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# Vision Of Feminism And Radical Perspective Of Reality In The Select Novels Of Margaret Atwood

## Abstract

Margaret Atwood effectively strides the international scene as a novelist, literary critic and environmental activist. She is regarded as an influential and accomplished woman of letters – a status which she richly deserves. She is among the most honoured Canadian authors of fiction in recent history whose novels are appreciated for their psychological depth, woman's experience and woman's positioning in the male-dominated patriarchal society. Her commitment to such social issues as colonialism and nationalism, sexism and feminism continue to engage her attention in her writings. Atwood denies that she is a feminist novelist, but she shows deep concern with the woman's issues in her fiction. Throughout her oeuvre, Atwood has tried to raise the public's awareness of women's position in society. The social pressure for rituals comes from all sides. The protagonists are directed by their families and friends to accept social conventions. When the protagonists try to reject victimization they risk alienating themselves from society because they find themselves in conflict with many customs and mores that society endorses. They distance themselves from their families and friends and gradually realize that their friends and society are holding power over them.

**Keywords :** Exploitation, Feminism, Patriarchal, Protagonist, Marginalized, Rituals, Tolerance, Victimization.

Margaret Atwood effectively strides the international scene as a novelist, literary critic and environmental activist. She is regarded as an influential and accomplished woman of letters – a status which she richly deserves. She is among the most honoured Canadian authors of fiction in recent history whose novels are appreciated for their psychological depth, woman's experience and woman's positioning in the male-dominated patriarchal society. Most of her works are marked by concerns which relate to the oppressed and marginalized. Her morality does not remain confined to human being, but extends to the flora and fauna of Canadian landscape. In her fictional world, she raises the question of Canadian identity and complexities of living in the fast changing modern world, marked by confusion and loss of human values which are very essential for sustaining a dignified and meaningful existence. Her commitment to such social issues as colonialism and nationalism, sexism and feminism continue to engage her attention in her writings.

A recipient of 55 awards including the prestigious Booker Prize and Governor General's award, Atwood denies that she is a feminist novelist, but she shows deep concern with the woman's issues in her fiction. Her first feminist treatise The Edible Woman depicts the difficulty a woman experiences to find her identity in a typically conservative society, in which the novel places her. It exposes the ways women are marginalized in their professional and private lives. The story concerns a college Graduate Marian, whose sane, structured consumer-oriented world suddenly slips out of focus. As the story unfolds a reader becomes conscious how suddenly the protagonist in the novel realizes that her body and her inner self grow more separate after she gets engaged. Ever since her engagement, the strangest things start happening to the hitherto independent Marian who begins to feel consumed with making plans, quitting her job, moving in with her fiancée Peter and settling down for her role as a successful housewife. Her freedom is threatened, but Marian sees no way out. She occasionally feels invisible when in a room with others, particularly it seems around her fiancée. Marian feels to be wandering through life without any purpose. She is horrified when forced to sign on to a retirement package feeling tied forever to an apathetic existence. She finds herself unable to eat anything, repelled by metaphorical cannibalism and becomes more and more anorexic. Worse yet, she has the crazy feeling that she's being eaten. At the end of the novel, before rejecting Peter as a marriage partner, she bakes a cake representing her body and serves the "edible woman" in the hands of her suitors, who devour it.

Throughout her oeuvre, Atwood has tried to raise the public's awareness of women's position in society. Both The Edible Woman and Surfacing are centred on rituals. The social pressure for rituals comes from all sides. The protagonists are directed by their families and friends to accept social conventions. They find that society has little tolerance for women who wish to remain self-sufficient. When the protagonists try to reject victimization they risk alienating themselves from society because they find themselves in conflict with many customs and mores that society endorses. They distance themselves from their families and friends and gradually realize that their friends and society are holding power over them. In both of the novels, the narrators avoid being consumed after they experience visions, which help them understand the degree to which they are being victimized. As a young woman, Marian is forced to play at sexual politics and to fit into

patriarchal hierarchal structures both in and out of the office. While working for Seymour Surveys, she hopes for promotion within the organization, but she does not know exactly how this will come about or where it will lead her. She believes she is "being groomed for something" but for what she has "no idea".(TEW19) She describes a very segregated working environment. "On the floor above are the executives and the psychologist—referred to as men upstairs since they are all men..."(TEW19). These men have very comfortable offices and deal with people from outside the office. On the floor below employees like Marian are the office machines "where the operatives seem frayed and overworked."(TEW19).

Marian describes her working environment and fellow employees with phrases that make the office seem like a children's school. She uses phrases such as; "motherly—looking women", "coloured crayons", "Superannuated kindergarten class", and "pink washroom" (TEW20). These descriptions imply that Marian believes that in the office she is considered to be a child rather than a responsible adult. She asks : "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn't become one of the men upstairs;" (TEW20)

Atwood shows how success is not defined in the same terms for men and women in Marian's society. A man in Marian's position would know what he was being groomed for executive level. Because she is the 'wrong' gender, Marian is excluded from promotion, and therefore, precluded from succeeding in the same ways that men may succeed. She is prevented from enjoying significant gains in several of the more important job satisfaction areas ; pay, status, and working conditions. (TEW21)

Just as her office, Marian's home is also dominated by paternalism. She lives in a flat where her landlady supports the structure of society as it forces her views on those around her. The widow landlady dominates every aspect of her daughter's life; "And I tell the child exactly which streets she can walk on and which she can't"(TEW15). The landlady does everything she can to make the child accept the existing social hierarchy. She makes "the child" miserable and does not prepare her to face the world outside the door. Even between her office and home, Marian has to fight being victimized. When she works on a long weekend conducting a door-to-door survey, she is unable to go about her job without being harassed. At the first house on which she calls, she is invited inside by the wife and then berated by the husband, while the wife watches everything with "frugal satisfaction". Shortly after, a married man invites Marian into his home and attempts to assault her sexually and tries to force himself in a physically and emotionally dominant position by describing himself as a "big strong man" who can "take care" of her.(TEW48) Wherever she goes, Marian must face a society that labels her by her gender and age and treats her accordingly. Unfortunately, she faces all such problems by being passive and camouflaged, at best, or by running from or agreeing with her opponents, at worst. Marian does not know how to avoid being a victim; she only knows how to lessen the damage that being a victim causes her. Thus the discrimination Marian faces, and the social conditioning of which she herself is a victim, is gender—biased and gender—based.

In the novel Atwood writes that Marian and Peter have never fought. There has been nothing to fight about because Marian's social conditioning has helped her to accept the victim role. Her normal behaviour has been to shun conflict. The housewives who go out and conduct the surveys for Seymour Surveys are undervalued. Marian aptly states about them: "They don't make much, but they like to get out of the house."(TEW19) The women who conduct the surveys are paid very little and are considered expendable. As a group they are valued only because the company cannot function without them, but as individuals they are not valued highly by them. Seymour Surveys is not concerned if the women employees resign after being misused because others are easily available to replace them. If the women do not help the men upstairs create the survey results, they are slowly destroyed by being forced into very restrictive housewife roles; if they try to escape their housewife roles by working for Seymour Surveys, they are destroyed by the men upstairs as part of the process of creating survey results. Either way, the devaluing of women leads to their destruction and their treatment as 'edible women'.

Another male character Len, in the novel, demonstrates a hatred for women, and berates Ainsley for being educated, which he considers a male domain. He uses for her terms such as "slut" "nauseating", "sick" and "unclean".(TEW157-60) He represents an unacknowledged attitude that supports society's devaluation of women by placing unspoken taboos on them. He is contemptuous about education for women because it gives them "ridiculous ideas".(TEW 157)

Atwood's second celebrated novel Surfacing which proved a classic in the field of feminist studies, concerns with the serious questions about the identity and freedom of woman. The novel centres around an unnamed young woman who is shackled by the mores of the twentieth century consumerism, insensitivity and exploitative nature. It includes in its ambit diverse themes and issues like Feminism, Environmentalism, Anti-Americanism, the question of Canadian Identity and Filial Relations. Atwood explores a woman's place in all of its aspects: as a human, a wife, a religious person, a mother, and a sexual being. The narrator's madness seems to arise from her anger at all of the standard roles forced upon women. The anonymous heroine in the novel who returns to her hometown in Quebec, Canada, to unveil the mysterious disappearance of her father, introduces herself to the readers thus, "I cannot believe, I am on this road again." She is alienated not only from others and from her family but also from herself. She remains ostracised in the world of power politics and begins to feel depressed, disconnected and believes that she is disintegrating. The travails that afflict her press on her so hard that she finds that "being in the air is more painful, than being in the water", and slips into the lake where her confrontation with the dead body of her father brings her back to reality. She believes that reality has to be faced and it is not possible to go on living in the cocoon of the past because the withdrawal is neither possible, nor desirable. Though the protagonist succeeds in getting her release from the oppressive context but the price of the release is inexplicably heavy as before emerging a successful advocate of feminism, she experiences a deep scar on her wounded psyche and becomes a victim of mental depression and psychic disorders.

The greatest conflict among married partners in the novel is between Anna and David. "Sometimes I think he'd like me to die', Anna said, 'I have dreams about it.'"(S 132) Anna knows that her body is attractive to David, so she is terrified that her body might lose its hold over him, leaving her without protection in a society in which women are expected to be dependent financially upon men. To avoid losing him, she is willing to accept a good deal of abuse. She unquestioningly accepts that she must follow the rules of the power games which David sets up. A pathetic figure, Anna hides her true self behind a mask of resentful tolerance and make up.

"God", she said "What'm I going to do? I forgot my make up, he'll kill me...He'll get me for it," she said fatalistically. "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him, you know what I mean? He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself." (S 131)

The most crucial aspect of Atwood's feminism is that she makes a plea for a balanced, harmonious man-woman relationship in which the two sexes play a complementary role instead of playing a winning or losing game. The heroine narrates her early experiences of her growing up in a masculine world. She remembers how when she was in school, "The boy chased and captured the girls after school and

...tied them up in their own skipping ropes. I spent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me;"

The heroine of the novel has grown up in a society where 'it was worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy' and where man is always on the front of the life's style. She vividly recalls her arguments with her brother in which "after a while I no longer fought back because I never won". The narrator is a commercial artist and every once in a while she recollects that she would have become a popular artist, if she had not listened to what her former lover used to tell her "there have not been any important woman artist".

The protagonist, who is none else but the mouthpiece of Margaret Atwood, strongly rejects the division based on gender which is unjust, discriminatory and biased against women. She finds marriage a kind of legitimised exploitation of women. If marriage is to become a tool in the hands of cruel, insensitive and indifferent husband for the gratification of sexual pleasure and fulfillment of the lust, better it should be avoided. Atwood's faith in Man and institution of marriage is completely shaken. She firmly believes that marriage merely for the sake of tradition and comfort should not take place, and if at all it takes place, it should follow love. A marriage without mutual love, trust and understanding is futile and it multiplies problems of women. It is wrong notion that such marriages bring comfort and solace to a wife. They end in divorce which is "like an amputation, you survive but there is less of you". The novelist clearly mentions in *Surfacing* that Marriage, in no way, improves a woman's position in a society where man emerges as a coloniser and woman the colonised. For a woman, it is like "Jumping off a cliff." It worsens the living conditions of the women as the protagonist herself realises: "It was good at first but he changed after I married him, he married me, we committed that paper act. I still don't see why signing a name should make any difference but he began to expect things, he wanted to be pleased." The heroine reveals the truth about her unborn child only to Joe towards the end of the novel when he proposes marriage to her: "you are screwing around with me. All I want is a straight answer ... just yes or no, don't mess around." And then she candidly discloses : " Look," I said, "I've been married before and it didn't work out. I had a baby too... I don't want to go through that again." "She hates men" is David's impression about the heroine after she repulses his advances at lovemaking.

The harrowing memories of her abortion haunt the protagonist whose experience in the hospital during the process was dehumanizing. She remembers it as something that was forced on her. All those memories come on the surface of her mind and a sense of guilt disturbs her as she takes the process nothing less than murder-a heinous crime against humanity and this is why she resolves to defy the institution without marrying Joe. She could never forget the misery the abortion caused her which again she considers another way for proving man's control over woman's body.

"...they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar". (S 85-6). After she conceives for the second time, she wishes :

"Nobody must find out (about the current pregnancy) or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machines, legs in the metal framework, secret knives. This time I won't let them." (S 173)

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