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Cannibalism, Fertility, and the Role of Food in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Abstract: Today we live in a world full of various temptations and sensations leading us away from ourselves. We change our *Self* in order to comply with society and in the process we become the *Other*. This paper explores how Margaret Atwood perceives the search for one's identity and the pressure of societal roles that lead to this loss of identity. The main character in the novel *The Edible Woman*, Marian, goes on a conflicting journey during which she rejects herself, muses about her environment and her role in it, and tries to grasp her essence, which has become elusive. Atwood uses food imagery to portray Marian's inner battles. In this paper we explore the implications that this food imagery has both on Marian and the contemporary reader. Atwood argues that this book is "protofeminist", yet from the prism of contemporaneity it can be read as feminist. However, the scope of this novel stretches to other concepts relevant to the present day: obsession with 'size zero', following the latest trends, living in the fast lane, etc.; these concepts are depicted through metaphorical extensions such as cannibalism and fertility. Atwood masterfully sets the stage where she explores how these concepts influence an individual to the extent where one uses mimicry to fit the regulations of a capitalistic society, thus becoming *almost the same but not quite* (Homi Bhabha, 1984), i.e. colonization of the Self leading to an unfulfilled Other.

Keywords: postcolonial discourse, cannibalism, fertility, food symbolism, the Other

Introduction

If one reads papers on the subject of Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, one will inevitably encounter interpretations pertaining to feminism. These interpretations vary and expose this book to different frameworks. According to Williams, for example, this novel, where cannibalistic overtones and food symbolism are abundant, takes

on a new resonance in the feminist and postcolonial discourses of Atwood's fiction.¹ The author herself, however, does not regard her first novel a product of the feminist movement. She says in the introduction that she perceives her book as being 'pro-feminist', since it was composed before any women's movements came into play. However, I will attempt to approach this book in a broader manner. As many authors before me I will focus on the metaphor of food that permeates its pages. The inspiration for this paper came from the introductory words of the author and are in relation to the image that inspired her to write this book:

"I'd thought it up while gazing, as I recall, at a confectioner's display window full of marzipan pigs. It may have been a Woolworth's window full of Mickey Mouse cakes, but in any case I'd been speculating for some time about symbolic cannibalism. Wedding cakes with sugar brides and grooms were at that time of particular interest to me."²

What is of importance to me in this excerpt is that the image is not limited only to the bride. The "symbolic cannibalism" can ambiguously refer to both gendered roles. The main character of this book is a woman, but her experience is not limited to women. She is influenced, as are the other characters, by her socio-economical habitus and relations. What I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper is the relation of the 'other' that emerges when confronted to its habitus, the mechanisms behind it and the consequences of it. I will mainly focus on the role that food has in this process and how it portrays the inner struggles of both the main and supporting characters.

Eating Marian

Marian MacAlpin is a young woman who works for a market research firm, lives with a roommate and has a boyfriend. A seemingly ordinary woman who, after being proposed to, gets into a state some authors and psychologists would call anorexia nervosa. Many authors ascribe this state to Marian's position in the novel, that being one of a woman in a man's world. Even though I do agree with this stand, I will try to analyze it from a slightly more comprehensive point of view. To do this I will analyze her relation to food throughout the novel.

'You are what you eat' is a popular saying nowadays and can refer to many aspects of human life. It can refer to our way of life, discipline, ideologies, personalities, etc. In this novel, however, Marian gradually renounces food. By doing so, one might argue that she is renouncing herself. By reducing the intake of food she is reducing the presence of 'Self' and is steadily succumbing to 'Other'. Homi Bhabha defines

¹ E. McWilliams, "Margaret Atwood's Canadian hunger artist: Postcolonial appetites in the edible woman", *Kunapipi*, 28(2), 9, 2014, 63.

² Margaret Atwood, "Introduction", *The Edible Woman*, London, Virago Press; 1980.

Other as a *subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*. In the colonial discourse when one is appropriating Other, one is also performing the act of mimicry. According to Bhabha mimicry is “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline [...]”³. Why is Marian *almost the same but not quite*? In what ways is she adopting mimicry and in comparison to what subject of power? She is not extraordinary in any way, except one, and that is that she has a college degree (not as common for the women of that time). She has a job and lives with a roommate. She has a boyfriend and a couple of friends. According to the time she lives in she fulfills all the requirements. The next step is marriage and a family. This is where it all goes awry. But, let us first examine the system in which she functions. According to Zidan it is a trap for women and signifies that patriarchy symbolizes western domination via capitalism.⁴ Marian works for Seymour Surveys, a market research company, and this is how she describes it:

“The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists – referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men – who arrange things with the clients. [...] Below us are the machines [...] Our department is the link between the two: we are supposed to take care of the human element [...] these are all housewives working in their spare time and paid by the piece.”⁵

It is very obvious that the working environment reflects the societal circumstances. There is a hierarchy that ascribes power of decision to men, portrayed through the sturdiness of ‘the crust’, and the ‘human element’ to women portrayed through the fluidity of the ‘gooey layer’. Furthermore, women are not permanently employed and are perceived as a liability once they are engaged:

“[...] Mrs Bogue preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past. Newly-weds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable.”⁶

We can see that women are expected to play a certain role in the society. Other female characters in the book are various representations of this role. Clara, Marian’s close friend, is a mother. Ainsley, Marian’s roommate, is an educated girl striving to

³ Homi Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1984, 126.

⁴ Ashraf Ibrahim Zidan, “Postcolonial Feminism in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction”, *International Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2013, 11–20.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, op. cit., 19.

⁶ Ibid, 168.

become a single mother and employs different aggressive strategies in order to achieve this purpose, however, in the end she gets married so she could have a father figure for her child. Then, there are the 'three office virgins' who work with Marian and are in desperate search for a husband in order to fulfill their societal role. And finally, there is 'the lady down below', Marian's landlady, who presents the parochial housewife ever interested in preserving appearances. However, Atwood also shows us the expected role of men through her characters. Peter, Marian's fiancé, is the typical representative of the higher middle class men. He is a lawyer with friends who Marian calls 'soapmen'. He is the paternalistic character through and through, the one making the decisions, and parading his wife to be. Then, there is Duncan, and his roommates Fish and Trevor, the philosophical grad students, the representatives of male academia (Duncan often comments on his female colleagues as being less female, and lost in their studies). Joe, Clara's husband, who is worried about Clara because she is educated, has "the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded [...]"⁷. And finally, there is Len, the elusive bachelor, who is a conqueror of women, who once being conquered himself, loses his ground.

Both Marian and some of the other characters are struggling with the roles they have to play. These roles are the Other and their self reacts in different ways, but all of them are represented through various relationships they have with food, the main one being that of cannibalism. We shall see how some characters appropriate the Other through their eating habits, and others renounce it through the metaphoric act of cannibalism, while some get lost in both.

Let us first start with the overall picture of the society. This is represented through the image of Seymour Surveys and their work and products. Most of the products they research are an easy and quick substitute for the real thing. One of the principal products is the canned rice pudding that has varieties of flavors, such as vanilla, orange and caramel. They have the necessary nutritional value and are 'fortified with vitamins'. Later in the book we have a new product emerging, that being the instant tomato juice which once mixed with water should be as good as the real tomato juice, and is yet again quick and easy. Capitalism serves us an *almost the same but not quite* image of existence. The mimicry under which these products function is easily digestible and subtly slips in the artificiality of existence. The consumers are under the impression they are eating natural food, made of natural ingredients and by consuming it are getting closer to the subversion of Self. The consumers become the Other by eating the Other, they appropriate themselves to society and settle for a living that is *almost the same but not quite*. Society is compliant with this arrangement and continues to divulge to the mechanisms of capitalism and power. The Other emerges through mimicry under colonization, but the new colonizer is perfidious enough to use this against the 'colonized', the consumers, and deceive them even more into losing the Self and becoming the cogs of the machinery. The new colonizer is capitalism and

⁷ Ibid, 235.

since the environment in which it flourishes is patriarchal its commanders are usually men. Thus, it is easier for them to conform to it. Women are the ‘human element’ that is being more aggressively colonized through the pretences of allowing them the sameness, very much portrayed through the artificiality of products mainly aimed at housewives/women. Marian compares this subtly aggressive colonization to a farm:

“Every time she walked into the supermarket and heard the lilting sounds coming from the concealed loudspeakers she remembered an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them. But just because she knew what they were up to didn’t mean she was immune.”⁸

Marian is aware of this capitalistic arrangement that subconsciously alters a woman’s Self into a consumer, into an expected role, into the Other. She is living in this world surrounded by expectations of others and fed false ideas of Self. Her struggle is existentialistic in nature. She is trying to find her way and in doing so automatically follows the path society dictates her. In this process she falls into self-deception and reaches for mimicry. The role imposed on her by society is her Other and once she agrees to marry Peter her Self fights back. Marian almost manages in fitting in, *but not quite*. Her first encounter with Self actually happens when she becomes more aware of Peter’s Other. The two of them were to have a dinner in a restaurant and Marian could not really decide on what to eat. She notices she never knows what to order when confronted with a menu. This alone tells us how the society tries to fit us in and how Marian is already incongruous with it. What happens next shows us that Peter, on the other hand, is very much aligned with his Other. He follows the script of his role in a patriarchal society and orders for both of them. What is interesting is his choice; Marian describes it like this:

“His taste ran towards steak and roast beef: he did not care for peculiar things like sweet breads, and he didn’t like fish at all. Tonight they were having Filet Mignon.”⁹

Peter’s choice is a mirror image of the archetypal role of men, the hunter. In Part 1 of the book there is a chase following Peter’s gory hunting story in which he guts a rabbit. The chase involves Peter, Len and Ainsley running after Marian. The chase looks exactly as if a rabbit were pursued by hounds. Once they caught up with her they go to Len’s place where Marian ‘burrows’ herself under his bed. This moment sets Marian’s rediscovery of her Self into action. Marian perceives herself as prey, as meat. Thus later on when confronted with the societal roles imposed on her she slowly falls into vegetarianism, negating the Other in doing so. Peter, being the paramount

⁸ Ibid, 172.

⁹ Ibid, 147.

character in this role, is the chief agent of her departure from Self. She watches him “holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. How skillfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting;”¹⁰. He was metaphorically cutting her, making her parts of Self separate and rearrange into what was expected of her, making her into Other. The image that reaffirms this is the diagram of the cow she saw in cookbooks. According to Bhabha:

“In mimicry, the representation of identity is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. [...] Mimicry, as the metonymy of presence is, indeed such an erratic, eccentric strategy of authority in colonial discourse.”¹¹

Being metaphorically equated with food, especially meat, which is the aim of the archetypal hunter, Marian gradually renounces parts of herself and through metonymical rearrangement becomes Other. What is interesting is that the female principle is always represented through plants, while the male is represented through carnivorous actions. Ainsley is once compared to a pitcher plant (being a more progressive and aggressive woman, she has the carnivorous, male elements); Marian’s colleagues are compared to various fruits:

“They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay.”¹²

Even Clara’s motherhood is portrayed by her saying that babies resemble prunes. On the other hand, men, throughout the book, literally devour meat and, as mentioned above, are represented as hunters. Female principle and fertility are both portrayed through flora, but another powerful symbol is also used by Atwood. After the engagement Marian has a conversation with Ainsley during which she manipulates this symbol in various ways:

“‘We got engaged,’ I said, a little reluctantly. I knew she would disapprove. I manoeuvred the egg into the saucepan; it cracked immediately. It was straight out of the refrigerator and too cold. [...] I inspected my egg, which was sending out a white semi-congealed feeler like an exploring oyster. It’s probably done, I thought, and fished it out. [...] I whacked my

¹⁰ Ibid, 150.

¹¹ Homi Bhabha, *op. cit.*, 131.

¹² Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, 166.

egg against the side of my dish and got my thumb stuck in it. It wasn't done after all. ”¹³

This passage is in a way a prediction of what would happen next in the novel. The egg is the symbol of Marian's fertility and womanhood. She 'explores it' and she thinks she is ready for this new role, only to later realize she isn't. Even while using this powerful symbol, Atwood manages to amplify it with adding additional food imagery, such as the oyster, a well-known aphrodisiac. This way she gives us hints of what is to unravel later in the novel (Marian's infidelity with Duncan). Another character whose relationship to womanhood and fertility is described through this symbol is Len. However, the situation here is diametrically different:

“She made me do it’, he muttered. ‘My own mother. We were having eggs for breakfast and I opened mine and there it was, I swear there was a little chicken inside it, it wasn't born yet, I didn't want to touch it but she didn't *see*, she didn't see what was really there, she said don't be silly, it looks like an ordinary egg to me, but it wasn't, it wasn't and she made me eat it. And I know, I know there was a little beak and little claws and everything...’”¹⁴

This outburst of childhood memories was triggered by the discovery of Ainsley's pregnancy. Len, being a confirmed bachelor and seducer, then throws a tantrum that explains his adult behavior. However, it might also suggest a deeper issue of Len's when it comes to women, since he ate a chicken fetus offered by his mother, thus symbolically devouring himself by command of women. Women are then an ouroboros-like entity for him, both his beginning and end. This symbolic return to the fetal period is reconfirmed by Ainsley's maternal coo when she tries to console him. She takes him in his arms, where he starts to drool, and rocks him like a child. Marian is 'coldly revolted' and leaves them with a visualization of infants in her mind's eye. It is, however, through this archetypal role of women as nurturers that 'bloom' and produce 'fruit', depicted in the symbol of eggs and flora, that Marian becomes the Other. Her gradual passage into vegetarianism accentuates her expected femininity. This is not something she understands. She almost despises this role:

“I'm turning into a vegetarian’, she was thinking sadly, ‘one of those cranks; I'll have to start eating lunch at Health Bars.’ She read, with distaste, a column headed *Hints For Serving Yoghurt*. ‘For a taste sensation, sprinkle it with chopped nuts!’ the editress suggested with glee.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid, 84.

¹⁴ Ibid, 160.

¹⁵ Ibid, 153.

Marian makes fun of the typical housewife, not because she thinks her ridiculous, but because she is so far away from her. However, by becoming vegetarian, she starts reading cookbooks, and in general starts thinking more about meals and food. She becomes what she ridicules, almost *but not quite*. Psychologically, this is for her equal to starvation as is obvious through her musings about it: “I hope it’s not permanent; I’ll starve to death!”¹⁶. By rejection of food she steadily, however, rejects the Other as well. She is left with phantasms of food, vitamins and artificial foods or cardboard-cartoned surrogates that she calls “Substitutes, or merely disguises?”¹⁷. Obviously, Marian is aware that she is furthering herself away from Self and is in distress because of it. Once she visualizes a carrot as a screaming root she crosses the border and renounces even her expected societal role, that of the nurturer, the Other. Finally, she even rejects the substitutes, the Other food:

“That morning her body had finally put its foot down on canned rice pudding, after accepting it with scarcely a tremor for weeks. [...] But all at once as she had poured the cream over it her eyes had seen it as a collection of small cocoons, cocoons with miniature living creatures inside.”¹⁸

This image is powerful in the way that it represents the Other food, the artificiality of the capitalistic society, as a parasite that once ingested could inhabit the body and take over. Marian’s Self is fighting it and refuses it.

By the end of the book she is not able to eat, and all the actions that led her to that point seem meaningless and overshadowed by the presence of a fully-formed Other or the lack of fully-suppressed Self. She has become a woman in a red dress, with perfect hair, a face made out of makeup, and a woman waiting on her fiancé’s friends with a polite smile, nodding to everything he says. To regain Self she reaches out for drastic measures. She is to reclaim herself through symbolic cannibalism. She bakes a cake, metonymically projecting the Self, in the shape of a woman. She pays special attention to details, such as the hair, eyes, red dress, in order to make it as realistic as possible. Her original plan was to serve it to Peter as a substitute for herself; she describes it as following:

“‘You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you’ she said. ‘You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork’, she added somewhat prosaically.”¹⁹

However, after Peter indignantly leaves her with the cake untouched she starts eating it herself. She starts with the feet, which could symbolically take her on the road

¹⁶ Ibid, 152.

¹⁷ Ibid, 155.

¹⁸ Ibid, 203.

¹⁹ Ibid, 271.

to rediscovery. While eating the cake she visualizes Peter as a hunter and concludes that he would definitely become successful. Peter is the hallmark of the time he lives in and his mimicry is so successful that it would finally lead him to success. During the process of auto-cannibalism, Ainsley walks in on Marian and accuses her of rejecting her femininity, using the exact same wording Peter did after the 'hunt'. Marian chooses to shun this, yet notes that Ainsley, now pregnant and married, has become as austere as the lady downstairs. Ainsley, unlike Marian, has accepted the Other imposed on her by society. From being a progressive female, she has been tamed by the patriarchal ideas of the danger of being a single mother (the child becoming homosexual or being deeply troubled). Ainsley, however, is right. Marian is rejecting femininity, but one imposed on her by Peter, the office virgins, her workplace and society in general; she is rejecting the Other and embracing the Self. However, at the very end Duncan appears, who, according to Christel Kerskens, is one of the main tricksters in the novel.²⁰ The other trickster would be Marian; unable to conform and clumsily using mimicry, she serves as a trickster of both others and herself. Duncan suggests that Marian was either trying to destroy Peter or that she was being destroyed by Duncan and concludes by stating that it is, however of no importance, since she once again became a consumer. He finishes the cake and in doing so possibly robs Marian of complete reclamation of the Self. If we assume that Duncan is the trickster, then his words could be interpreted in more than one way. Following the analysis so far, we can interpret this 'consumerism' as one of consuming the Self, or life. Marian is not then accused of succumbing to capitalistic society, but is complimented for coming back to 'so-called reality'. Duncan seems to be a subversive character, but he also enjoys and uses the 'societal card' dealt to him; by mocking society, he becomes it. Marian, on the other hand, just feels uncomfortable in it, and once she regains her Self she is ready to eat again, to live again. Johanna Lahikainen²¹ makes one interesting observation that fits well into all the above mentioned. The first and the third chapter are written in first person singular, while the second chapter is written in third person singular. This coincides with Marian's changes. Once she is engaged, she loses her appetite and also loses her voice. So, it is only logical that rediscovery of the Self is portrayed in the cyclicity of narration.

Conclusion

Eating and food are one of the few homeostatic motives a human being has. This means a human being is innately incumbent on eating in order to survive. Food is one of our first experiences we have with the world starting with mother's milk. It reinforces the bond between the mother and child and enables protection for the life

²⁰ Christel Kerskens, *Escaping the Labyrinth of Deception: A Postcolonial Approach to Margaret Atwood's Novels Volume I*, Ph.D. dissertation, Universite Libre de Bruxelles, 2007, 75–85.

²¹ Johanna Lahikainen, "You look delicious": food, eating, and hunger in Margaret Atwood's novels," University of Jyväskylä, 2007, 55–86.

ahead. Food can also have a societal role. Different religions have different ideas of what is to be eaten and thus reflect on the soul. Ethnically, food can be a sign of difference or sameness. Food has since the dawn of man been the central point of families. It is also a sign of class membership.

A meal can be a cause for getting together with friends, or having quality time with family, it can be a romantic gesture, a center of a festivity bringing groups of people together. It can also be the axis of difference, whether religious, philosophical or medical. It can be an object of admiration or disgust. Food serves also as a status symbol. One can eat by using hands, or using cutlery, thus portraying one's ethnicity, religion, and class. Food can serve as consolation, or stigma (obesity/anorexia). Food is also, more often than not, a litmus test for gender inequality. Women are usually the ones that deal with food, not only in small ethnic groups, but in the general capitalistic society as well. According to Allen and Sachs²² women are tied to their problematic relationship with food. They are perceived as nurturers, but are also pressured through advertisements and society to control the Self when it comes to the body and food. The societal role of women is according to these authors, and other feminist food scholars, perceived as that of being responsible for feeding others. This, however, then puts them in the position of subordination since the hours they work for others are almost never acknowledged and recognized. They also add that in the food industry the difference of remuneration differs greatly on gender, and men are given the leading chef positions, while women tend to be employed more in the eating establishments of lesser stature.

However, both men and women are the audience of the advertisement machinery that represents the capitalistic society. Since food is the integral part of human existence it is one of the most fruitful areas of manipulation. Through advertisements we are lulled into a state of existence that negates nature, as we have seen through the examples in the novel, the artificial quick-and-easy food, the hypnotic music in the supermarkets, the carefully-chosen words that trigger our inner Self. All of this is employed with the aim of numbing the Self and making it closer to the expected Other for the purposes of consumerism and easier colonization of society. With the help of today's globality, capitalism strides into the private and rearranges the Self. The individual is left questioning, searching, and is presented with two options: either subvert Self and appropriate Other through mimicry or stand on the borders of society as an outcast. The latter option leaves one with unresolved issues and, more often than not, as was evident in Marian's case, physical manifestations of being different, of being THE OTHER in the world of Others.

²² P. Allen and C. Sachs, "Women and Food Chains: The Gendered Politics of Food", in: Psyche Williams Forson, Carole Counihan (eds.), *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World*, London, Routledge, 2013, 23.