



## **The Study Of Identity Crisis In Atwood's The Edible Woman**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research aims to analyse the internal conflict that arises when Canadian women try to reconcile their sense of identity with the expectations of society at large. Numerous feminism-related themes are highlighted in Edible Woman, including women's enslavement, male hegemony, the debate over gender roles, women as commodities, and consumerism. Margaret Atwood's works show the pitiful side of Canadian women who are limited to predetermined positions that reflect a rigid moral code. They suffer from a permanent identity crisis. The rigidity of patriarchy, which promotes women's traditionally feminine qualities and their subordinate status in society, drives women farther and deeper into servitude.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, femininity, self-identity, patriarchy, gender, equality

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### **Introduction**

Atwood's feminist theory promotes women's social liberation by rejecting patriarchal tyranny and encourages women to embrace their full potential and declare who they are as individuals. She gets to the core of the challenges that affect modern women. She understands the ramifications of female roles in society and has shown via her writings how centuries of male dominance prevent the current male ego from accepting gender equality. The struggles of Canadian women are reflected in each of her works, highlighting the dominance of patriarchy in Canadian society. Christine Gomes examines in Perspectives on Canadian Fiction,

At the thematic level, Atwood's novel examines themes related to the politics of gender, such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy., the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual craving out of female space by the woman through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy... not only at the thematic and structural levels but also in the organisation of women characters, Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender (Gomes 74).

In her book *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood expresses a clear concern for the nuanced nature of culturally ingrained notions of gender. Atwood investigates the difficulties faced by Canadian women in the 1960s. The book was created during a period when Canada's social, political, and economic landscape underwent rapid transformation. The change in Canada significantly influenced women's established mindsets, and they began to rethink traditional notions of femininity. They started to face the gender divide that restricted their ability to exist. *The Female Body* by Sofia Sanchez-Grant, which discusses feminine characteristics designed to benefit patriarchal society, may be found in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*.

Femininity is supposedly the 'natural' essence of womanhood: to be feminine is to be a woman. Conboy et al. argue that femininity is another social mechanism based on male desires that curtail women's freedom (Sanchez-Grant 79).

*The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood is a cutting satire of marriage and materialism in contemporary Canadian culture. In the story, women are shown as being forced into the position of commodities while yet being productive in various occupations and having children. The major figure of *The Edible Woman* is Marian MacAlpen, around whom the narrative is structured. She examines and contrasts her life with the people and women around her to clearly understand herself. Her relationship with Peter, a seasoned attorney, ends up being the biggest barrier to her actual identity. Atwood effectively conveys Marian's transformation into a passive spouse by switching the narrative from first to third. She conforms to Peter's expectations, which causes her individuality to crumble. Her involvement causes her to connect with consumables, and the forced personality split causes her to lose her appetite.

She gradually evaluates her passivity in connection to Ainsely, Peter, her friend Duncan, and the individuals in her immediate environment. By switching the viewpoint to the first person, Atwood demonstrates how her personality is integrated. It demonstrates that Marian has recognised her real self and has chosen not to be used. *The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Characters in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman*, by J. Brooks Bouson claims that

Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women (Bouson 230).

Atwood has succinctly shown the grave consequences of the restrictive restrictions on women's lives. Women's physical and mental talents are devoured and questioned by the patriarchal culture. They are seen as being on par with any food item males may enjoy. If women wish to establish a place for themselves in men's lives, they must demonstrate their value to them. Most of the time, women secretly assume passive positions because they find it impossible to escape patriarchal scrutiny. Through *The Edible Woman*, Atwood makes a case for how women should rearrange their lives and give them a compelling theme to pursue. The work focuses on a few key subjects, such as the rejection of gender norms, the idea of women as commodities and objects of consumption, and male dominance. The book finishes on a hopeful note, showing how a woman may break free from the confines of gender stereotypes and achieve self-realisation.

Marian comes from a household that upheld the conventional societal dogmas linked with women. Additionally, Marian's family has certain concerns and doubts about her degree and believes that "the effects of her university education" are "never stated but always apparent" (TEW 174). They worry that Marian will work as a "school teacher," "maiden aunt," or "female executive" once she graduates. Marian acknowledges that education liberated her from the traditional beliefs of her family.

The social structure of Canada favours males, and it has a long history of discrimination against women. The Canadian 1960s are captured in *The Edible Woman*. Men of this time regarded women differ in their personal and professional lives. They were paid less for the identical job done by their male coworkers. The female lead Marian considers her future at the business where she works in “*The Edible Woman*.” Atwood uses the metaphor of an ice-cream sandwich to depict the organisation’s structure and exploitation. On the top level of the office buildings, men are assigned to the “Upper Crust” post. Like contemporary slave labourers, machines and their operators were positioned on the ground. Women who work as housewives for minimal pay in their leisure time are provided “the goosey layer in the middle” (TEW 12). Marian is aware that she can advance in her department only to the positions of head or assistant, similar to Ms. Bogue, who would eventually retire as a spinster. Marian declines to emulate Ms. Bogue. Marian rejects the route that the patriarchy established for women since it deprives them of fundamental rights. Men were intended for the upper crust, while women were confined to second-class workplace positions.

Because she is a woman, Marian opposes the concept of leading a segregated existence. She turns down her first role. Marian examines the three office virgins’ lives. To impress others, they dress purely femininely and use much makeup. They don’t want to get married till they have lived. They resolve to wait to be married before becoming virgins. Marian rejects the notion of the three virgins as a cliché. She is against showing off her femininity and seducing people.

Marian makes an effort to draw parallels between herself and her friend Clara. Through Clara, she seemed to examine parenthood and being a woman. Marian observes Clara’s several gestations as she gives birth to a large number of children. It seems like Clara is content with becoming a mother. Clara’s haphazard reproduction perplexes Marian. She loosely and meticulously scans Clara’s physique, which resembles “a boa constrictor that swallowed a watermelon” (TEW 25). Marian feels degraded by Clara’s participation in reproduction. She doesn’t want to become a breeding animal. She believes that a woman’s capacity to procreate restricts her, so women give in to what their bodies need. Marian also notices society’s prejudice toward expectant mothers. In *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin notes

that one cannot help but see the clash with which the two worlds collide, meant to be kept ideologically separate. A pregnant working woman is an embarrassment, an offence. She is threatened with loss of job or career, or it is assumed she will quit; she is told she would never have been hired if her supervision had been warned, and she is told she cannot have it both ways (Martin 197).

Marian despises the thought of changing into a lady like Clara. She abhors the idea of the aimless mother bearing offspring for no particular reason. She views playing such a role as a woman as weak and irresponsible. Marian discovers the fourth option in her roommate Ainsely, a prime example of a predatory female. Ainsely is a symbol for mothers who prefer to raise their children alone. She doesn’t seem interested in getting married but wants to have children. She doesn’t believe in the marital institution. Through Len Shank, she had an unplanned pregnancy. Later, she understands that because of its future designation as an illegitimate kid, her baby would have to deal with the wrath of society. So she attempts to coerce Len into getting married. Marian concludes that Ainsely is unethical in how she views life and love. Marian finds her in an empty condition since she cannot reconcile with any of the dominant feminine roles in her environment.

The cycle of life of living things still has solid roots in the age-old phenomena of eating and being eaten. Smaller animals are preyed upon by larger creatures. The strongest individuals have the

most power. Like this, humans have been victims of the most powerful humans, who have ruled and preyed on factors such as gender, class, religion, and community. In her novels, Atwood uses gender inequality to define the concepts of eating and being devoured. In her book *Edible Women*, she argues that traditional societal standards of conduct have consumed women's identities and created conflicting perspectives on femininity. It also shows how the patriarchy has long trampled on women's rights.

Atwood depicts women in Canada in the 1960s as being treated like commodities to be consumed. Women are valued for their aesthetic appeal; they may also be purchased. Marian also makes her seem beautiful by donning a dazzling red dress and applying plenty of cosmetics. She positions herself as a product to satisfy Peter, her customer. In response to Peter's request, she applies many layers of makeup to her face. When he hosted the party that evening, he wanted to see her looking better. Marian starts to worry about what Peter wants. She believes that Peter intends to make this new persona a permanent shift. Marian adopts the same strategy as the women emancipating themselves from traditional societal norms in the 1960s. She feels constricted by her fiancé's constant moulding of her. Peter's mindset reflects 1960s Canadian culture, which was phallogentric. He does not treat Marian equally, and he shows dominance over her. Marian notices Peter enjoying the fact that she is edible. She begins to associate herself with the items that are being eaten. She sees Peter eating meat.

She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. Watching him operate on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks: the cow with lines on it and the labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken. She looked at her half-eaten steak and saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a cow that had once moved and ate and was killed. She set down her knife and fork. 'God', she thought, 'I hope this isn't permanent; I'll starve to death (TEW 78).

The episode mentioned above shows Marian to be anorexic. She has the strange sensation that Peter is deftly chopping her into bits to savour and sate his needs. She is torn apart by the demands of modifications, and she begins to see similarities with the commodities that others use to serve their wants and interests. Peter views the interaction as a brand-new acquisition. Marian says he sounded like he had just purchased a brand-new, shining automobile. Through Marian MacAlpin, Atwood demonstrates materialism, stereotype, and revolt in Canadian culture. The main character connects with the consumables. Women are severely exploited when they are treated like commodities. Women are reduced to the position of a commodity by the conventional roles that society has assigned to them.

By showing how the heroine and her fiance Peter interact, Margaret Atwood boldly portrays the theme of male dominance in the novel. Peter is someone who expects Marian to cater to his every whim. Her every move is dictated by his orders. As a result of Peter's control, Marian fell victim to his tyranny. Only her physical attributes are of interest to him; he pays no attention to her mental or emotional needs. Peter has high expectations for Marian, and she must always cater to his whims and demands. She does not want to annoy him because she is scared of him. She often wants to rebel, stating, "I was hurt: I considered this unfair... I was about to make sharp comments, but repressed it" (TEW 74).

Marian constantly makes an effort to accommodate Peter's demands. Her wants are put on the back burner, and Peter makes all the decisions. Peter "could make that kind of decision so effortlessly, as she puts it. Over the last month, she had developed the habit of letting him make her decisions. I eliminated my vacillation." (TEW 185). Peter does not comprehend Marian's wish to have a good relationship with him. She cannot object and must adopt Peter's attitude. Peter consistently ignores her and expects her to submit to him in every manner. He gains dominance through Marian's submissiveness. Although she is aware that her relationship with Peter is neither pleasant nor compatible, she nevertheless makes an effort to make it work. In her book *The Edible Woman*, Atwood examines the problem of women's dependence on males. Through Marian, she illustrates how being a woman carries a weight that renders women oppressed characters, and she transforms Marian's personality into a passive follower of her fiancé, Peter. He recognises his superiority as a result of her submission. Atwood shows that Marian finds it challenging to place her under traditional masculine notions. According to Atwood, victimising a woman is the same as victimising a community or a nation. She states, "... the positions are the same whether you are a victimised country, a victimised minority group or a victimised individual" (1972).

Marian accepts Peter's suggestions and makes peace with her position of submission, saying, "I'd rather leave all the big decisions up to you" (TEW 87). She hears Peter tell a haunting tale in which he recounts how to kill and gut a rabbit. She connects with the rabbit and feels terrible sympathy for the persecuted animal. Because she does not want to end up a victim like a rabbit, she flees from Peter. She feels accomplished and victorious after making an illogical getaway from Peter and hiding beneath a bed.

"Though I was only two or three feet lower than the rest of them, I was thinking of the room as 'up there'. I underground, I had dug myself a private burrow. I felt smug"( TEW 76).

Atwood discusses how a woman might experience psychological repression in addition to physical humiliation at the hands of a male. After agreeing to Peter's proposal, Marian's personality changes from the first person to the third person. It becomes clear to Peter that Marian will mindlessly obey his orders if she becomes his property. His unequivocal rejection of Marian's ideas is

"Darling, you don't understand these things, Peter said, 'You've led a sheltered life'... ..He smiled indulgently"( TEW 147).

Her servitude chokes Marian. She stops eating and loses her appetite, refusing meat, eggs, and ultimately vegetables. She enters a state of anorexia due to emotional distress, at which point everything in her surroundings seems dangerous to her. Even the phone lines give her the impression that they are snake-like and have a way of coiling back on you and entangling you (TEW 168). Marian feels afraid and unable to make wise judgments due to Peter's constant interference in her life. Even what Marian should eat is specified by him.

"she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away" (TEW 147).

She observes Peter confidently and deftly eating his meal.

"She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. Watching him operate on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks: the cow with lines on it and the labels to show you from which

part of the cow all the different cuts were taken. She looked at her half-eaten steak and saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a cow that had once moved and ate and was killed. She set down her knife and fork. ‘God’, she thought to herself, ‘I hope this isn’t permanent; I’ll starve to death’ (TEW 152).

The story shows the urge of males to take charge of women’s lives.

The civilisation has been segregated into male and female halves by centuries-old indoctrinations. Social expectations have left men in a dominant position in society. The ability to serve as a sheltering tree for women has been bestowed on males. Because of this, women have an unwavering urge to own a sheltering tree. Marian’s search for a hiding tree disastrously ended at Peter. She has an uneven connection with Peter. During the market research on beer, she meets Duncan and discovers a real friend or mentor in him. She learns through meeting Duncan that while making many sacrifices, she had been striving to have a good relationship with Peter but also losing her sense of self. In her connection with Duncan, self-expression and equality are created, which provides the catalyst for Marian’s self-realisation. She realises,

“It occurred to her also that she didn’t see any point in starving to death. What she wanted, she realised, had been reduced to simple safety. She thought she had been heading towards it all these months but hadn’t gotten anywhere. And she hadn’t accomplished anything” (TEW 343).

Marian contrasts hers with two dolls from her youth. One was a blond rubber doll, which she feels reflects her public persona as a flawless representation of femininity, and the other was dark-haired, which she believes depicts her inner self. She learns Peter’s identity at a party as “a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hand” (TEW 255). She concludes that since she has always been subjugated to others, she has not been able to assert herself. Finally, she continues, “It is your cul-de-sac; you invented it; you’ll have to think your way out” (TEW 343).

Through her protagonist, Atwood effectively depicts a transition from exploitation to discovery. After “the black episode,” which begins after her engagement, she offers her the freedom to redefine her life with fresh zest. Marian’s investigation begins when she declines Peter’s choice of steak and acceptance the inferior position that Peter had in mind. We see that food and the body serve as a source and a language for Marian to reject Peter’s dominance. She prepares and gives Peter a cake that is shaped like a woman’s form and says,

“You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,” she said. “You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork”, she added somewhat prosaically” (TEW 352).

The revival of Marian is shown in the episode. Her search for her lost self-identity ends with the breakup of her relationship with Peter. She gets her lost appetite back and devours the cake. The forced image that was put on her is destroyed. The main character implies that being subservient causes women’s lives to stagnate. The Female Body in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* by Sofia Sanchez-Grant explains,

“Atwood indicates that the solution is not to accept and adapt oneself to repressive culturally-defined conventions but to rewrite them” (Sanchez-Grant 82).

According to *The Edible Woman*, women are treated as mere assets in a relationship between men and women. Their secondary position destroys their individuality. In a patriarchal culture, norms may stifle and impede women's ability to develop normally, as shown in Atwood's works. Male dominance continues unabated, and societal structures are firmly rooted in women's enslavement. Despite being educated and financially independent, women struggle to avoid being devoured and consumed by others. We must adopt a new perspective on femininity.

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