

Food - The Replica Of One's Psyche

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Abstract

The fields of food studies have broadened to incorporate human gastronomy, culinary history, and the arts and humanities. In literature, food may represent many different things, such as power or social status, emotion, religion, culture, identity, family or relationships, gender, sexuality, wealth, and group identity. Food perception and consumption can be influenced by emotions. Emotions are intricately linked to choices in food, and the cultural ritual of eating, as well as to other emotional and physical repercussions. Emotional eating is a food habit that can be used as a projection of different coping mechanisms for emotions. Additionally, consuming more food under the emotional and psychological stress may be hazardous to one's health. Studies have shown that both good and negative emotions can have an impact on how much food is consumed and women are more prone to develop eating disorders. In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*, we find that the Protagonist develops food aversion because of an unhappy relationship with her fiancé and it worsens her bodily condition as she is one of the victims in a patriarchal society. This paper aims to change the people's mindset of considering food just as a source of energy and to make them accept that food represents them and their emotions by employing psychological theories.

Keywords

Emotions, Food, Identity, Patriarchy, Psychology, Food aversion.

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1. Introduction

Food literature is a multifaceted field of study that helps to understand the connection between food and the human experience. Food enables us to delve deeper into social, cultural, and economic issues and helps us to understand human life and society. Together with oxygen, water, and shelter, food is regarded as one of the essentials of life. Eating is a behaviour that has social as well as existential connections. In literature, food is used as a metaphor and symbol to represent power, religion, culture, identity, relationships, and emotions. Mental health can significantly impact our relationship with food, and some people may turn to food as a source of comfort or discomfort. In the novel *The Edible Women*, Atwood uses food as a metaphor to describe the protagonist's (Marian) mental health and her internal conflict. The food becomes an image of Marian's "struggle" and "ultimate revolt" between society's executed responsibilities and her own distinctive definition of self. This paper delves deeply into the connection between stress, anxiety, and emotional eating in the case of Marian. Additionally, it examines how depression can result in a reduced appetite or a lack of interest in food, employing a thorough analysis grounded in various psychological theories. This paper will shed light on the following research questions:

2. Research questions

- Is food solely a means of survival?
- Can emotional state have an impact on a person's daily food habit?

- Is it possible to utilize food as a symbol of rebellion and protest in oneself and in society at large?

3. Research objectives

- To Change the people's mindset of considering food just as a source of energy
- To conduct in-depth research on Marian, the protagonist's psychological state
- To discuss food aversion and how it deteriorates mental and physical wellbeing
- To comprehend the idea that food is a reflection of the individual

4. Literature review

In the realm of literary exploration, researchers have delved into various thematic elements and symbolic representations within Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Edible Woman*. Notably, Udhayakumar (52–56.) conducted an inquiry into these elements, unravelling hidden meanings and symbolism woven into the narrative. On a parallel track, Mouda (1-8) approached the novel through a feministic lens, particularly emphasizing the symbolization of women's body. While numerous scholars have acknowledged the feminist undertones and dissected the significance of food as a discursive, narrative, cultural, and ideological trope, a critical aspect has remained understudied—the examination of characters' internal conflicts and the application of psychological theories. There is still a lack of analysis regarding how psychologi-

cal theories pertaining to female identity development and crises can provide a deeper comprehension of the characters' psyches. This study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological dimensions of the characters and deeply examines the psychological aspects of how the characters' body perceptions affect their mental well-being. The primary objective is to deeply analyse within the context of psychology, filling an existing research gap in the literary analysis of the novel *The Edible Women*.

5. Background study

The protagonist Marian McAlpine's life is the significant part of the book. From the perspective of society, Marian appears to be a typical young woman, financially independent, engaged to a perfectly good man, and enjoying a comfortable future. These opportunities would be the lifelong dream of any young lady. However, as we follow Marian's life, we see that her mental state was not at peace with what was happening to her. Her interactions were making her feel uneasy and confused, which was why she was experiencing physical revolts and behavioural changes that she couldn't explain. Her mind was unprepared for the criticism and protest against the roles that society assigned for women, which led to unusual ideas and strange actions. This resulted in Anorexia Nervosa (eating disorder). She was unable to intake food causing food aversion. Marian's eating illness, anorexia nervosa, started the minute she agreed to marry Peter and got worse as the wedding date drew near. Her body began to separate from her mind. It was a sign of the anxiety she was feeling about the kind of future her marriage would bring as Peter controls and brings her into social constructivism. Unable to accept the decision of Peter, her body turned into a battleground in fear. The body's frenzied response included the reluctance to eat.

6. Fear of being hunted

Fear is a complicated and multidimensional psychological concept that affects human emotion and thought. Fear is an adaptive and natural reaction to perceived threats, real or imagined. It is essential to human existence because it warns people of impending threats and sets off the "fight or flight" reaction. A persistent fear or Chronic fear is that, it can affect one's physical and emotional well-being over time which is seen in Marian's life. Marian's fear is heightened as she perceives Peter as a consuming force in her life, leading her to resist traditional roles symbolized by certain foods. George Woodcock (153) criticizes this novel as "Emotional cannibalism. Emotional Cannibalism is the term used to characterize when someone unhealthily feeds on the emotions of others. The fear of being consumed by societal expectations is mirrored in her relationship with Peter. When Marian goes out drinking with Peter, her friend Len, and roommate Ainsley, she experiences the first stage of food aversion. Marian's disassociation from her body begins with Peter's narrating of a gruesome hunting story to Len. Marian is eventually shocked by Peter's account

of his hunting rampage. She learns that Peter likes to hunt and murder rabbits and is extremely fond of non-vegetarian food and treats animals cruelly out of pride and enjoyment. Her thoughts turn to him as the hunter and to herself as the hunted. A sort of opposition and protest against all Peter stands starts. She feels in the way that she is hunted by Peter through his patriarchal thoughts and she has been eaten up by Peter. It was later when Marian saw she was crying.

"After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet has materialized on the table near my hand. . . I must be crying then! (Atwood 81) After hearing Peter's hunting account, she began to identify with the victims of the animals, and as a result, her body refused to accept any non-vegetarian food. 'He put his hands on her bare shoulders and kissed her lightly on the back of the neck. "Yum yum," (Atwood, 230).

It is almost a mockery, an analogy of her current state being that of food eaten by men. The rebellion that her mind tried to evade turned inward, resulting in her body's sudden rebellious reflexes. As Marian contemplates the transformation that marriage with Peter would bring, her fear intensifies. The symbolic association with food choices reflects her apprehension about the expected changes in her identity. This act of Peter towards Marian is nothing but the emotional cannibalism. Prabhakar (44) rightly states: Marian finds herself reduced to the state of a destitute girl. She is extremely melancholic and feels dejected about future. Gradually, she realizes the futility of starving herself to death. She begins to see Peter in his true colours and recognizes her complicity in her victimization. She understands how she has allowed Peter to exploit and "eat" her. Thus, Marian is made a victim of symbolic cannibalism.

7. Anxiety and hallucination

In Marian's life, fear plays a significant role and manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it manifests as hallucinations, dreams, or fantasies. Other times it shows up as aberrant conduct or is dealt with via disobedience. Anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon that has been studied from various theoretical perspectives in psychology. It is possible to interpret Marian's food sensitivity and her difficulties meeting social standards as symptoms of unconscious tensions. Anxiety is seen as a consequence of irrational thoughts, cognitive distortions, and problematic behavioural patterns. Marian was deeply affected by the image of the cow that remained motionless and had dotted lines in her recipe book. She saw herself as the helpless cow that had no idea what would happen to it. She became aware of how long she had been content and was happy because she had no idea what would happen to her identity, meaning, or future. Her mind associated herself with the meat as a result of her subconscious identification with the cow and the way Peter was consuming cow's flesh, believing that Peter would do the same with her identity and personality. She was unable to comprehend the body's unexpected, rebellious impulses as a result of this anx-

ity. She was existing on canned rice pudding which also was rejected eventually, for she saw it as a collection of cocoons.

“But all at once she had poured the cream over it her eyes had seen it as a collection of small cocoons. Cocoons with miniature living creatures inside” (Atwood 253).

Hallucinations can distort an individual's perception of reality. Someone experiencing a hallucination may have difficulty differentiating between what is real and what is imagined. Since the story is told from Marian's point of view, her experiences are very individualized. Through revealing Marian's distinct perspectives, anxieties, and problems, the book explores her inner world, which could be comparable to the subjective character of hallucinations. She hallucinated her fear and thoughts with carrots. She started to feel as though the carrots were screaming due to this extreme phobia. She expressed her own concerns about what was within Peter's flawless personality through the sound of the carrots screaming, her worry of what might be buried in the meal, or her fear of the vitamin pills.

“She became aware of the carrot. It's a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive...” (Atwood 93)

The book employs literary devices to delve into the depths of Marian's mind, giving readers a vivid picture of her inner conflicts and the difficulties, she encounters in balancing her own sense of self and society expectations.

8. Alienation from her own body

Alienation in psychology refers to a state of disconnection or estrangement that an individual may experience from oneself, others, or the surrounding environment. Marian's life lacks the obvious personal ties of love and sharing with her family. Her life appears to be marked by a sense of estrangement from her family. Had her family provided emotional support and care, her predicament and sufferings would not have occurred. Most likely might have been diminished. When she does what is right and not what she wants, she starts to feel alienated. Marian has always craved a sense of belonging. She didn't feel comfortable in her apartment with Ainsley or in her relationship with Peter.

“I locked myself into one of the plushy-pink cubicles and wept for several minutes. I couldn't understand what was happening, why I was doing this; I had never done anything like it before and it seemed to me absurd.” (Atwood 81)

While the novel doesn't delve deeply into Marian's family background, her interactions with her family members. There is no reference to her childhood trauma and there is no clear projection of why Marian rejecting conventional role of a women and thus the psychological perspective to understand the past trauma is shallow. This condition of not getting what she desires reflected through her body resulting in food aversion. Marian's connection with food is a reflection of her feelings of isolation and loneliness. Her act of selective

eating draws attention to her inner issues and separates her from expectations from her family and society. Marian's internal world is symbolized by food, which also expresses her emotional state and the difficulties she has balancing her need for autonomy with the demands of her family and society.

9. Freudian concepts

Analysing the character of Marian, we can apply Freudian psychoanalytic concepts of ID, Ego, and Superego to gain insights into her experiences and behaviours. The ID stands for the innate, primitive part of the mind that craves instant satisfaction. Marian's initial opposition to marriage-related expectations and conventional duties for women may have been a reflection of her ID. Marian's reluctance to consume meat reflects her desire to resist societal expectations and the traditional role of women in relationships and marriage.

The Ego serves as a mediator between the ID and the outside world, trying to satisfy needs in a way that is acceptable to society. Marian's battles with her identity and social expectations are an example of how her ID and ego are at odds. Marian's ego is always active as she negotiates her relationships and social roles. For instance, Marian's deliberate choices and avoidance of particular meals, such engagement chicken, demonstrate her willingness to either comply with or defy social standards and demonstrate the impact of her ego.

The Superego represents internalized societal and parental values, forming a moral compass. Marian's Superego is likely influenced by societal expectations, family values, and cultural norms. Marian's internal struggle and guilt associated with her food choices mirror the societal expectations and moral standards that have been internalized. The Superego, in this context, becomes a driving force behind her emotional turmoil. Eating or refraining from particular meals turns into a metaphor for Marian balancing her own desires with those of society. Her shifting connection with food is a reflection of both her internal conflict and her changing identity.

10. Cognitive behavior

Cognitive-behavioural theories emphasize the interplay between thoughts, behaviours, and emotions. Marian's change in eating behaviour may be linked to shifts in her cognitive processes, such as changes in her beliefs, attitudes, or self-perceptions. By developing a new relationship with food towards the end of the book, Marian partially reconstructs the new persona, or notion of self. As she turns Peter down as a life partner, she bakes and gives him a cake shaped like a woman, dubbed the "edible woman." She is able to eat again, which is a sign that the Marian has discovered who she is. The art of baking provided Marian with a way to liberate herself. The creation of a woman shaped cake provided her a confidence that designing her life was in her hands. ‘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.’ (Atwood, 276) He runs away, scared, and she is left

with her appetite recovered, ready to star devouring her cake. Williams (70) in her study observes: "The Edible Woman in the shape of a cake is the symbolic punch-line in Atwood's food metaphor in the novel, representing Marian's exposure of the threat posed by Peter to her autonomy and her reclamation of agency" After undergoing cognitive restructuring, Marian was able to reclaim a more normal eating pattern by confronting and changing her negative beliefs and fears related to food. This helped to improve her behaviour.

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11. Conclusion

In the novel *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood skilfully demonstrates how food has evolved beyond its basic use as nourishment to become a multifaceted symbol that affects psychological behaviour and may be a potent weapon for social revolt against established conventions. The novel deftly incorporates food symbolism into the story, highlighting its complex influence on the development of the individuals' identities, bonds, and acts of defiance. *The Edible Woman* emphasizes that food is a complex means of expressing feelings, wants, and resistance in addition to being a means of nutrition. The book challenges readers to think about the enormous effects that food has on people's psychological states as well as the ways in which it is related to food can express more fundamental meanings or even operate as a form of protest. Thus, this paper claims food is not just an energy source but also the reflection of one's psyche.

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