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## **A Study of Consent, Bodily Autonomy and Psychopathological Fragmentation in Women through Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

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**Abstract:** This paper argues how the patriarchal culture has distorted bodily autonomy in women through a close reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. I espouse how the culture first leads to the interpellation of the subject within the system. It fosters an illusion of 'consent' that distorts the body agency in females. It is done by interpellation of social and cultural constructs. I explore how such interpellation and false notions of consent are often times a political exploitation of the bodies of women. This, I argue, results in loss of bodily autonomy as seen in the literary representation of Marian McAlpin in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. It results in her psychopathological fragmentation as she develops anorexia nervosa. These constructs bestowed upon women are manifold and make the female body a contested site of struggle. Women's bodies have always existed in a cultural time and space where there has been recurring and powerfully invasive demands on them. It is generally depicted as passive with its lack of agency. I explore how Atwood depicts the female body- as a site of repression or site of resistance.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal culture, bodily autonomy, illusion of consent, interpellation, psychopathological fragmentation.

### **Introduction**

"History shows that even when men achieved a certain degree of formal freedom, women were always treated as socially inferior beings and were exploited in ways similar to slavery" (Federici 13)

-Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*.

The female mind and body have long been subjected to patriarchal hegemony through social and cultural constructs. Both the mind and the body are subjected to regulations that take away their agency through interpellation by fostering an illusion of consent. Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Edible Woman*, delves deep into such exploitation of the mind and the body and the simultaneous repercussions through the character of



Marian McAlpin. This paper examines how Atwood shows that Marian has been interpellated within the social, cultural and capitalist system the effect is quite evident in her gradual withdrawal from food, in the form of Anorexia Nervosa. Her body becomes a site of struggle.

### **Interpellation and Illusion of Consent:**

“As long as you only think about the surface I suppose it’s all right, real enough; but once you start thinking about what’s inside...”-Duncan, *The Edible Woman*. (Atwood 232)

How often do we lend a critical thought to what goes on around us? Do we truly see things in their real essence or are we manipulated into thinking whatever benefits the hegemonic social order?

The term ‘interpellation’ was introduced by Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* to talk about how people accept certain roles and values without questioning them (Althusser). It can be attributed to the numbing of the mind due to continuous presentation of the same set of ideas, beliefs or value systems. Eventually it grows to be what is natural and logical and the mind in turn accedes to it, making the acceptance both voluntary and subtle. The mind starts believing the values or ideas to be its own. Althusser propounds that the interpellation of gendered behavior is one such example of interpellation. This gives birth to an illusion of consent, a consent that has been given consciously but has its origin in the preconscious mind that has already fallen a prey to interpellation of pre-circulated ideas and belief systems.

Interpellation can be imposed in two ways that is – Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) or the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). In this paper I shall focus only on the ISA which manufactures consent through ideas and representations, constantly conditioning the mind.

Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* shows how ISAs work to control the body rhetoric and take away agency of women through the character of Marian McAlpin.

At the beginning of the story we see Marian is made to sign a ‘Pension Plan’. She says:

“I don’t think I’d like to join the Pension Plan” (Atwood 15)

However she is told that it is obligatory. Marian acknowledges the feeling of being depressed. She offers an insight into her mind. She makes it clear that it is not only being subjected to rules she had no interest in but also the reality of being bounded to a future that lay so far ahead that she couldn’t even think about it.



This first episode lays bare the coercion of decisions that is to follow in the life of Marian. The consent that she is to give or the seemingly informed decisions that she is to make are all ideas that are a result of the interpellation of the socio-cultural norms.

The psychological fragmentation that Marian is to experience later has its beginning in this particular episode at the office with the pension plan.

The socio-cultural patriarchal pressure is intensified when Ainsley gives her verdict on the issue of reproduction:

“Every woman should have at least one baby...It fulfills your deepest femininity” (Atwood 43)

The idea tying reproduction to femininity has long been propagated and is nothing but a patriarchal and capitalist ideology. It is the socio-cultural norm that makes a woman feel that reproduction is her destiny. Silvia Federici says that in the capitalist world which is intensely patriarchal, women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity, that is, labour power. “Femininity” has been constituted in capitalist society as a work function masking the production of the work force under the cover of biological destiny (Federici 14). As J. Brooks Bouson rightly opines :

“Marian’s core identity is threatened by the female roles she is expected to assume” (231)

The pressures get hold of Marian. The socio-cultural set up distorts the bodily agency and the coercion of decisions lead to the fragmentation of the self. Marian’s thought weigh down as the story progresses. She thinks to herself : *what if we both fell asleep and the tap got turned on accidentally, lukewarm so we wouldn’t notice and the water slowly rose and killed us?* (Atwood 69)

The coercion and manipulation are heightened with Peter, whom Marian has chosen as her partner. He is representative of the traditional patriarchal masculine ideology that is toxic and regressive all at once.

When Marian runs away after drinks with Ainsley, Len and Peter, it marks a moment of both psychological fragmentation and a moment of resistance as she rejects the ideologies imposed on her. It marks a moment of ideological resistance and inverts all suppression.

Patricia Spacks notes in her seminal work *The Female Imagination* how it is often portrayed that “Feminine power includes the power to endure without a sob, the greatest suffering...” (85)



Marian's abrupt departure is the point where interpellation fails. It also marks a departure from the above ideology that is often seen to be interpellated within females- the ideology that's says that a female must endure, in spite of and despite all. Peter (a traditional patriarchal figure), Ainsley (reinforcement of patriarchal ideas) and Len( a pseudo-intellectual figure) fail to reinforce or take away from agency.

To leave them behind seems like an achievement for Marian.

The episode where Marian climbs under the bed evokes the image of suffocation. She has her own moment of introspection and she realizes the hard truth that Peter, a patriarchal figure, had been monopolizing her. She realizes how deep her anger runs at the way she was being interpellated into the system, a culture that prioritizes marriage and childbirth for women above everything. In her mind she constantly scrutinizes Peter who then quite blatantly says that Marian, unlike most women, was rejecting her femininity. To her he is objectifying, threatening and capturing.

The normative pressure on a woman to settle down is further highlighted as Clara says that Joe had always thought it was time for Marian to settle down. This reflects back once again at Althusser's theory of interpellation where a stereotypical domestic future is projected onto Marian. It fuels the thought that a woman's fulfillment lies in accepting domesticity, thus limiting both her mental and bodily autonomy.

Duncan whom Marian meets at the dry cleaners articulates his concern about being bogged down by things, an inertia and in a way articulates Marian's own situation. He embodies a step away from moral scrutiny, ambiguity and detachment that Marian often felt.

The sexual engagement with Duncan marks in Marian a step towards reclamation of agency outside structures of domesticity.

When Marian enters a salon where everything had been 'pink and mauve' she also offers a very potent Marxist feminist critique of such a place. She says its 'frivolous' and wrongly associated with femininity but manages to function any way and makes visitors passive. It opens our eyes to institutionalized forms of control and how women's bodies are often turned into products yielding returns under the capitalist and patriarchal structures. The stripping off of agency is quite subtle and the beauty industry here functions as the ISA that aligns with patriarchal ideologies.



This brings us to scrutinize the gradual disintegration of Marian's mental health. Marian develops conditions symptomatic of anorexia nervosa and one is led to think if the loss of bodily agency has a role to play.

### **Psychopathological Fragmentation**

Atwood shares an important analogy of a caged animal in psychosis:

“They say all caged animals get that way when they're caged, it's a form of psychosis, and even if you set the animal free after they go like that they'll just run around in the same pattern” (Atwood 115)

The psychological impact of the constant surveillance of the ISAs and the inadvertent interpellation of socio-cultural norms, is reflected through the analogy. Marian's psychological fragmentation takes the form of Anorexia Nervosa as she gives up on food gradually.

Anorexia Nervosa and bulimia are both construed to be a result of certain ills of our culture in the words of Susan Bordo. It stems from the “... disdain for the body, fear of loss of control over our future to the disquieting meaning of contemporary beauty ideals in an era of greater female presence and power than ever before” (Bordo140).

Marian sits and watches Peter eat steak while her aversion towards food grows, an indication of deepening discomfort with the interpellation of societal norms and gendered roles. It signifies her loss of autonomy and the growing pool of identity crisis that she was desperately wading in.

She feels 'gluttonous' after seeing the loaded table at the party. Her rejection of food can be directly co-related to her denial of the desires of the self.

Paul Garfinkel and David Garner called it a “multi-dimensional disorder with familial, perceptual, cognitive and possibly biological factors in various combinations...” (112). Researchers have agreed that cultural factors are more often than not responsible for the pathogenesis of eating disorders. Bordo opines how “psychopathologies that develop within a culture are far from anomalies or aberrations, to be characteristic expressions of that culture”(141). It is a crystallization of what is wrong with it.

Marian's dying hunger and appetite point out to the development of anorexia nervosa and is a crystallization of her internal and external strife. She constantly shifts her anxiety to food. The metaphor of the egg has been deftly employed by Atwood to convey her strife. It stands out as a metaphor for balance which she rejects as she leans towards anorexia quite unconsciously. Her growing alienation from food hides her growing



alienation from her body and bodily autonomy. She subconsciously rejects the ideologies and resists interpellation as a subject. The tensions between resisting and giving in cause dissociation within Marian as she grapples with reality. This is voiced by Duncan as he says:

“As long as you only think about the surface I suppose it’s all right, real enough; but once you start thinking about what’s inside...”(Atwood 232)

Marian’s repeated reflections in the mirror, “She saw herself in the mirror between them for an instant...two overlapping images drawing apart further...they were trying to pull her apart” is a deeper reflection on her internal fragmentation.

“Marian gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoon: herself upside down...” (Atwood 179)

This is a re-emphasis and an insight into the inverted world that she is trapped in.

Towards the end of the story Marian says how she cannot even drink a glass of juice and in a moment of introspection she learns “her body had cut itself off”. She creates a doll-like cake which she devours while saying “you look delicious...And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food.” (Atwood 342)

Marian realizes what assimilation and constant coercion of her decisions by the patriarchal set up has done to her. Not only has it subdued her identity but in a way has led to absorption of her identity into Peter’s own . The cake shaped like a doll, symbolizes her transformation into a consumable object, that is passive and assimilated at the same time.

### **Body As a Site of Repression or Resistance?**

In *Gender Trouble :Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler quite aptly writes how the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to emancipate it. (Butler 4)

This very system thus then becomes problematic for women. If the very system that seeks to represent and uplift women, is faulty, then the representation and emancipation itself becomes problematic.

The body is a site where norms are inscribed. The repression is inscribed on her body and it becomes a paradoxical site. Marian tries to resist the repression of her bodily autonomy as it grows into a contested site



of struggle. Nevertheless one could say that there is repression even in her resistance. She is re-absorbed into the system, once again, without knowledge and her resistance through rejection of food becomes problematic. However the acceptance of food shown through the consumption of the cake, is not totally without its problems. It marks her re-entry into a world of consumerism run by patriarchal and capitalist ideology. This has been agreed upon by Jennifer Hobgood who says that Marian's renewed consumerism serve to re-emphasize the scathing criticism of power and capitalism. (Hobgood)

### Conclusion

Atwood's *The Edible Woman* thus revisits concepts of bodily autonomy and agency and foregrounds the inter-relationships of body, agency and power. Through critical theories of Althusser's interpellation, we see how even resistance can have an underside of subjugation that is embedded in the deepest pits of the society.

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