

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE THEME OF SURVIVAL AND THE SEARCH FOR FEMALE IDENTITY IN MARGARET
ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

MD. AJMAUL ANSARI

Research Scholar (PhD), Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh.

Email: ansariajmaul@gmail.com



MD. AJMAUL ANSARI

ABSTRACT

From the very beginning, the world has been divided into two stereotypical groups namely the male and the female. This distinction is made on the basis of biological and social difference. Patriarchy, the dominance of male over the female, defines female identity where the female are considered to be logically, morally and culturally inferior to the male. In a patriarchal society, women are considered as "other". They are treated as object of sexual pleasure, destined to give birth to child and engage themselves with household chores only. Patriarchy belittles the world of women by creating the four walls and advocates the notion that in a society there is only one entity, the male, that wields power, and it is this power which determines its relation to the "other". It is "sexual politics" that defines the women to be passive, meek and humble. Feminism questions male-defined world of the women. It protests the deprivation of women of political, economical, educational and social opportunities, and at the same time advocates for the equal rights of women in every sphere of life.

This paper will deal with how difficult it is for the female to struggle for surviving and thereby form their own identity in a world where they are considered to be "other" by the male dominated world. The identity crisis and quest for the establishment of identity of the female will be closely analyzed by applying feminism in *The Edible Woman*.

Keywords: Distinction, Patriarchy, Feminism, Dominance, Male, Female, Sexual, Pleasure, Power, Marginalization, Identity

The world has been patriarchal from the very beginning. In the patriarchal society, the female are considered as commodities and to be used and thrown out. The female suffer from existential and identity crisis. Their identity is formed at the hand of the male where they are considered as "other". The female are deprived of active participation in political, economical, social sphere. There are many eminent feminists namely Kate Millet, Judith Butler, Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter and of course Margaret Atwood who talk about why and how to establish female identity being emancipated from the clutches of patriarchy.

Margaret Atwood's novels portray marginalization and victimization of the female characters and their painstaking struggle to position themselves in patriarchal society. *The Edible Woman* presents a very grim picture of the female characters. It shows what complexities the female characters are to suffer to survive in a patriarchal society and their tireless effort to establish their identity. The protagonist Marian MacAlpin is the embodiment of suffering and victimization in the hand of patriarchy. She fights for self-determination and her own female identity. Throughout the novel, she allows herself to be absorbed that is to be

possessed by the patriarchal principles. The personality of Marian finds a development paralleled to the women's trajectories described in Betty Friedan's feminist classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Marian McAlpin, the protagonist, has recently passed out from a university. Marian is a simple woman who does not seem to have any difficulty in the ways to her own life. But when she searches herself in patriarchal society, she thinks that she does not have any existence. Marian gets tired of living up to the expectations of her lover Pater. Without questioning the patriarchal values, she accepts the attitude of her lover "Of course I had to adjust to his moods, but that's true of any man". (Atwood 50) Marian feels suffocated with patriarchy and can not resist associating femininity with excrement, defilement and waste. According to Kristeva's theory of abjection, Marian has failed to draw a clear line between her own body and the "unproper/unclean" substances that one has to exclude and keep at bay with a view to defining oneself as subject. She is unable to establish this clear border because her identity as a separate subject does not find any existence. Kristeva defines, "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 4)

Marian considers herself as an object rather than an active subject. Body and mind have got separated and Marian can no longer perceive herself as a single entity. Her inner self is refusing to have food because of the feeling that she herself is being consumed. In psycho-feminist theory, food loathing plays an important role in connection with the development of identity, as Kristeva observes, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection... I am in the process of becoming another at the expense of my own death." (Powers 3) Abjection does not allow Marian to proceed to the achievement of individuality and

independence. She finds it impossible to eat during her struggle for self-determination. Marian's identity crisis finds its peak in her engagement party when she finds it difficult to recognize herself into a mirror.

Marian's friend Clara also represents the victimization of the female at the hand of patriarchy. She can not complete her education because of her marriage. She has been a traditional mother being reduced to merely a child producing machine. Kate Millet says that patriarchy wants women to be meek, submissive and humble. Here Clara has been submissive to the sexual desire of her husband and has been (reluctantly) engaged with giving birth to baby after baby. She has been humble to the patriarchal values as she has left education and has been serving male desires, remaining confined to four walls and responding to the male needs. Her frustration with patriarchy finds a fine expression when she heartbrokenly says that she has been reduced to "just a housewife". (32) Her identity crisis finds a fine expression in the following lines: "So she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she does not have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed." (182)

Ainsley, being interested in leading a life without male dominance, wants to have a baby without being entangled with the custom of marriage. She chooses Len to fulfill her desire. She does not want to get married because there is a fear psychosis in her minds that if she finds a husband, she has to abide by patriarchal norms leaving behind all individual freedom and thereby she will lose female identity. Her decision to have a baby without getting married surprises Len because Ainsley's decision goes beyond the patriarchal norms. Marian convinces Len, "a lot of people do. It's fashionable these days, you know; and Ainsley reads a lot; she was particularly fond of anthropology at college, and she's convinced that no woman has fulfilled her femininity unless she's had a baby. But don't worry, you won't have to be involved any further. She doesn't want a husband, just a baby." (122) Len gets quite upset with the idea of Ainsley and laughs at

Ainsley's being educated by saying "for educating women. They get all kinds of ridiculing ideas." (122) Len perhaps wanted to have only sex with Ainsley. He does not want to take responsibility of parenthood. Being unable to enjoy the body of Ainsley without being a responsible father, Len, out of frustration, makes patriarchal comment on Ainsley, "The little slut. Getting me into something like this." (122-123)

Len is a filthy womanizer. He gives preference to his sexual life; but when the sexuality of Ainsley comes to be materialized, he, being a representative of patriarchy, makes derogatory comment on the privileged position of Ainsley, "Well I'm not so damn happy about it. 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!"(123) Female body is an object of sexual pleasure and it has to be enjoyed and thrown out. Len does not want to be a father but he wants to enjoy Ainsley's body. Both Len and Ainsley have made illicit relationship with each other but as Len belongs to patriarchal group, he comes to conclusion that it is Ainsley who is the only defaulter and it is very clear in his statement, "Don't remind me. I really can't stand it, you'll make me sick. Don't come near me! You're unclean!"(124)

It is the male who enjoy supremacy in the society and the female are "other". The female are not a minority in our society but their "lives, experiences, and values have been treated as marginal."(Sherry 6) Ainsley wants to lead a life free from patriarchal dominance. She wants to have a baby but not a husband. But she can not to do so as there is patriarchy that will question her freedom and female role. Marian says, "But since the society is the way it is, aren't you being selfish? Won't the child suffer? How are you going to support it and deal with other people's prejudices and so on?"(35)

Women are treated as objects of exchange between men, a transaction which keep them deprived of subjectivity. Women are commodified as sexual creatures and they are to serve male desire. Len stands for the exploitation of female

body. He is in the habit of pursuing women and after enjoying their body he wants to run away from them. He treats women as objects of sexual pleasure and they are destined to be used and disposed of. That he is a filthy womanizer is very clear in his very statement, "But you've got to watch these women when they start pursuing you. They're always after you to marry them. You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out."(54)

All of Atwood's female protagonists in *The Edible Woman* suffer from identity crisis in some way or other. The power of the society lies in the hand of the patriarchy. It is the patriarchy that defines female identity. And being defined by the patriarchy, the female are "other" and marginal beings. The protagonists testify to the fact that the female suffer from severe identity crisis and to establish their female identity they have to confront oppression and the mechanisms at work that victimize them. Atwood writes in *Survival*, they are required to strive at "Position Four: To be a creative non-victim". (Atwood *Survival* 38)

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. McClelland and Stewart, 1969
- _____. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi, 1972
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Penguin, 1982
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton, 1974
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. Macmillan, 1999
- Sherry, Ruth. *Studying Women's Writing: An Introduction*. Hodder Arnold, 1988
- Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Rodopi, 2007
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982