

# Female Identity and Autonomy in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle

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**Abstract**—This paper examines the representation of female identity and autonomy in Margaret Atwood's novels *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976). Both novels address societal expectations and personal struggles as women navigate patriarchal norms. By analyzing the protagonists—Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman* and Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*—This paper addresses the research questions like: How do *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* explore the concept of female identity? What strategies do the protagonists use to achieve autonomy, and how successful are they? In what ways do these novels critique societal norms? The paper highlights Atwood's critique of traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and the female pursuit of self-realization. Central themes such as food, body image, creativity, and self-determination are explored to demonstrate the psychological and societal pressures shaping female autonomy.

**Index Terms**—Identity, Autonomy, feminism, rebellion, self-realization

## I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most celebrated and influential writers, renowned for her profound storytelling and sharp social commentary, born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada. She has built an illustrious career as a novelist, poet, essayist, and environmental activist. Atwood's work often explores themes such as feminism, power dynamics, identity, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Atwood is a prolific poet, with over a dozen collections to her name, and a vocal advocate for social and environmental causes. Her distinct voice, versatility, and willingness to tackle complex issues have cemented her place as a literary icon of our time.

Margaret Atwood is renowned for her exploration of feminist themes and her incisive critiques of societal norms. In her novels, she vividly portrays the lives of women as they wrestle with cultural expectations and personal agency. *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* are two pivotal works that embody these concerns. These novels are not merely stories of rebellion but nuanced explorations of identity and autonomy in a world defined by gendered expectations.

The protagonists, Marian McAlpin and Joan Foster, confront crises of identity as they struggle to define themselves beyond societal roles. Their journeys, while distinct, share a focus on the negotiation between societal conformity and individual desire. Through food imagery, body politics, and creative self-expression, Atwood critiques patriarchal structures that restrict women's lives.

Feminist literary theory provides the foundation for understanding Atwood's exploration of female identity and autonomy. Influenced by works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, feminist criticism examines how literature reflects and critiques gender inequalities. Atwood's protagonists embody the struggles described by these theorists, particularly in resisting societal roles that reduce women to objects of consumption or conformity.

### A. Identity and Autonomy

Identity, in feminist terms, refers to the self-definition of women outside prescribed societal roles. Autonomy is the capacity for self-governance and self-realization. In patriarchal systems, women's autonomy is often undermined by expectations tied to domesticity, beauty, and submissiveness. Atwood's novels

foreground these conflicts, portraying the journey toward autonomy as both internal and external resistance.

Atwood incorporates class, body image, and societal expectations in her portrayal of identity.

These elements intersect to create unique challenges for her protagonists, highlighting the multifaceted nature of oppression.

#### Female Identity in Lady Oracle and The Edible Woman

Margaret Atwood is widely celebrated for her insightful explorations of female identity, autonomy, and resistance to patriarchal norms. Her novels *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman* serve as profound critiques of the societal constructions of femininity and the pressures faced by women to conform to rigid gender roles. Through the experiences of Joan Foster and Marian McAlpin, Atwood delves into themes of body image, autonomy, rebellion, and the fragmentation of self, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's struggles in navigating societal expectations.

## II. SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF FEMININITY

Atwood situates both *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman* within societal frameworks that impose rigid ideals of femininity. These frameworks define women through roles such as homemaker, wife, or object of desire, leaving little room for individual autonomy. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin is a young professional in 1960s Canada, a time when societal expectations for women revolved around marriage, family, and conformity to consumerist ideals. Marian's engagement to Peter encapsulates these expectations. Peter, with his affluent, polished demeanor, represents the archetype of male dominance, envisioning Marian as a compliant partner who fits neatly into his preordained life plan. Marian's increasing unease with her role in this relationship manifests as a physical rejection of food, symbolizing her subconscious resistance to being "consumed" by Peter's and society's expectations. The novel critiques the commodification of women, who are expected to be simultaneously ornamental and self-sacrificing.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster's journey is shaped by societal beauty standards and gender roles. As an overweight child, Joan experiences shame and ridicule, internalizing the idea that her value is tied to her appearance. Her eventual weight loss and

transformation into a glamorous woman reflect the societal pressure to conform to narrow definitions of beauty. Yet, Joan's double life—one as a Gothic romance writer and another as a woman hiding her past—underscores the performative nature of femininity. Joan's story critiques how societal expectations force women to adopt multiple, often contradictory, identities to survive.

#### Body Image, identity and rebellion

The protagonists in both novels grapple with their bodies as sites of conflict, rebellion, and identity formation. Atwood uses the body as a metaphor for the societal control women endure and their attempts to reclaim agency. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian's relationship with food is deeply tied to her sense of autonomy. Her gradual inability to eat parallels her growing realization that her identity is being subsumed by societal expectations. The climax of her rebellion is the creation of a woman-shaped cake, which she offers to Peter, symbolically reclaiming her agency by refusing to be "consumed" in either a literal or metaphorical sense. Marian's rejection of food and her eventual decision to leave Peter signify her resistance to societal norms and her quest for self-definition. Similarly, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan's struggles with her body reflect her struggles with identity. As a child, her obesity marks her as an outsider, leading her to retreat into fantasies and literature. As an adult, her weight loss allows her to conform to societal beauty standards, but it does not resolve her internal conflicts. Joan's double life as a Gothic romance writer mirrors her fragmented identity, where her public persona conceals her private insecurities. Atwood critiques the idea that physical transformation alone can resolve deeper issues of self-worth and autonomy.

Both Marian and Joan embark on journeys of rebellion against the roles imposed on them, ultimately seeking autonomy in their own ways.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian's rebellion is initially passive, expressed through her refusal to eat. However, as the novel progresses, her actions become more deliberate. By the end of the novel, Marian breaks off her engagement to Peter and reclaims her identity. Her decision to eat the woman-shaped cake she baked signifies her reclamation of agency, as she no longer sees herself as an object to be consumed by others. This act marks her rejection of societal norms and her embrace of a more authentic self.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's rebellion is more dramatic. Trapped in an unfulfilling marriage with Arthur, Joan stages her own death to escape the constraints of her life. This act of faking her death symbolizes a desire to shed her constructed identities and a new start. However, Joan's escape is not without complications, as it reflects both her agency and her ongoing struggle with authenticity. Atwood portrays Joan's rebellion as a complex process of self-reinvention, illustrating the challenges of breaking free from societal expectations while staying true to oneself.

#### A. Narrative Style and Identity

Atwood's narrative techniques in both novels emphasize the fragmented and multifaceted nature of female identity. The use of dual narratives and shifting perspectives highlights the internal conflicts faced by the protagonists.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's Gothic romances serve as a reflection of her inner world and her critique of societal norms. These escapist fantasies allow Joan to explore themes of power, vulnerability, and agency, offering a counterpoint to her constrained reality. The interplay between Joan's private and public personas underscores the performative aspects of her identity, revealing the dissonance between how she is perceived and how she perceives herself.

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood employs shifts between the first-person and third-person narration to depict Marian's fragmentation. The use of third-person narration during Marian's period of alienation reflects her dissociation from her identity, while the return to the first person at the end signifies her reintegration and reclamation of self. This narrative technique reinforces the theme of self-discovery, showing how Marian moves from passivity to apathy.

#### Exploring Female Autonomy in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*

The concept of female autonomy has long been a focal point of feminist literature, serving as a lens to critique societal norms and examine the complexities of gender dynamics. Margaret Atwood, a prominent figure in Canadian and feminist literature, uses her works to unravel the layered struggles through protagonists Marian McAlpin and Joan Foster. Atwood explores themes of societal pressure, identity fragmentation, and rebellion. Both characters confront external constraints imposed by gender norms and the internalized expectations of compliance.

#### B. Mutual Framework: Feminism and Female Autonomy

The mid-20th century marked the rise of second-wave feminism, a movement focusing on issues like workplace inequality, reproductive rights, and personal freedom. Central to the feminist discourse of the time was the idea of autonomy—women's ability to make independent choices in the face of social and institutional pressures. Margaret Atwood wrote *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* during this period, reflecting the ethos of feminist liberation while challenging the traditional roles assigned to women. Autonomy, as defined in feminist theory, transcends mere independence; it involves the ability to shape one's identity free from societal and patriarchal expectations. During the 1960s and 1970s, women faced rigid gender roles, with societal success often tied to marriage, domesticity, and motherhood. Atwood's novels serve as critiques of this framework, illustrating the tension between societal conformity and the pursuit of selfhood.

#### Female Autonomy in *The Edible Woman* Marian as a Symbol of Societal Conformity and Rebellion

Marian McAlpin begins her journey in *The Edible Woman* as a woman emblematic of societal conformity. She works a monotonous job in an advertising agency, a setting that reflects the commodification of individuals, particularly women. Her engagement to Peter, a successful and conventional man, further aligns her with societal expectations. Marian's life is structured by routine and a superficial sense of security, yet this stability masks her growing dissatisfaction.

Peter serves as a symbol of patriarchal control in Marian's life. Their relationship, though outwardly ideal, epitomizes the societal pressures that define women's worth through their roles as wives and mothers. Peter's obsession with appearances—exemplified by his meticulous planning of their engagement photos—reveals his desire to mold Marian into the perfect partner. Marian's acquiescence to these demands initially underscores her internalized acceptance of societal norms.

However, Marian's psychological rebellion begins to manifest through her relationship with food. Her progressive inability to eat symbolizes her subconscious rejection of societal roles. Food becomes a metaphor for consumption and control, with

Marian's refusal to eat reflecting her resistance to being "consumed" by the expectations placed upon her.

#### C. The Turning Point: Rejecting Societal Norms

The pivotal moment in Marian's journey occurs during the dinner party scene, where she observes Peter's dominance and her own passive complicity. This realization triggers her descent into psychological turmoil, marked by her inability to consume certain foods. Marian's internal rebellion culminates in the creation of the "cake-woman," a symbolic act of defiance. By baking a woman-shaped cake and offering it to Peter to consume, Marian reclaims her agency. This act subverts traditional gender roles, with Marian asserting control over her identity rather than allowing herself to be devoured—literally or metaphorically.

#### D. Marian's Transformation

By the end of the novel, Marian's decision to leave Peter signifies her rejection of societal conformity. Though her future remains uncertain, her actions demonstrate a newfound autonomy. Atwood's conclusion avoids offering a simplistic resolution, emphasizing the ongoing nature of Marian's journey. Marian's autonomy lies not in achieving a specific ideal but in her willingness to question and redefine her identity on her own terms.

#### Female Autonomy in Lady Oracle

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster's struggles with identity form the crux of her journey toward autonomy. Unlike Marian, whose rebellion is primarily psychological, Joan grapples with the fragmentation of her identity. From a young age, Joan is subjected to her mother's criticism and societal expectations of beauty and femininity. Her weight becomes a battleground for control, with Joan's body serving as a site of resistance against her mother's demands.

Joan's dual life as a gothic romance novelist and a poet symbolizes the dichotomy between societal expectations and personal authenticity. While her gothic romances cater to traditional notions of femininity and escapism, her poetry reflects her deeper, unexpressed self. This duality underscores Joan's inability to fully reconcile her public and private identities.

#### Escaping Male Control and Societal Expectations

Joan's relationships with men further highlight her struggle for autonomy. Her marriage to Arthur, though initially liberating, becomes another source of constraint. Arthur's idealism and need for validation trap Joan in a caretaker role, mirroring the societal expectation that women prioritize others over themselves. Similarly, her affair with Royal Porcupine and her interactions with Paul reflect the limitations of male-dominated relationships.

Joan's decision to fake her own death represents a radical rejection of societal and personal constraints. This act, while extreme, underscores her desperation to escape the roles imposed upon her. By erasing her old identity, Joan creates the possibility of starting anew. However, this escape is not without its complications, as Joan must confront the consequences of her actions and the realities of self-reinvention.

#### E. Joan's Journey Toward Self-Acceptance

Joan's narrative arc ultimately leads her toward a nuanced understanding of autonomy. Her journey is marked by moments of humor and absurdity, reflecting Atwood's critique of societal expectations. By the end of the novel, Joan achieves a sense of self-awareness, acknowledging the complexities of her identity without succumbing to external pressures. Unlike Marian, whose rebellion is more overt, Joan's autonomy lies in her ability to navigate and accept the multiplicity of her identity.

#### F. Comparing Marian and Joan's Journeys

##### Similarities

Both Marian and Joan grapple with societal expectations and the patriarchal structures that seek to define their identities. Food emerges as a recurring symbol in both novels, representing control, consumption, and resistance. Marian's refusal to eat and Joan's struggles with her weight reflect their respective battles with societal pressures. Additionally, both characters experience moments of rebellion that challenge traditional gender roles.

##### Differences

While Marian's journey is rooted in psychological rebellion, Joan takes more drastic physical and geographical steps to assert her autonomy. Marian's transformation is quiet and introspective, whereas Joan's actions—faking her death and fleeing her old life—are dramatic and unconventional. Joan's

narrative is also marked by a greater use of humor and absurdity, contrasting with Marian's more subdued tone.

#### G. Feminist Themes and Literary Devices

Atwood employs a range of literary devices to explore feminist themes in both novels. Symbolism, particularly through food, clothing, and physical transformation, plays a central role. Marian's cake-woman and Joan's weight fluctuations serve as metaphors for their struggles with identity and control. Narrative techniques such as duality of voice and fragmented storytelling further emphasize the complexity of the protagonists' journeys. Atwood critiques the patriarchy by highlighting the ways in which societal norms constrain women's autonomy, while also celebrating their resilience and capacity for self-reinvention.

### III. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* provide profound insights into the struggles of female identity and autonomy. Through Marian McAlpin and Joan Foster, Atwood critiques societal norms that reduce women to objects of consumption and conformity. Both novels emphasize the importance of self-definition and autonomy, though their resolutions highlight different approaches to these challenges. Atwood's exploration of food, body image, and creative expression remains relevant in contemporary discussions of gender and identity. Her work invites readers to reflect on the constraints of societal expectations and the possibilities for female empowerment. In *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood presents nuanced explorations of female autonomy, illustrating the tensions between societal expectations and personal agency. Through Marian and Joan, Atwood critiques patriarchal structures while emphasizing the importance of self-definition. These novels remain deeply relevant, offering insights into the ongoing struggle for gender equality and individual freedom. Atwood's work not only reflects the concerns of second-wave feminism but also resonates with contemporary debates about identity, autonomy, and the pursuit of a life unbound by societal constraints.

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