

“The ‘I’ against an ‘Other’”: Gender Trouble in *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract—The concept of self and body has been discussed since the evolution of Modern philosophy by Descartes. With the ignition of feminism movements, these theories attracted the attention of many critics to revise the truth of gender and identity with relation to body. One of the well-known critics in this realm is Judith Butler, who has given fresh sense to postmodern way of thinking. She believes that body, sex and gender are all mingled into one definition and this is the society which has separated them as different still false notions to preserve its survival through normalizing the heterosexual matrix. Being influenced by the chaotic world of limitations and rules, Margaret Atwood, the acknowledged novelist, wrote her first novel, the *Edible Woman* including the theme of woman in search of identity and the imprint of social norms on her character. The body and the act of eating in this novel appear symbolically, as they represent different modes of a character in the process of self-recognition. What has been tried to illustrate in this paper, is to show Butlerian instability of body and its inseparability of gender and the traces, back into Atwood’s first novel. Through the rejection of established interpretation of gender and body, the characters become involved in the process of change and realization. This is the possibility of change which still attracts many readers to this old work of Atwood.

Index Terms—Margaret Atwood, Judith Butler, gender, body, instability, identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood’s various ways of representation and her creativity in the production of new fiction with the base of political and social life, have made her the voice of today’s Speculative Fiction. Her fiction in postmodern literature has found its unique status, as she goes on writing stories about identity and the lost self, each time with a new approach. Atwood embraces the world with the knowledge of its corruptibility and darkness. Though she tries not to put the spotlight on the dark sides of modern existence, her fiction mirrors her negative attitudes and sometimes doubt about deceptive concepts of everyday life. To be part of Atwood’s novel, is to be part of the social life she depicts through her character’s formation.

In her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood carves out a character in search of the independent individuality in the patriarchal system. The peculiarity of this novel lies in its view, towards the construction of identity, in a patriarchal society, where all the roles and labels are prior to the existence. The symbolic elements of capitalism and materialism reappear purposefully, through the images of food, eating, clothes and gatherings. In addition, Marian, the primary Atwoodian heroine, gains voice by refusing to yield to the masculine authorization and oppression by patriarchal society. Thus the basic but repetitive themes of Atwoodian fiction find ways into her novels, with the emphasis on the subordinate position of women and the connection between consumption and patriarchal domination.

“Like Atwood, Judith Butler explores the relation between material and citational being Butler describes the regulatory processes that operate like legal imperatives” (Boynton, 2002, p.52). This is when Judith Butler’s theories add new dimension of meaning to what was considered as the correct assumptions of gender, body and the conventional categories of heterosexuality. The purpose of this paper is to show the strict relations between society’s interpretation of gender and its effect on the roles each human plays, while all the rules are well-established before the existence of a figure. With regards to materialism and heterosexual matrix, it is crucial to understand “how the strict regulations of gender norms inform one’s action” through the “performativity” of gender in Atwoodian heroine (Fleitz, 2005, p.19). Butler’s theories, though complicated and difficult to grasp, are distinct in their unique way of reconnaissance of gender and the system it is defined in.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Butler’s Gender/Sex, Body and Heterosexual Matrix

Though being influenced by great thinkers like Freud, Wittig and Foucault, Butler brings into question many concepts like gender and sex which have been discussed and established before. She borrows Foucault’s idea of power and sexuality to endorse her view about the existence of rules, prior to heterosexuality and homosexuality. In her

influential book *Gender Trouble*, Butler refuses to accept the binary distinction between gender and sex and she fuses the two into one category as she asserts: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender" and she continues with this idea that "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (2006, pp. 9-10). As Salih mentions, Butler believes that sex and gender are both the "effects" of discursive "production", not the "cause" (2002, p.73). Butler's assumption of the gender as a "free-floating artifice", supports her argument against stable sex and bodies (Butler, 2006, p.9). She opposes the fixed structure of anatomy as she asserts "that an individual's body boundary (the imago, or phantasmatic body) is an erotic surface whose individual perception is forged from social relations that are always evolving and shifting the body's contours and desires" (Kirby, 2006, p.61). With the emphasis on invented, but still mistaken aspects of cultural and normal perception of the so-called concepts, Judith Butler goes against the fixed formation of the body and gender.

Sex also appears as a result of the repetition of established rules. So the body is "this reiteration" which has a "social birth", though in Butler's sense "the body's ultimate unfixability" leads to its notion of being "revisable" (Boynton, 2002, pp.53-54). By this view, she regards body as a way of practice of norms through repetition, which has led to the false, misleading and permanent belief of body while still this false belief can be modified by rejecting the traditional confirmation of body. For instance, if one has this assumption of body in his/her mind as a matter of certainty, he/she can bring into mind the possibility of the opposite condition to the current one; when a body of man was considered to be female's and vice versa. Thus Butler, with the help of Foucault's theory of power, proves that the establishment of the view towards gender, sex and body has the pre-existence priority of culture and norms to the existence of the self.

In order to discuss gender, sex and body with its accepted terms like "male" and "female", she uses the "heterosexual matrix" as a framework "of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler, 2006, p.208). This process of "naturalization" happens through the "reiteration" in the culture as a normal way of living and also by the oppression of other categories, like bisexual or homosexual as the marginal ones.

III. DISCUSSION

A. *Marian, in Search of the Lost Self*

Although Atwood has separated herself from the "feminist label" and showed tendency "to protect her text from unauthorised interpretation", her concern for women's issues, their oppression and the look on them from the suppressive patriarchal system, has found important place in her fiction (Tolan, 2007, pp.9-10). The *Edible Woman*, Atwood's first novel, includes the discussion of identity and self as they are mingled to the concept of body and gender. What is new in her novel is how Atwood entangles this loss of self to the loss of body and also loss of desire for food. Marian, an employee in a market research company, leading an ordinary life, tries to gain a new identity through the entrance of Atwoodian quest. Atwood's heroines begin their story with the stereotyped female characteristics, while they try to reject the heterosexual gender norms.

The powerless heroines come to search for their lost self and step forward to claim what has been deprived of them in the patriarchal community. Marian is also captured in this system and cannot uncover her identity and also individuality. What is evident in Atwood's heroines, is their lack of knowledge of their condition, at the first stage of their appearance in the plot, and their similarity to a victim. Like Offred, *Handmaid's Tale's* protagonist, Marian is also ignorant of what has defined her individuality. Dissatisfied with her work and also her later relationship with Peter as her fiancé she begins to sink into a state that she cannot "recognize her own self" (Tolan, 2007, p.13).

In the beginning, Marian, as a narrator of the first part, presents herself with the most normal image of an accepted woman. What is very important to be focused on in this book, is the way Atwood depicts her characters, their taste of food, the preparation of it and different materialistic but inseparable aspects of human being's existence and his/her way of living. To show Marian as a character endorsing the social norms, Ainsley describes her choice of clothes as "camouflage or protective colouration" and through Marian's description of her own behavior and the comparison which happens with Ainsley's, the reader can speculate her very conservative side of individuality, following the restricted and convinced steps of the controlling culture (Atwood, 1969, p.12). Marian finds herself facing the question of "what one is expected to want" when she is culturally oppressed by her stick-to-norm fiancé Peter (Boynton, 2002, p.58). Handsome Peter, as Ainsley describes, is a 'nice package' who wears beautiful clothes and makes decisions "effortlessly" (Atwood, 1969, p.150). Once engaged, Marian behaves like a puppet in the hands of Peter, when even structurally, she loses the power of narration of the story, detached from her power of identity to act consciously on her own behalf and she find herself "letting him [Peter] choose for her" (Atwood, 1969, p.150). Atwood's maneuvering, for this loss of power, in Marian's individuality happens through the loss of appetite for food. In fact, it should be noticed that Marian's voice was the one, parallel with the standards of womanhood in her first appearance. As the narration switched from first to third person, her relationship with Peter takes a formal and serious step and goes to engagement. This is after the announcement that Marian's disorder in eating becomes intense.

With regards to Butler's view, Marian is a woman "in process" of choosing her gender. This "process" is the recognition of self and then its limitation in the defined categorization by the society. It continues with refusing the conventional definitions of body and gender. By choosing, Butler does not hold out this promise that infinite ways of acting is possible for a "subject". Instead, she supposes that "one's choice of 'gender style' is always limited from the start" when one is moving towards this recognition (Salih, 2002, pp.45-46). The conflict in Marian's inner self, the

binary that shows itself ubiquitously in her encounter to the “Other”, becomes explicit first in the structure of the novel. Marian reports the beginning chapters of the story in the first person point of view, the most dependable style of narration to the character. After her engagement to Peter, the passive side, the side which goes on till almost the end of the book continues, while the narration of this point of view is in control of an outsider, who scrutinizes Marian’s thought with the very detail imagery. As the title of the novel suggests, the story is replete with food and eating imagery and their connotation and objectification to the outside world.

Atwood’s detailed portrayal of the meal Marian and Peter have in the restaurant, is the beginning of the conflict, when Marian finds Peter’s choosing her meal as a “getting rid of vacillation”, in other words, his superiority of power in making decisions. In one of their conversations, Butler’s idea of the body as a “reiteration” in the culture can be viewed from the perspective of Peter. He believes that the right way to punish a child, “even physically”, is to do so “consistent[ly]” (Atwood, 1969, p.151). Peter, as a lawyer, has the power and rules in mind and is the controlling agent in the conversation when he depicts Marian’s life as a “sheltered” one, in other words, as a normal and accepted one from the common cultural vantage point (Atwood, 1969, p.151). He emphasizes that the effect of physical punishment can be felt when it is repeated, for this is the repetition that converts the “juvenile delinquents” to the welcome usual people (Atwood, 1969, p.151). This is when Peter considers himself as “‘I’ against an ‘Other’” and undermines the outcasts by sticking to the standard rules (Butler, 2006, p.197).

Marian’s reaction to Peter’s authority is silence. She reacts passively to Peter’s power, though “she was secretly convinced” that Peter is wrong in his judgment (Atwood, 1969, p.151). The wish to regulate the whole community in the patriarchal society, what Peter explains to Marian, gives validity to the “heterosexual matrix” and Marian’s silence, like Peter’s judgment is a practice of this regulation. In fact Butler believes that the heterosexual hegemony specifies “a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse” (Salih, 2002, p.89). Though Butler defines that the stable notion of gender no longer exists, she does stress that rules of gender have predominated the world before our presence and the world needs this “reiteration” and this “heterosexual matrix” to survive the way it is working momentarily.

B. Food, Body and Identity

Emma Parker (1995) states that there is this “cannibalistic nature of the relationship between women and men in Atwood’s fiction” which follows as an effect on another binary categorization of “consumed” and “consumer” (p. 363). Counihan in her *Anthropology of Food and Body* affirms this idea that food will provide women with “comfort, numbness, and pleasure” in order to be away “from sexual exploitation” (1999, pp. 80-81). Marian’s way of seeing people is so much affected by the idea of “consumed” food, and its relation to women specifically reveals itself when she associates women’s body with food and vegetables. For instance, she sees Clara’s oversize pregnant body as the “swallowed watermelon” and her tired expression like a “strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber” (Atwood, 1969, pp.30-31) and her colleagues in the gathering as “the roll of fat” (Atwood, 1969, p.171). This obsession with the embodiment of women comes to be problematic for Marian, in fact for all women, for this includes a fallacious involvement in “unrealistic standards” which will eventuate to the “distorted perception of their own and other’s bodies” (Counihan, 1999, p.81). The misleading perception that Counihan explains, signifies Butler’s theory that the “ontological autonomy”, which has been assimilated with “discourse or signification”, reveals the falsehood of gender and body as both being “fiction” (Salih, 2002, p.134).

One would recognize that non-eating in Atwood’s novels resembles the “powerlessness”. What Parker (1995) concludes about Marian is that non-eating can also represent “a protest against that powerlessness” (p. 350). Duncan, the cadaverous figure who is against all the normality from society’s perspective, elaborates this fact to Marian that she is “rebellious against the system” by her non-eating (Atwood, 1969, p.198). Duncan with his “fragile” body is the foil character for Peter, whose traditional style of manhood and his appearance are all against Duncan’s traits. Duncan, like Marian, expresses his protest against the patriarchal system and cultural normality by refusing all the deep-rooted way of behaving, in a similar way of eating so little. Duncan’s apartment is the symbol of the minimal life which those outcasts like Duncan and his friends are living. Marian’s inclination towards Duncan ratifies Butler’s idea of “performativity” when Butler states that an “identity” of a “subject” is a “performative construct”, signifying the search and act for finding this individuality through the chaotic, but still normal grounds of living (Salih, 2002, p.45). Marian is living in a world which its survival and continuity demands “the conventional categories of sexual identity” that are following to gain the aim of “normalizing regimes of heterosexuality” (Kirby, 2006, p.50). Duncan opens up this possibility to Marian, by degrading the mentioned “normalizing regimes” and unshackles her from the net of restriction that society, marriage and her gender have set on her. Marian’s having affair with Duncan, negates the traditional assumption of womanhood, passivity and commitment in marriage. She opposes “the parodic repetition of gender” which pervades among all as the “illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance”, though no one is heedful of its illusory notion (Butler, 2006, p.220). Duncan discloses a nonconventional type of personality, wishing to be an “amoeba” for they are “shapeless and flexible” (Atwood, 1969, p.207). His reference to the shape and body of amoeba, can be considered of what he desires: the limitless interpretation of his existence, without any categorical definition. Thus he potentially motivates Marian to see the other side of endurance in the society, which demands rejection of rooted normality.

Atwood's references to the loss of self do not come to end with only materialistic and concrete images of food. In the sixth chapter when Marian recounts her dream briefly, she cannot remember it well, since she sees the reflection of herself in the mirror immediately upon her waking up. The only thing she can remember is her "feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly" and her "transparent" "fingers" (Atwood, 1969, p.43). How her body seems to be vanished, how escaping her figure appears, is what Butler points out as the unstable notion of physical figure. Marian's vanishing body represents this "unfixability" that Butler has maintained as the inseparable aspect of a "subject". Female body and "gender hierarchy" are only social constructions and norms which have been set by "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 2006, p.198). But the references to the vanishing body of Marian have the denying power of the rooted norms, while she returns as a stronger female character at the end of the novel. At the end of the novel this condition becomes more tangible when Peter's presence hollows out her individuality. As Butler suggests, "the subject", the individual human being in the society, is "a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses" (Butler, 2006, p.198). In this sense Marian appears as the "I" who has problem with the "Other" who is Peter here, and later on with the defined identity he is imposing on her. Marian's process of changes is going towards the realization of the power of "I", the suppressed "subject" against the social construction of her identity. This is the dominant discourse in the society which is imposing this oppression of "I" as the "Other" gets more powerful.

She finds her engagement ring back "among the pennies, nickels and dimes", all resembling the materialistic side of marriage (Atwood, 1969, p.208). He possesses and evaluates her like his "new camera" by trying to grasp what was her "mechanism", which objectifies Marian's existence (Atwood, 1969, p.154). Marian's fathom of her own body is also fragmentary. She sees her own arms in the mirror as "fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible..." (Atwood, 1969, p.235). This is the lack of acknowledgement of her identity which makes her unresponsive to Peter's oppression.

At the end of the novel, this is eating that empowers Marian, making her return to her individuality and the lost power, even structurally narrating her own story again. She resists the "idealized, objectified, and sexualized images" of herself as a woman, when she begins eating and at the same time, gaining power to reject Peter as a "consumer" (Counihan, 1999, p.82). By rejecting Peter and the established opinion of body, she approves Butler's view that "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 2006, p.220). This proliferation happens to Marian, when she denies the imposed feminine role by Peter and she finds her strength back by eating. Though limited in ways of expression, gender depicts itself in this novel to have this mode of alteration when one needs a new voice. To understand Butler, one should focus on the possibility of the new expression Marian finds, in behaving more freely by ignoring the boundaries, when she encounters Duncan. By refusing the passivity that Peter was imposing on her, she supports the idea that her role of femininity "is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to "splittings, self-parody, self-criticism" (Butler, 2006, p.220).

Joe, Clara's husband also affirms this point that there is this difference between one's "core" and "femininity", while the later one's tendency is towards "passivity" (Atwood, 1969, p. 242). In order to achieve "the wholeness" which Ainsley accuses Marian of being deprived of in the beginning of the process of self-realization, she needs to overcome the so-called passivity (Atwood, 1969, p.40). The depiction of a woman, sank into the culture normality, is the image of the old woman, the owner of Marian's apartment, whose behavior is the "performativity" of the established patriarchal discourse. This old woman lacks the name, as she is the one that no one will remember her identity and she is only acknowledged in the story for the infinite limits and rules she sets in the apartment to control the inhabitants of the building (Atwood, 1969, p.11). Marian's struggle is not a futile one, since she shares the cake with Peter, symbolically showing the power she has gained again, concretely by eating and in the deeper sense by rejecting the rooted femininity role by undermining the gender identity she faces. She ends this internalized feeling that she feels as a victim, like a food to be "consumed" by confessing that to remain passive, to be part of "heterosexual matrix", has no consequence other than being eaten or oppressed.

IV. CONCLUSION

Resistance to what society defines as the normal and accepted identity is what calls for struggle. This is not an effortless task to go against what has been established for centuries, as a deep-rooted system of controlling. The superiority of power lies in the patriarchal system of governing and this is through the discourse that the power permeates. Margaret Atwood's various, but still complicated novels, are representative of the so-called struggle to acquire voice and the discourse which women have been deprived of. Though body and gender have been instituted prior to the existence of a "subject", there is still this potential to achieve individuality with the personal desires, though it might cost a "subject" with his/her exile and label of abnormality. What remains to be told, is the struggle of an individual which is worth to be indicated through literary lines.

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