character is formed first by her parents' plans for her future, then by her boyfriend Peter's. Marian fears Peter's tough personality will ruin her own delicate identity. She finds out her boyfriend's consumer nature during a talk in the restaurant, and she cannot eat. Marian's initial lack of desire for food finally leads to an eating disorder, which is her body's response to the society's effort of imposing its policy on the heroine. Moreover, the three parts of the novel propose the course of this eating disorder. Background causes are shown in Part One, Part Two indicates the mind/body split and Part Three reflects the spontaneous declaration of the problem. Non-eating in *The Edible Woman* is mainly a symbol of denial of the patriarchal model of femininity. Although the protagonist is an educated woman who lives on her own, she feels manipulated and unable to take decisions for herself. She hates her tidy-minded fiancé, Peter, who likes shooting rabbits:

One shot, right through the heart. The rest of them got away. I picked it up and Trigger said, "You know how to gut them, you just shit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts' fall out".

So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack,...there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards..." (Atwood 74).

Peter continues to boast his talent of handling gun. Gun and knife, which is machine made, act as means of an extension of Peter; he

proves himself to be totally unconcerned about the ethical implication of an act of obliterating any life form and uses the mechanical extension of his body to perpetuate violence. The boasting of Peter reflects a culture that equates masculine behavior with the victimization of other beings. His recreational approach to hunting escapade undermines the severity of the oppressive act itself. She envisages the hunter in him, where as she, the hunted. She perceives herself sold, her body sold in the commercial market of consumerism. Here, feminism and environmentalism come together. Because she feels like she is being consumed by Peter, she cannot consume food. Steak was the first to go. She feels pain in every muscle even at the cooked steak that Peter is skillfully consuming at the restaurant. Marian draws a parallel between the barbarous act of slaughtering the animal and the polite etiquette Peter is possessing while slicing, chewing and swallowing a thick, flat piece of meat:

She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing preciously with an exact adjustment of pressures cutting, and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. How skillfully he did it: bi tearing, no ragged edges, and yet it was a violent action (Atwood,180).

Then lamb, pork, and the rest; next comes her incapacity to face an egg. Vegetables were the final straw. Not only has she lost her appetite, but also she has lost her sense of self. In order to show how limited are the models offered by society to adult women, Atwood uses food imagery. The sudden and spontaneous reaction of Marian's body to the events happening around and to her are the first step on her way to regaining independence. As she slowly discovers the nature and causes of her eating disorder, she starts to understand her own needs and feelings. One of the symptoms of her unconscious inner rebellion against adjusting to the role of the mother that Clara, her friend, embodies is her body's refusal to eat dinner with Peter, even though she is hungry. Clara is also shown as a victim of patriarchal setup in the society, who discontinues her education after marriage and is going to deliver her third child. When Marian speculates Peter as a hunter, hunter of rabbits, she loses respect for him,

which is symbolic of her conscious awareness of victimization. Step by step, the items that remind Marian of a human body, become inedible and they seem to be the reminders of her own bodily existence and her identity and position. The hunter/hunted dichotomy is a prevalent metaphor for man woman relationship in our culture. It is quite visible in this novel also. In *The Princess*, Tennyson wrote "Man is the hunter; woman is his game/the sleek and shiny creature of the chase/we hunt them for the beauty of their skin; they love us for it and we ride them down" (qtd. in Fiddes 144). Both women and animals are victims of men's selfish nature. They are being consumed by patriarchy. He uses the bodies of both animals and women for his satisfaction.

Beside the domination over women, the destruction of nature is also shown in the novel when Marian's friend Duncan tells her that he thinks trees should have permanent leaves on them. They have to reproduce leaves every year and the old one are thrown in the garbage. He recalls that in his native place, there is no vegetation at all:

The thing I like about the place I came from, it's a mining town, there isn't much of anything in it but at least it has no vegetation...It's the smelting plants that do it, tell smokestacks reaching up into the sky and the smoke glows red at night, and the chemical fumes have burnt the trees for miles around , it's barren, nothing but the barren rock, even grass won't grow on most of it, and there are slag-haps too; where the water collects on the rock, it is a yellowish brown from chemicals. Nothing would grow there even if you planted it. (Atwood 159).

Here Atwood exposes the pathetic condition of Nature in the hand of man through Duncan's mouth. He does not reveal the name of his native place but he tells Marian that he belongs to a mining town where there is no sign of vegetation at all. Industrialization and commercialization has ruined the environment and polluted the surroundings. Big factories where lots of chemicals are used have burnt the trees and plants for miles around them with their chemical fumes. This act of polluting air

and earth has increased to such amount that the land has become totally infertile. Now the situation is that even if someone wants to plant even grass, it won't grow there. Man has become so blind to earn profit that he does not even care that he is destroying the mother earth and he has to face the horrible consequences of his cruel activities toward nature. Peter also sees Marian as an object to discriminate, not as a human being. When they get engaged, he feels proud to show her in public, "Now that she had been ringed he took pride in displaying her" (191). From here, it becomes clear how Peter views Marian: as an object to display, not a real woman or independent person with agency. Women and wives are meant to be put on display and reinforce male identity within their work or society. Peter takes pride in Marian only so much as she fulfills his expectations of what a woman should be, presentable and submissive. Marian takes a fundamental step to win back her identity. A very brave move on Marian's part is to show Peter that she can no longer be controlled. She does this by designing a cake in the image of a male's ideal woman. When Peter refuses to eat the cake, Marian eats it which means that she alludes no longer woman is to be treated as a base object in the consumer-ridden world. Now she knows her stand which means she regains her lost identity with full affirmation. She eventually offers a baked cake-woman to Peter and says, "you have been trying to destroy me. You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted along. Isn't it?" (Atwood 352). The baking scene is the heart of the novel as it has literal as well as symbolic meaning. Marian eating the cake-woman, a substitute of her own-image in a fit of frenzied anger and angst of retaliation after Peter's refusal to partake it, shows that she would rather rebel and survive than subjugating to selfish male domination. Gloria Onley reviews, "Marian's eating of cake woman destroys a false image and reabsorbs her culturally split-off female self" (Onley 74). In the end, Marian is able to eat again. She is free to hunger, no longer unknown to her own body; Marian is absorbing the power of woman and her body that she has ignored till now.

In *The Edible woman*, that is how one finds that the author starts with the basic premise of ecofeminism. Atwood identifies the dualistic power model of patriarchy on which this society rests. Margaret Atwood questions the standards of patriarchal hegemony which always alienates women and nature. Atwood supports the ecofeminist views and identifies the basic connectivity of life process that supports the web of life-harmony between human and non-human nature. By using the symbol of cooking and eating as the dominant image in the novel, author highlights how patriarchy consumes woman and nature in the same way. She emphasizes the need to recognize and identify the life forces i.e. woman and nature and thus to establish a healthy co-existence between all life forms.

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