

Thematic Analysis in *The Edible Women*

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Abstract

The Edible Women is one of the most outstanding novels of Margret Atwood which has set a big milestone in her writing career. The novel leaves multiple of interpretations since its subject touches the most sensitive and deepest chord of the society. The novel is more a social novel that it deals with the major issue of gender roles and relationships in general. Atwood has used the novel to magnify even the minute errors and ills of the society which is not touched by other writers of her time. She has clearly portrayed the actual problems of Canadian women of 1960s who have been suppressed by the patriarchal society. She has tried to name their problems which have no names and moreover her approaches to those problems are strange and new. And hence, the novel is called as a proto-feminist novel. Beyond the feministic point of view, the story conveys various themes such as self-discovery, marriage, love, sex, modernity, cultural attitude, relationship and many. Besides, the novel is filled with various symbolic and metaphorical elements that support the author's presupposition of her world view. Therefore, the paper has made an inquiry in to various thematic elements and symbols to explore the hidden meanings bound with in the story.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Self-Discovery, Relationships, Social Novel

Introduction

Margret Atwood is considered as one of the most sought after writers of Canada because of her literary geniuses and versatile nature. She is a poet, novelist, essayist, critic, teacher and environmental activist. Her major collections of work in all genres reveal her important place in the field of literature. She is highly acclaimed for her feminist perspective that has influenced many feministic movements and writers. Also, her works resonate on the themes of gender issues, loss of identity, religion, mythology, climatic change, power of language and power struggle. Her writings have special attention because of her unique way of depicting the bare realities of the society. Hence, she is treated as a rare writer of Canada. She has earned reader around the globe and notably her works have been translated into more than 30 languages of the world. Besides, many of her works have film adaptations too. She is the founding figure of Griffin Poetry Prize and The Writers' Trust of Canada. Further, her contribution through writing has earned her a great number of awards and recognitions. She has won two Booker Prize, The Arthur C. Clarke Award, The Governor General's Award and many. Apart from being a writer, she has placed her name in the field of robotic science. She is an inventor too that she has invented a device called LongPen.

Despite lacking of formal education, Margret Atwood has risen to the level of a well-established writer through her voracious reading from her childhood days. By the way, she has been influenced greatly by her predecessors. Notably, she has received many honorary doctorate degrees from reputed universities of Canada. Her genius in analyzing the fundamental problems of the society has been bundled up in the form of novels, short stories and poems.

The Edible Woman is her first novel that has elevated her to the level of a great writer. Moreover, the novel has engraved the feminist image up on her very firmly. She has written more than a dozen of novels. Some of her popular works are *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and *The Madd Addam Trilogy*. Her book *The Testaments* has been the number one bestseller globally in the year 2019. Apart from her novels, her poetry collections are widely popular among the literary circle.

Atwood is known for her large number of readership that she has made an emotional bonding with her readers through her sensible writing. She excels in tying the fictional characters and readers emotion with the most insightful words. She pierces in to the reader's subconscious taking the complex issues in hands. Hence, she is considered as the bold writer of Canada as she wisely handles controversial and taboo topics with clear vision. She mainly addresses fundamental issues regarding sexual power politics, gender stereotypes, gender roles which seems to be the recurring problems of women in the Canadian multicultural society. She wishes to play an invisible role in bring a change in the society. She has remarked this, "I would like to be the air that inhibits you for a moment only. I would like to be that unnoticed and that necessary."

The Edible Woman is considered as a proto-feminist work that centers on women's issues. In fact, the rise of second wave feminism and the publication of the novel have coincided with each other and hence, the novel is received as a feminist work by the critics as well as by her readers. However, Atwood calls the novel as a social realism novel that she says, "I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism." Indeed, the bare reality of the society is reported using symbolism and metaphors as the medium. Though, the novel is interpreted using various feministic theories by many, there are lot of thematic elements imparted within the context of the Canadian society. The themes such as relationships, marriage, love, self-discovery, sex, cultural attitude, food, victimization etc. have shaped it as a complete social realism novel. Moreover, the conflict of the novel is very crucial that the protagonist's internal conflict is resolved through a symbolic cake

episode. Therefore, the connection between the title of the novel and the cake symbolism convey the central message of the story.

Margret Atwood has given much care to the characters' role to reflect the society as such. Mainly, the issues on relationships as husband and wife, as mother, father, son, daughter, friends, relatives, colleagues, roommates, and neighbors are greatly exposed through the clear language and actions. With a limited number of characters, Atwood has explained the problems that take place with in every relationship. All the characters of the novel are directly or indirectly related to the protagonist Marian. Accordingly, the level of her relationship with each of them varies based on her acquaintance with them. Ainsley Tewce is Marian's roommate, Peter is her boyfriend, Clara is her high school as well as College mate, Joe is Clara's husband, Duncan is her client and later becomes very close to her, Len Slank is her college mate and friend, Trigger is Peter's friend, the land lady and landlady's daughter are the owner of the room where Marian stays, Bogue is her HOD and the three virgins Emmy, Lucy, and Millie are her office colleague. These characters' association with Marian has been shown under two aspects that one is a good and healthy relationship and the other one is a troubled or problematic relationship.

Marian McAlpin experiences the most problematic and troubled relationship with Peter the lawyer. The young and the educated woman, Marian be friends Peter a lawyer and a perfect provider. Peter is a man of perfection; he is smart, well-built and settled in his life in all aspects. Both of them have modernistic and unconventional ideas regarding marriage in the beginning. Later, Peter changes his attitude and proposes her for marriage. He turns conventional and tries to justify his stance. He says.

"A fellow can't keep running around indefinitely.... the clients like to know you've got a wife, people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age,... Marian, I know I can always depend on you..."

Marian's opinion regarding marriage is very practical. She makes a rational choice that he would be the perfect partner for her life and eventually, she accepts Peter.

"I've never been silly about marriage the way

Ainsley is... and life isn't by principles but by adjustments,”

As they step into a new relationship, they undergo some psychological changes. After the engagement, as the friendly relationship moves to a husband and wife relationship, Marian starts to sense Peter's domination. She expects Peter to be the same even after taking the role of a husband but he behaves like a usual traditional husband. The new relationship has demanded a lot of changes from her; especially, she is forced to depend upon husband for all matters like decision making, choice of dress etc. When she realizes that she is controlled by Peter, she repels. Peter even comments on that, “The problem with you is, you're just rejecting your femininity.” Indeed, the repulsion has come from her subconscious mind and out of her body. She gets eating disorder and lack of interest on day-to-day activities. “Marian's protest is silent: it is manifested in terms of her body and we have to decode that body if we are able to understand the language of its protest.” Her body's abnormal and artificial behavior indicates her non-acceptance of the gender role. Her body and subconscious urge her conscious to break the relationship with Peter.

Marian's relationship with Duncan doesn't create any problem because he maintains his unconventional behavior till the end. Also, Marian's autonomy hasn't been disturbed by his unchanging behavior. He is opposite of Peter in every aspect. Duncan is a graduate student who is unsettled yet. She calls him “Cadaverously thin” because of his thin and melancholic look. He is unattractive and even says lies. Duncan's character is similar to the character of Huck in *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain in which, Huck is identified as the archetypal character of American dream who goes on adventurous trip. Duncan is bit adventurous by nature. Marian infatuates on him by pity. However, Marian feels no loss of identity with Duncan as she exerts little domination on him. In fact, he has tried to peel off her social masks and has made her to feel the real happiness of life. Certain times, he tries his manipulative techniques on her which she takes positively. Moreover, she doesn't feel that he is literally consuming her even, when he eats up the left over piece of cake that she had offered to Peter.

Marian's relationship with her office colleagues

has also created bit uncomfortable to her. She hates the hierarchy followed in her workplace. Her male colleagues occupying the upper portion of the office makes her feel their domination on women. Moreover, they hold the high level position and women have been assigned lowly regarded work. This kind of practice has affected her psychologically. Moreover, she treats the three office virgins as the representation of the society. She moves with them very carefully. During a heated argument with her fiancé, she speaks gently with him after noticing the presence of the three.

Her friendly relationship with people like Ainsley, Clara, and Len has only made a positive impact on her personal life. Though, Ainsley and Marian have less common traits and behaviors, they jell with each other in every matter. Ainsley is aggressive and questful. She protests the domination of the patriarchy that she objects the system of marriage. However, Ainsley decides to bear a child without wedlock which is disliked by Marian. Clara is a perfect example for the self-sacrificing traditional mother who lost herself completely after being pregnant constantly. Marian learns the perils of being a perfect traditional housewife by seeing the life of Clara. She even has a smooth relationship with her womanizer friend Leonard Shank, her college friend because he never interferes in her personal life.

Anti-marriage is the key element of the novel. Atwood pictures marriage as a trap to bring women under the dominance of the patriarchal society. Marian is being trapped but her bodily and psychological resistance has released her from the trap. But Clara and Ainsley are the victims of the system of marriage. Though Clara and Joe wedded with true love, Clara's life become uninteresting because of the gender role that has troubled her a lot. She couldn't be her own. She has lost her identity and personality completely after her marriage. The society has trapped her and in a way her problems remains unexplainable. She yells at her son “bastard” that shows her anger against the society. Therefore, her life reveals that the system of marriage makes women a household worker forever. Joe is the perfect image of a conventional husband. He says, “He tends any way to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection.”

He believes that marriage is a system which protects all women. He remarks about his wife Clara that how marriage ruined her,

“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. When she gets married, her core gets invaded...”

The novel doesn’t explicitly project love as an important component of life. For Atwood, marriage and love is same that it is a tool to trap women under the male hegemony. Joe and Clara are united by love; however, their love doesn’t last forever when gender role peaks in. This is evident when Marian visits Clara’s house where she witnesses their loveless and uninteresting life.

The novel’s depiction makes clear that sex is an inevitable part of life. The very title of the novel gives an erotic impression. Nevertheless, the title ironically suggests that women are not a product of consumption. Atwood brings out the opposing views of the society regarding sex. Millie, Lucy, and Emmy are collectively known as office virgins whom Atwood refers as the representatives of the 1960s traditional women. These girls believe virginity to be protected for their marriage. Marian is bit modern in all aspects; however she has less regards for sex. She uses sex to know Peter’s true nature. At a time, Peter attempts sex with her in a bathtub to kill his depression. This act of being very spontaneous makes her to think suspicious of him. Marian doesn’t want anyone to enjoy her body for their benefit. She also beds with Duncan with whom she never feels that her body is objectified. Ainsley when tries to seduce Len, she treats him as an object of sex and as a giver of baby. Ainsley and Len’s relationship is seen as the reversal of gender roles. Usually, men try to seduce women but Ainsley’s act is bit unusual. Len feels that he has been objectified in their pursuit, he says to her,

“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.”

This kind of statement is unusual from a man. Len understands that the reason for her such attitude

is because of her education. He says “That’s what we get then for educated women. They get all kinds of ridiculous ideas.”

Food is used as an important tool to find solution to the internal conflict of the protagonist. Marian develops eating disorder because of her body’s resistance to a new condition. She connects this incident with her childhood memories that she used to keep food for her doll and the next day, she used to see the same food not eaten by it. Now, she imagines herself as a lifeless doll that is being controlled by Peter. Though, it is a symbolic representation, the image of doll has been settled in her subconscious mind which now revolts with her conscious mind as Peter tries to dominate her. She conducts a test to Peter in which, she presents a cake in the shape of a woman. Peter doesn’t eat that and so he fails in the test. In fact, food is meant to eat but Peter sees it as Marian which itself indicates his perception on Marian as a product of consumption or an object. But, Duncan eats the remaining of the cake that shows he sees cake as just an edible product. Atwood’s cake episode has Christian connotation too. Jesus Christ at the last supper offers bread and wine to his disciples, saying it is My flesh and blood.

“Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26: 26-28)

Jesus Christ has used food as a symbolic representation of his flesh and blood. For Jesus Christ, eating and drinking the bread and wine is to believe in Him so that they would become his own people. In the similar way, Marian uses the food as a token of their communion. She believes, eating the cake would make their bond stronger. This cake episode has brought a spiritual transformation in her. She is able to reconstruct her personality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the themes of the novel pin point very clearly the negative aspects of the society and culture. As by the statement, “Man is a social animal”, human beings have to live their life by sharing and

depending up on each other for various reasons. The dependency must never make one subordinate to other. The problem arises when one tries to subordinate the other. Men always assume to be the provider and women to be at the receiving end. So, they take upper hand. The patriarchal society wishes women to depend up on men. Apparently, men and women have equal responsibilities in the society, so no men or women are superior or inferior to each other. They are equal by nature. The problems within relationships lead to identity crisis. Marian in the novel fights identity crisis and discovers her in the process. Thus, Atwood's portrayal of this issue is a call for a social reformation in terms of man woman relationship.

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