

## POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's fiction is greatly concerned with women's equality, the violence committed against women, and the convergence of Canada and women with reference to their comparable colonization. Her clear situation, insight vision, and well-determination enable her to be contiguous to women/Canada's wounds, defects, and corruption. This study highlights the natural close relationship between feminism and postcolonialism in Atwood's fiction. These concepts are classified as political, economic and social tools for fighting oppression, patriarchy/colonization, and injustice. This article also stresses the following issues: how women are colonized, victimized and silenced; how they themselves can be predators; how they may be responsible for their humiliation, downfall and disruption; and finally how they could achieve survival and freedom.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethnocentrism, Feminism, Gender, Identity, Oligarchy, Oppression, Postcolonialism, Postfeminism, Separation, Survival, Theocracy

### INTRODUCTION

This article explores the close relationship between feminism and postcolonialism in Margaret Atwood's fiction. These terms are classified as political, economic and social terms fighting oppression, patriarchy/colonization, and injustice. The article also stresses significant issues: how women are colonized, victimized and silenced; how women themselves are predators, as Atwood sometimes seems to be unconsciously anti-feminist though she is a staunch feminist; how they are responsible for their humiliation, downfall and disruption; and finally how they could achieve survival and freedom. I will limit my study to three novels of Atwood's, namely, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for many reasons. First, these novels share the theme of self-discovery. Second, their endings are open, round and pessimistic. Third, they depict varieties of authorities: p/matriarchal, natural, imperialistic, and theocratic. Fourth, the three heroines of these novels lack extreme political views; they are highly problematic heroines from feminist standpoints. Fifth, the first two of these novels are set in Canada while the third is set in America. Sixth, these novels portray different stages of Atwood's writings: *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* use traditional realism, but *The Handmaid's Tale* is a science fiction and its ending requires a rereading of the novel.

Margaret Atwood (1939-) is a Canadian poetess, novelist, critic, and dramatist. It is difficult to go through her oeuvre without thinking of Canada/women. She is always afraid of losing her country/identity: "We need to know about here [Canada], because here is where we [Canadians] live." (*Survival* 19). In her writings, she cannot separate her suffering as a woman from that of Canada as a culturally and economically occupied country. Moreover, she cannot find a great difference between patriarchal and imperial dominations; both of them cause depression and descend on both individualistic and societal levels. She creates literature in order to embody how Canada/women are humiliated and usurped. She seeks to represent a realistic picture of a nation easily beaten on every angle. Her clear situation, insight vision, and well-determination enable her to be contiguous to wounds, defects, and corruption. She warns the Canadians of

a forthcoming dark future if they could not achieve eminence and centeredness through emphasizing human freedom for both men and women on equal terms.

Atwood's pessimistic view is highly blatant throughout her fiction especially in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. These novels combine the concrete with the imaginative, the mythical with the realistic, the materialistic with the spiritual, love with struggle, and dream with defeat. They embody two tracks: the feminist novel and the Canadian novel. However, the theme of woman/country recurs in most of her works. This accentuates that Canada cannot get its full independence without women's liberation of patriarchal authorities and the constraints of society. Atwood emphasizes that she will not waste the land ploughed by her ancestors, maintaining that passive death is waiting for those who are not loyal to Canada.

She is ready to fight and chastise both the American imperialism and social/religious restrictions either inwardly or outwardly. On the other hand, some writers/thinkers prefer to be silent or commit suicide because they could not bear the shock of defeat. It appears at the very beginning of *Surfacing* that the Americans have profaned the Canadian properties: "the white birches are dying, the disease... spreading up from the south" (7). This extract indicates that "America is not a nation but a metaphor for a set of economic, environmental and political practices that belong to Canada too" (Fiamengo 7). This means that the souls of Canadian people must have been violated in return. Fiona Tolan argues that "in accordance with ecofeminism, the [unnamed] narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature, and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimized" (43). The heroine rejects the masculinist culture. In brief, the devastation of land/women symbolizes fragile determination and downfall resistance.

Atwood asserts that women are oppressed by two authorities: the power of traditions and that of physical and cultural colonization: this can be viewed as a kind of double colonization. She underscores that their executioners, whether men or women, are themselves executed; their jailers are also imprisoned. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are controlled by some political, religious and social norms.

In *The Edible Woman*, they have to be deprived of maternity in order to keep their jobs. In *Surfacing*, people are destroying nature/women, and in return they have to suffer: after the honor of land, we have no value for any kind of honor. Women and men are two victims of that modern world. Therefore, their unity leads to fighting ignorance. Women are not only oppressed by men, but by underdevelopment, racial segregation, imperialism and by women themselves as well. They cannot give up men because their fate is always connected with them: it is an ideological concept. They could not liberate themselves from men; they have to seek reunion. In fact, modern feminism does not reject lovemaking, but its traditional definitions, with women viewed as ordinary sources of pleasure, beauty and seduction.

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide of Canadian Literature*, Atwood says, "Stick a pin in Canadian literature at random and nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim" (39). Northrop Frye defines survival as "living through a series of crises, each one unexpected and different from the other" (220). Atwood also presents four "Basic Victim Positions," which include denying victimization, acquiescing in victimization, repudiating victimization, and becoming a "creative non-victim" (*Survival* 19).

The Canadians are innocent, vulnerable, pacifist, and passive victims: women as well as Canada are treated like children. They are obsessed by landscape and puzzled by its diversity. Canada is a country made up of different ethnicities: the Natives, the English and the French. They are both culturally and racially different. Canada has also suffered a lot because of the atrocities of miscellaneous colonization. These occupations have not only their influences on military and materialistic fields, but also they have deepened their roots into cultural identity, economy and sociology. Feminism and

post-colonialism are interrelated; both struggle against injustice and oppression: they center on revolting against perils of p/matriarchal, societal and colonial subjugation.

Women as well as countries are displaced and deterritorized: both women's weak bodies and fertile lands are conquered and raped. Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is displaced out of her natural environment. She has to disregard her name; this is a kind of identity distortion and denying cultural and personal history: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it's forbidden. Name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (79). This conveys a kind of violation and possession. Offred stresses out her suffering throughout the following extract:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. ... I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter. Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England. (*The Handmaid's Tale* 93)

Those women/handmaids have already been constrained and victimized. They are called sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices and containers. They are intimidated throughout brainwashing, and their bodies are used for the goodness of the nation: "They are holding the future of Gilead in their hands" (55). They are subjected to humiliation through monthly sexual ceremonies under the guise of religion. They are exposed to torture through being categorized as lesbian/unwomen and being denied motherhood. Here, the crippled/sterile governor [Mr Fred] symbolizes the western civilization which will stop existing soon: "The monthly rape 'Ceremony' ... grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead. (Cavalcanti 166). Alanna Callaway adds, "The handmaids lost control of their bodies, and, therefore, of their identities" (38).

Women, in *The Edible Woman*, are not allowed to keep their earnings in case of marriage and pregnancy; this is considered as an act of disloyalty to the institution:

Marian knew ... that 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. (168)

Feminists are accused of encouraging women "to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and becoming lesbians" (Jadwin229-30). We wonder who is to blame for destroying families: supporters of feminism or men of religion. Educational opportunities for women are also limited. They are considered to be unqualified to work on machines: they are like the Natives. Kudchedkar asserts that women, in Atwood's novels, suffer from personal victimization which has its roots in the colonial pattern of dominion and destruction. The women feel inferior to men and suffer psychological tension. This supports the view that women's life constitutes an experience of colonialism (249). Marian, *The Edible Woman*'s heroine, works for Seymour Survey, a market research company. This institution is portrayed as a trap for women. It also signifies that patriarchy symbolizes western domination via capitalism, as can be attested from Marian's remark that "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" (*The Edible Woman* 19).

The female body is colonized by repeated pregnancy (Clara in *The Edible Woman*), rape (Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*), and traditional sex (Anna in *Surfacing*). This also signifies the American cultural imperialism, as Eva

Mackey argues that "Similar images of marginality are used by Canadians outside of Quebec (the majority) to define Canada in relation to the United States" (129).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is portrayed as a colonized individual. She as well as Canada has to resist in order to survive. Canada has resisted the British, French, and cultural American imperialism. She also has to resist both p/matriarchal and societal traditions. However, she gets adjusted to that new world: she loves Nick; she does her best to give birth to a child in order to avoid being sent off to the colonies like unwomen/her mother: she has assimilated so successfully that she is more Gileadean than the Gileadean. Therefore, the protagonist sometimes contributes to her own colonization/imprisonment. She is responsible for her suffering due to her dependence, naivety and passivity. She represents the Canadians who are not more extremist and radical. However, Offred's hybridity may be considered as a kind of survival and resistance.

On the contrary, Offred's mother and her friend Moira are active, adventurous and positive. They have taken intrepid steps against oppression and injustice. The former, a dedicated Second-Wave Feminist, has burnt misogynist magazines, ending up her life as an unwoman: "I saw your mother, Moira... There was a close-up, it was her all right." (*The Handmaid's Tale* 263-4) The latter tries to escape, but in vain. Both have preferred either explicit or implicit death to a temporary blessing life. They represent the Americans who are extremists in philosophy.

Offred is also an unreliable narrator. "The Historical Notes", at the epilogue, is a good example. It seems that the whole story is reconstructed and received by professor Pieixoto and his colleagues. This epilogue also emphasizes that men's attitudes towards women are still hostile even after the downfall of Gilead [the biblically-inflected nation Atwood imagines: it is a puritanical, reactionary, militaristic regime.]. Wagner-Lawlor asserts that Offred's narrative itself can be: "faulted on similar grounds particularly because it is retrospective and seems, for all the vivid description of life as a handmaid, too artful and self-consciously constructed, too distant, too noncommittal about what happened and what will happen" (83). These "historical Notes", on the other hand, denote survival and resistance. Hogsette argues that "Women can use language to create their own subjective meaning and challenge certain socially and politically oppressive institutional meaning" (263).

In Gilead, there are three language systems: the Gilead system, the narrator's system, and the academic rhetoric of the novel's closing section (Callaway 6): this classification can be seen as a tool of dominating and silencing women. Yazdani and Royanian think that Offred uses language to fight oppression and injustice, as "She comes to know of the importance of language for self-realization and eventually survival. Language makes her strong enough to survive in Gilead and to raise her voice against the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society" (90).

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian's colleagues, Emily, Lucy and Millies, are also aware of being victims in a patriarchal society. They accept their society's definition of the role of women as lovers, wives, mothers and inferior/mean: they represent irrationality, wilderness, and nurture. Their sole aim in life is getting a husband who is reasonable, civilized, and cultured. They represent exploited female workers typical of the 1960s.

They also embody virginity and sexuality. All of them are "artificial blondes" and "virgins" (*The Edible Woman* 22). Lucy always dresses well and visits expensive restaurants in town in the hope of hunting a well-off man. When Marian announces her engagement to Peter, they wonder: "How on earth did you ever catch him?" (124). Women, according to Sanchez-Grant's view of the novel, "are expected to adapt themselves to masculine desires, as exemplified by Marian's flatmate Ainsley .... Those women who fail to adapt are, put simply, not women" (83).

For Atwood, the body can be a means by which a woman can assert her existence, and not a manipulated existence defined for her (Sanchez-Grant 90). In *Surfacing*, Anna knows well that her body is a good weapon for controlling and holding over her husband David. Therefore, she is horrified when she forgets her make-up. She has to tolerate physical and sexual humiliation in order not to lose him. She is just a doll:

"God," she said, "What'm I going to do? I forgot my makeup, 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. (*Surfacing* 131)

Atwood's women cannot act on their own; their actions are connected with men. The unnamed narrator, in *Surfacing*, has accompanied both her husband Joe (a failed potter) and his friend David (a failed rebel). Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is afraid to act alone: she is afraid to stand up for the Revolution, to divulge herself to Ofglen, to secretly come into operations on behalf of the Mayday group, to attempt escape with Moira, to commit suicide like the late handmaid. Cooke comments,

The only risks she [Offred] takes are either prompted by a male partner (the attempted escape from Gilead with Luke[her husband], her evening at Jezebel's with the Commander [Mr Fred], and her eventual escape facilitated by Nick [the driver]) or in order to be with a male partner (as in her nightly journeys to the Commander's office and later to Nick's bedroom). (125)

Marian, in *The Edible Woman*, also seeks a male alternative in Peter, her boyfriend, to fulfill her desires. She looks upon him as not only a rescuer from chaos, but also as a provider of stability. She is attracted to him because of his pleasing manner, impressive way of talking and his culture:

"When do you want to get married?" he asks, almost gruffly.  
... I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it. (90)

In the Republic of Gilead of *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are turned into mere cogs and tools in the machines of the state with the help of aunts, wives, traditions and commanders. Like properties, they are both protected and imprisoned by imperial/social restrictions. In this Republic, Offred is "colonized" by two opposite "ideologies: the puritanical right that denotes women's proper place in the home, as the property of men, and leftist feminist groups that protest against the objectification of women and their bodies under patriarchy. Both result in Gilead's censorship and control of reproduction and sexuality" (Blackford 2). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy, the commander's wife, is classified as both oppressor and oppressed: she is an agent of Gilead. However, she is affronted by those handmaids because they always remind her of her inability to bear babies. Atwood stresses that women have lost their humanity as long as they lack the strong bonds of female friendship, community, respect, solidarity, definitions of "woman," in addition to their antagonistic attitudes towards men. In other words, post-colonial feminism is criticized for supporting division and ethnocentrism. This leads to losing power and purpose:

However, the creation of these female-only spaces could be problematic in that women were choosing merely to separate themselves from society instead of attempting to educate men and bring about some social reform. Therefore, Separatism fails to offer a viable alternative to the existing system, ...thus ensuring the continuance of patriarchal systems for future generations. (Callaway 18)

Simone de Beauvoir strongly believed that "marriage ... trapped and stunted women's intellectual growth and freedom" (Tyson 97). Therefore, Ainsley, in *The Edible Woman*, is against marriage because it distorts women's identities. She plays the role of an aggressive, devious and emancipated woman. However, she wants a baby in order to fulfill her desire of motherhood and femininity:

I'm not going to get married. That's what's wrong with most children, they have too many parents. Think how confused their mother-image and their father-image will be; they're riddled with complexes already. And it's mostly because of the father. Every woman should have at least one baby. It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity. (*The Edible Woman* 39-40)

Ainsley is keen to catch a man with a decent heredity; she only needs a man's sperm. She succeeds in trapping Len, Marian's former classmate. Her strategy is to turn the table on man by using and exploiting them to become a mother. She is compared to a "pitcher-plant waiting for some insects to be attracted, drowned and digested" (*The Edible Woman* 81). Like Peter, she is a predator: she is both oppressed and oppressor. She tries to triumph over social norms and to guarantee her existence. However, she ultimately accepts the traditional role of a wife and a mother: she is worried about her baby who may suffer from homosexuality because of the absence of a father.

She becomes edible in the marriage-market against which she has professed earlier. Atwood's novels assert that life is a matter of adaptations. Coral Howells thinks that the aim of Atwood's fiction is to make women critically conscious of their own roles in conventional structures. The characters in her novels struggle to get over alienation and achieve personal and social integration which is imagined as a freedom to love, to share, to meet, to touch (4). Offred manages to find her freedom; she records her story for the world to know. In this context, Marie Jonsson comments on the power of writing at the hands of Offred, saying that "by telling her story she won power. To Offred the pen was also powerful and something she envied, since it was the tool for the powerfully written word" (10). On the other hand, Marian, in *Surfacing*, has stopped listening to herself, leading herself to become a slave to society.

There are different victims in Atwood's novels. They are animals, Indians, sham pioneers, children, artists, women, French Canadians, explorers, and immigrants. At the very beginning of *The Edible Women*, Marian accepts the victim's role. She has to carry out her roommates' work; she has to buy the office cake's party instead of making it. However, at the end of the novel, she may restore her freedom. Sharon Wilson says, "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image, she announces, to herself and others, that she is not food" (96). Marian says to her fiancée, "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" (271). Donn Welton says that people sometimes give up eating for self-mastery and spiritual relief (291). Eating disorder conveys inner conflicts. Blodgett thinks hunger and eating have been used by feminist writers to speak of personal and social behaviors, psychological problems, art, sex, politics, poverty, nationalism, gender roles, power, and domesticity (1). Marian has to revolt against capitalism by stopping eating. Capitalism has sought woman to be a good lover, wife and mother. According to Emma Parker, food functions, in Margaret Atwood's novels, as a form of female self-expression. Eating and non-eating illustrate resistance to the system of oppression. Atwood's protagonists are oppressed by [imperial] parents, partners, peers, or by society as a whole. They try to protect their selfhoods by psychic distancing of their selves from their bodies and by physical loss or increase of weight (378). Anorexia nervosa has been widely discussed in *The*

*Edible Woman* as a means of Marian's renunciation of social p/matriarchal restrictions and political and capitalist norms. This illness stresses that the heroine's body reacts to society's attempt of imposing its rules on the heroine: "I drew back from him. A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (*The Edible Woman* 83).

Narration has also stressed this idea by shifting from the first-person (part 1 & 3) to the third-person (part 2). In part 1, Marian is active and independent. In part 2, she is lost and dependent. In part 3, she gains her identity and power. Joyce Hart points out that through "this structural change, Atwood distances the reader from Marian, just as Marian's body distances itself from her mind, just as Marian distances herself from food" (3).

In *Surfacing*, the heroine, unlike Offred, could achieve survival by revolting against both physical and spiritual powers represented in western civilization by giving up language, the language which colonialism has imposed upon her/Canada in order to wipe out her identity. This is also a kind of alienation/inferiority. She has risen from death to life:

I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. ... The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (*Surfacing* 206)

The endings of Atwood's novels may be the product of a mental study rather than the outcome of the end of the Canadian/women struggle against miscellaneous forces. These endings denote pessimism and continuous loss. They represent the novelist's viewpoints and visions even if she is out of the scene. In other words, she expresses what she is going on inwardly. Otherwise, she can choose different endings. We may wonder whom Atwood is fighting and attacking, and whom she is supporting.

The answer may be: struggle itself without any truce is her main concern either against women or anyone else. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story ends on a note of disappointing ambiguity. We are left with more questions than answers as Offred steps up "into the darkness within; or else the light" (295). Did Off red escape? What became of her? Did she devote herself to the resistance? The text fails to answer these questions (Callaway 63).

In *The Edible Woman*, the story ends as a circle in which the heroine ends where she starts: "I'll start with the feet," she decided." (175). In *Surfacing*, we are not sure if the heroine will commune with the dead and living as a wild animal rather than a human. At the very end she seems to be coming to her senses, but it is left open, without any affirmation as to whether or not she rejoins her friends back in civilization.

## CONCLUSIONS

Margaret Atwood's novels highlight the question of identity from a postcolonial perspective. Her characters are colonized by patriarchy, cultural imperialism, and geographical colonization. This leads to their displacement and disconnectedness from their own life. This study also shows two types of colonization: physical with reference to Canada and women and psychological. Women, in particular, may suffer from double colonization: her body is colonized by men and her psychology is victimized by society.

This study also stresses that we have to deconstruct those stories told by suppressors/victors and reinstate those untold. Women and men are partially oppressed, silenced, marginalized and victimized through language, culture and history. Women are sometimes react to their victimization by turning themselves into predators.

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