
A STUDY OF MARITAL RELATIONS IN ATWOOD'S THE EDIBLE WOMAN

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood has very strongly asserted her stand regarding the feminist movement and the place of a woman in the contemporary society. Women all over the world suffer similar neurotic and Psychic disturbances in a male dominated world. It is interesting to note that even a considerable similarity relates to memories of home and child, parental relationship, attitude to sex and men. Her female protagonist need to be something other, sometimes even a different form, suggests their uneasiness with definitions of self intimately ties to the conventional roles they play. Psychologists have made an in depth study of inter personal relationship of man and woman, in and outside marriage. Marital adjustment is associated with adaptability, as measured by "giving in" in arguments, not being dominating, slowness in getting angry, and quickness in getting over anger.

Key Words: Gender discrimination, Demand, Equality, Domestic slavery, Struggle, Liberation.

Atwood can be viewed as a feminist writer as she is concerned with the psychological and physical survival of women, and she sees this in terms, not merely of individual survival of women, but of sisterhood. Her unique style of feminist humour is almost always directed against the inflated egos of men and women, especially the cloaked ones.

The Edible woman is a story of the predatory relationship between man and woman. It describes in detail the pre-marital anxiety and tension created by the situation in which a couple is engaged to be married. Thus the study becomes a commentary not only on the pre-marital relationship but broadly speaking, on man –woman relationship under the social ritualistic bond. *The Edible Woman* is a story of a perfectly ordinary girl, Marian, who, after graduation has a goal of a stable marital relationship. She is surrounded by an ordinary atmosphere. She feels miserably sandwiched in the working condition. Only marriage could bring a desired change. As the girls of her age and are waiting, so she too queues up in marriage market. By her occupation as a market researcher, she is kept in constant contact with the vast world of so-called ordinary people, who want nothing more than sheltered normality. The young men and women, whose ambitions are bounded by a horizon of suburban retirement, after her engagement with Peter, initially she is happy but gradually realizes that it was a marriage. She feels as if she has been trapped and her subsequent marriage to be seems a life time imprisonment to her. This idea takes hold of her and it becomes a psychological obsession, which leads to a series of complication in her life and her interpersonal relationship with Peter. She is confronted with a silly and irrelevant kind of social situation where she feels that her fiancé is not up to her expectation in anyway, her job isn't up to her liking.

Marian's marriage to be is an instance of "Homogamy". Here the potential partners are likely to encounter themselves in similar backgrounds centered on neighborhood, school, place of work, club or church, as is the case with Peter and Marian. Marian meets him at a party and he is "a friend of a friend". She is disgusted at marriages and the man – woman relationship.

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Ainsely, her flat – mate takes it as a 'hit and run' games and Len too is not serious about it. Clara and Joe's marriage is a veritable disaster. Thus, the models before her are not enticing.

Peter is an appearance conscious and self-centered man. It is to fill up the vacuum of loneliness formed by his last friend Trigger's marriage that he has decided to get married and had proposed Marian. His other reasons for marrying are the ordinary conventional mundane reasons, any normal man would expect from marriage to settle down, become stable, he believes its better to be stable than just to be a reckless bachelor, it creates a good impression on the minds of his clients.

The trouble starts when Peter begins imposing the role of a husband to be and Marian very meekly accepts her part of a wife to be. She feels Peter is the hunter and she is being hunted by him. Thus, when Peter is narrating the story of his hunting a rabbit, Marrian feels threatened and hides herself under the bed, as she imagines herself being searched for as a prey. Thus her imagination runs amok:

I saw it is thought it was a slide projected on a screen in a dark room, the colours luminous, green, brown, blue for the sky, red. Peter stood with his back to me in a plaid shirt, his rifle slung on his shoulder Splashed with blood, the mouths wrenched with laughter. I couldn't see the rabbit, (69).

She also imagines Peter as a predator, a wrangler. At a number of instances she observes Peter as a sophisticated hunter, - a fisherman. Her psyche of being used is expressed at such instances as when Peter makes love with her in the bath tub. She thinks that Peter perhaps imagines her as a 'lavatory fixture'. She fears that she would end up by being just a thing of entertainment and occupation for Peter. Through the ashtray image this idea is expressed quite appropriately. It presents Marian as a consumer item on which Peter is resting his ashtray well-balanced.

She is as if a kind of doll. As a husband –to-be, Peter always seems to be superior being. Marian therefore suffers from inferiority complex. She dreads the demand marriage makes especially on a woman. She has to leave the job, the house in which she has been living with her partner Ainsely and also all her friends. There is a lot of anxiety involved because she'll have to live with Peter, adjust with him, get tuned to his tastes and his way of life. It is this complete takeover of herself, her shedding off of her original personality and training herself to be Mrs. Peter Wollander to be that she subconsciously resents. The role performance becomes too oppressive for Marian and in the conflict resulting from it she is psychologically torn and looks for relief.

Marian's recognition of her situation takes the form of a symbolic neurosis. She finds her throat closing first against meat, as she vividly associates a steak with the living animal. There comes a stage when she peels a carrot and imagines that soundless shire as it is pulled from the earth. After rejecting food she takes to eating canned and processed food. In addition, Marian begins to consume vitamin pills, another manufactured alternative to organic food. We have a paradox here. Marian is using the products of the consumer society to sustain a rebellion which is ostensibly directed against that very society.

Like a child, her sub-conscious retaliates against the treatment she is meted out by Peter and others. Thus, as an attention - seeking device she hides under the bed. This can be also an

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act of self-defence from the predatory threat from Peter and the company around him. She protests against being treated as “anything”. Her eccentric behaviour is part of a protest against being given a marginal importance. Her running away from Len’s house is also symbolic of her trying to run away from the oppressive surroundings and the predatory world. She is trying to escape from emotional cannibalism.

The feminist perspective of the equality of sexes is also one of the factors which make Marian retaliate against Peter’s imposing superiority. We observe that after their engagement he seems to consider Marian as his own property. He starts visiting her frequently, thus making demands on her time and routine. Also, most of the time it is he who decides the menu and the place of outing. Marian apparently feels relieved of the botheration of these trivialities but later perceives negligence. He even goes to the extent of commenting on her ways of behaviour and appearance.

Some of the Marian’s apprehensions are also related to sex, which in terms of folk-tales like “little Red Cap” is seen as violent and destruction activity, with the dread of being consumed by the opposite sex. Thus, in the red dress, which she wears for the party at Peter’s, she feels more vulnerable. Her position is reduced to that of the childhood dolls that she had preserved, representing the separate aspects of her personality. The two dolls stand for her split self. One engaged to Peter and the other allowing things to happen to her.

The identity crisis experienced by her is extended by the narration of the changes brought about in her physical self. Her overall transformed self can be noticed by her completely changed image in the red dress, the hairstyle and a new kind of make-up with it. She feels uneasy with it. These do not project her. She feels masked in it. Peter, Ainsely and others appreciate her change. A new dress and hairstyle and others appreciate her change. A new dress and hairstyle were Peter’s suggestion. The matching make –up and jewellery are done colour of the new dress by Ainsely. The colour of new dress is red. Marian is thus prepared as a consumer good elaborately to satisfy his lust. Her appearance in red dress is the representation of her transformed self. She is almost mesmerised by her own picture in the mirror.

Marian searches for a new alternative in Duncan, but he is another extreme of the Peter type. His self centeredness is reflected in all his conversations, which are directed towards himself. Duncan is Peter’s opposite in many ways. Duncan’s behaviour is spontaneous and introspective, in contrast to Peter’s calculated and socially conditioned behaviour. Duncan is outside the normal power structure of society, whereas Peter is on his way to a prosperous career. Duncan and Peter never face each other they are like the two ends of Marian’s river of self, and thus they could never meet.

After having a jilting experience with Duncan, she realizes that there is no external solution to her problem, no solution is escape. Thus, she returns and bakes, *The Edible woman*. She has, of course, eaten herself, and in consuming the artificial ‘normal’ being she symbolically cures and releases herself from her earlier mode of life.

Marian tries to punish Peter for his imagined attack on her by offering cake in the shape of a woman as a substitute, but Peter rejects it, thereby refusing to perform symbolic cannibalism. Ainsely remarks that she is rejecting her femininity but Marian is in fact reasserting her femininity by incorporating the feminine cake woman or the cake child into herself. Thus, by

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becoming consumer herself, she is happily able to overcome identity crisis. The baking of cake is also an art of splitting herself into two parts which is symbolically her predicament. The cake represents her feminine self, the vulnerable and inferior person, society would like her to be. She offers the cake to Peter saying:

“You’ve been trying to destroy me....to assimilate me. I’ve made you a substitute... This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork”, she added somewhat prosaically, (271).

Through this act she is trying to protect her real self the autonomous human being endowed with independent desires and needs. By eating some of the cake, she tries to eliminate the symbolic difference, and tries to accept the fate instead of looking for escapes and hideouts. The eating of the cake is an act of displaced anger on her part. This is a re-enactment of the chastisement received from the society.

Marian realizes at the end that life can only exist at the expense of other life. Everyone in society is ‘food’ for his fellowmen and everyone is both eater and eaten. She seems crazy but actually she is right about her question of self – identity. Thus, at the end, while baking the cake she acts, and decides what she wants to be what she should be until that point she had been evading, running away, avoiding retreating and withdrawing but by this action she finally puts her foot down. With this self-control, she learns to grow-up accept the responsibilities that go with maturity.

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