

Consuming and Being Consumed: Cannibalism in the Consumerist Society of Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman'

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Abstract

*The article explores how Margaret Atwood demystifies the romance plot in her first novel *The Edible Woman* by exposing the world of consumerism as artificial and threatening to the point of cannibalism. This is revealed through references to fairy tales and myths with cannibalistic undertones such as 'Snow White', 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. It is also highlighted in the reference to the theme of the eaten heart in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. In the tempting world of advertisements and commercials, women are objectified and traded and their roles are diminished. In this realm, Marian, the protagonist, is in search of her identity but first tries to 'adjust' to society's artificial and delusional narrative. The advertisements dictate a behaviour, objectify her body and force her to comply with preformed roles. She consciously tries to defend herself from this consumerist mentality by allowing her body to 'speak' for her. Her body starts to refuse food and she feels it is alive, until it cuts itself off. Therefore, showing how she refuses to 'adjust' to the consumerist society. The narrative points out the inherent cannibalistic quality of the consumerist society in which human beings are commodities and their roles are dictated by commercials and the ferocious rules of profit.*

Keywords: intertextuality; cannibalism; postcolonial; consumerism; patriarchal; eating disorder; advertisement

'Nonsense,' she said. 'It's only a cake.'

The Edible Woman (Atwood, 2009)

In her first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (published 1969), Margaret Atwood exposes the world of consumerism as artificial and threatening to the point of cannibalism. This is revealed through references to fairy and folk tales with cannibalistic undertones such as 'Little Red Cap', 'Snow White', 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' (Wilson, 1993: 82-83).¹ It is also highlighted in the reference to the theme of the eaten heart linked to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Fourth Day, first and ninth stories) and to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. The narrative explicitly mentions *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll and refers to commercials and advertisements of the 1960s.

In this paper, I argue that the intertextual discourse in *The Edible Woman* underlines the cannibalistic aspect of consumerist society, which matters significantly in the reading of the text. Through intertexts and allusions, Atwood shows how the tempting world of advertisements exercises a power that moulds individual identity and influences people's behaviour and that its final aim is sheer profit. It is a constructed world of fantasy where individuals are supposed to attain happiness and satisfaction through consumption. At the same time, its cannibalistic undertones menace and force people into prescribed roles, threatening their integrity. Furthermore, in Atwood's novels, the concept of cannibalism is linked to postcolonial discourses in the sense of the colonisation, exploitation and objectification of women's bodies. As McWilliams claims, in *The Edible Woman* 'food takes a new resonance in the feminist and postcolonial discourse of [Atwood's] fiction' (McWilliams, 2006: 63). Atwood explores Canadian identity and culture in relation to female identity in more detail in her second novel, *Surfacing*, and in *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian literature* (both published 1972). Nevertheless, these concepts are already present in *The Edible Woman*. In this novel, according to Tolan, 'Canada is caught between two opposing power positions. It is both the ex-colonial nation ..., and it is undeniably a First World nation, with a position of privilege and power in the world' (Tolan, 2009: 143). In Atwood, 'the examination of women's power is frequently employed as a metaphor for Canada's experience as a postcolonial nation' (Ibid: 144). Consequently, the concept of identity is shifting and 'the boundary between self and the other – between colonizer and colonized – is fluid and uncertain' (Ibid: 144). At the same time, Canadian society is also an 'invader-settler society' (Ibid: 149) that is complicit with the domination of the coloniser.

The Colonised Woman's Body

In Atwood's novels women need to camouflage and mimic the roles dictated by society to survive. The strategies of colonial power are described as 'irony, mimicry, and repetition' by Homi Bhabha (**Bhabha, 1984: 126**), appropriating and threatening the 'other' if they do not comply with the dictated roles. The colonised subject is defined as '*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*' (**Ibid, emphasis in original**). This underlines ambivalence, a forked discourse where the subject is alienated and discriminated against by apparently logical and rational discourses. Therefore, according to Bhabha, the inherent contradiction of postcolonial theory violates the 'rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality' (**Ibid: 132**), turning from mimicry to menace and triggering irony. In this perspective, a woman's body is constructed for a man's pleasure and adapted to his desire and to the needs of society. Women are surveilled and controlled by men's gaze and their horizons are limited to being a mother, a carer and a lover to fulfil social and political purposes as an object of pleasure that also reproduces the species. Society can be said to be cannibalistic, threatening women's survival if they do not comply with their role. Its apparently rational discourses hide ruthless exploitation of women's bodies and the logic of profit of the consumerist society. The narratives and intertextual references in *The Edible Woman* highlight the inherent cannibalistic quality of the consumerist society in which human beings are commodities and their roles are dictated by commercials and the ferocious rules of profit. It is consuming 'for its own sake, without thought, discretion or taste', in a mass market where the subjects are induced to accumulate (**Bartolovich, 1998: 206**).

Similarly, according to Maria Mies, the exploitation and colonisation of women as a foreign land are connected to a postcolonial mentality that emerged in the patriarchal capitalist society, fragmenting and objectifying the 'other' so that it was seen as an 'enemy' (**Mies & Shiva, 2014: 5**). The female body is fetishised and mechanised to transform it into a profitable machine, a resource that is appropriated and manipulated so that it can be exploited to supply commodities in a consumerist system (**Mies, 2014b: 26, 33**). In a similar way, native lands are considered empty, unexploited by Indigenous peoples, and therefore the appropriation of their resources by the colonisers is considered an improvement instead of a violation (**Ibid: 32**).² Nevertheless, the abuses committed by colonisers against Indigenous peoples is not exactly the same kind of abuse committed by men against women. In fact, white women are part of the dominant society and therefore have a privileged status compared to Indigenous peoples and other groups that are discriminated against, such as Black people.

Mies also observes an increasing 'tendency towards domesticity' in the nineteenth century that secludes women in the home (**Ibid: 102**). Therefore, the housewife becomes a 'social category', and an 'agent of consumption', creating new needs and 'a market for the new products' (**Ibid: 105, 106**). Similarly to native lands and Indigenous peoples, 'women's labour is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water' (**Ibid: 110**). It is an 'internal colony' that is exploited in the same way as 'external colonies' (**Ibid: 110**). This process is necessary for the 'ongoing capitalist accumulation' process (**Ibid: 170**) that sustains modern society. The work is unpaid and does not empower women (**Federici, 2002: 62**); on the contrary, it 'has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers ... has been built, and the secret of its productivity' as well as the 'source of capital accumulation' (**Federici, 2004: 8**).³ In this context, the implicit cannibalism of the consumerist society is evident in the desire for an absolute and unlimited consumption that needs to deplete the increasing mass production by over-accumulation.

As Jerry Phillips claims, consumerism is therefore linked to the Marxian concept of 'primitive accumulation' in which capitalism is cannibalism, a vampire that thrives 'on the blood of the living' (**Phillips, 1998: 186**). It is a 'corporeal dismemberment' in which workers' labour becomes a commodity that is '*disembodied*, detached from the persons who perform it' (**McNally, 2011: 13, 14, emphasis in original**). Therefore, the workers' bodies are fragmented and subjected to surveillance and to the system of machinery (**Ibid: 15**). Marian's body's resistance to this tendency through starvation is evidence of her rebellion against the current consumer role. Her struggle to recover a wholeness of mind and body testifies to this risk of fragmentation and mutilation inherent in the consumerist society.

In opposition to this consumerist world, the objectified exploited female body speaks a distinctive language, taking control of the actions of Marian McAlpin, the protagonist. It leads her to an awakening and self-discovery and to alternative identities to the stereotyped female roles that surround her. It takes action by running away, refusing food and vomiting, or searching for renewal in sexual exploration that encompasses sexual self-pleasure, cleaning, cooking and eating food. Thus, her body speaks of rebellion and subversion while her mind keeps aligning to society's rules. The final act of metaphorical cannibalism (eating the woman-shaped cake) is a reappropriation of the body and the dissolution of the 'enemy' in digestion: the woman is considered to be like a submissive, glossy doll.

The protagonist's eating disorder can be interpreted as an act of self-cannibalism, a 'symbolic (self-) destructiveness' that exposes a 'failure to achieve autonomy' in a society that does not allow self-determination (**Sceats, 2004: 64-65**). Simultaneously, it reveals a creative attitude that

reshapes the self in a 'ritual of eating [that] becomes metamorphosed into a creative expression' (**Hobgood, 2002: 154**) and exposes different visions of being human.⁴ The body becomes capable of resistance and expresses subjectivity through powerlessness, overcoming the dictated mind/body split (**Ibid: 155**). Atwood proposes a re-reading of the female body that 'dismantles the culturally-encoded concept of femininity ...; women must re-embody themselves and consequently re-embody culture' (**Sanchez-Grant, 2008: 79**). This possible new ontological vision rewrites the narratives through the body that is resisting the conventions and the consequent danger of becoming edible.

Therefore, in this context, anorexia nervosa is linked to 'body construction and relationships' and self-identity (**Mancini, 2010: ix**).⁵ Consequently, refusing food implies a protest and signals the autonomy of the person (**Ibid: 164**). It is an 'extreme way to affirm oneself', to modify the body by 'not wanting to be the one whom a person *is*' (**Ibid: 164, author's emphasis**). The image the anorexic person conveys is both weak and strong in a game of 'consumption and destruction' where the woman's body is 'deconstructed and rebuilt' (**Ibid: 165-166**).

The dichotomy between mind and body is revealed as menacing, contradictory and aiming to control women's behaviour. Simultaneously, Marian's marginal position allows her to develop a different vision that is more fluid, flexible and always in process. As Howells claims, this vision is 'possibly multiple' and 'in constant transformation' (**Howells, 2003: 20**). It is a logic of becoming, a process connected to experience that is expressed in actions and body language to affirm their existence. In this sense, 'the anorexic is the victim of representation, trapped in embodiment through stereotypical and alienating images – but at the same time ... only a realistic, nonrepressive and less regulative form of representation will allow women to see themselves as autonomous subjects' (**Bray, 1998: 35**). In this context, eating disorders are a way of opening a woman's body to other possibilities, 'in terms of bodily activity rather than in terms of a repressed or negated "normal" body' (**Ibid: 37**). It is a way of 'thinking-through-the-body and of establishing the corporeal ground of intelligence' (Bray, 1998: 46) in a process of 'self-formation' that is both 'forms of critique' and 'the production of a "being otherwise"' (**Ibid: 58**). Therefore, Marian, through her 'symbolic form of anorexia' (**Sceats, 2004: 98**), not only defies the consumerist society and rejects the women's roles forced on her but also reshapes her body and consequently her identity. She creates possible alternatives that go beyond dichotomous views and point to multiplicity and transformation.

In this perspective, cannibalism has a double significance; it is predatory in the consumerist male-dominant society, and, in an anorexic view, it allows a new vision that reshapes the body and mind in a re-embodiment of culture, suggesting possible alternatives. The intertextual connections emphasise this progress in the protagonist's journey in search of her identity, which is both personal and national. Nevertheless, as Tolan claims, Canada is in an ambiguous position; it is a colony of settlers that exploited the new land and assimilated Indigenous peoples, dispossessing them of their territories, and it is a colony itself, exploited by Britain and influenced by the US.⁶ Though Atwood seems to suggest that Canada and women impersonate the role of victim in modern society and that the emancipation of Canada is linked to that of Canadian women (**Zidan, 2013: 13**), Canada can also be seen as a victim that colludes with the victimiser. Similarly, 'women collude in their oppression (in being edible), through passivity and the assumption of innocence' (**Sceats, 2004: 98**). Therefore, they need to reconsider the victim position and reshape their identity both at a cultural and a personal level towards a more disengaged autonomous vision.⁷

Most critics highlight the centrality of the female body in the narrative and how it voices the protagonist's protest against the constrictive and exploitative roles and rules of the male-dominant society, which in part coincides with the consumerist society (**Howells, 2005: 20, 23**). Marian's body 'becomes the site of victimisation, internal conflict and rebellion' (**Ibid: 23**) and 'is subject to sudden metamorphoses, transformations which are symbolic of her mental state' (**Hill-Rigney, 1987: 20**). Marian's refusal of food is interpreted as a rejection of the roles and identities proposed by society, and her prescribed destiny is revealed in both the Pension Plan of the market company she works for and the models of wife and mother proposed in the narrative (**Wisker, 2012: 37**).⁸ Her 'loss of appetite marks a resistance to pre-designated roles as both consumed and consumer' (**Davies, 2006: 60**). Her powerlessness is silently acknowledged and leads to a split between body and mind, a crisis and displacement in which the body's self-cannibalism blackmails the mind (**Palumbo, 2000: 74**). The body becomes 'a figurative text' (**Davies, 2006: 61**) that is written and rewritten, resignified in a palimpsestic approach (**Ibid: 67**), in an attempt to shape an alternative identity. It speaks a non-verbal language, a concept pointed out by several critics regarding Marian but also other characters, such as Duncan in relation to his ironing obsession (**Greene, 2008: 31**). In the final performative action of making a sponge-cake woman, Marian creates an edible substitute, a sacrifice (**Ibid: 12**) for the market of the consumerist society in which she was traded as a commodity, affirming that 'she is not food' (**Wilson, 1993: 96**). Simultaneously, by eating the cake, Marian becomes a consumer again,

which entails ‘empowerment ... aggression and participation in the *status quo*’ (Sceats, 2004: 99), denoting ‘the impossibility of transcending the “system”’ (Greene, 2008: 12). Power shifts: the objectified woman is hungry again and therefore powerful. Bouson underlines the ‘female protest and revenge in the final – and controversial – cake-woman scene’ (Bouson, 1993: 32) as a ‘way out’ from ‘the traditional romantic and novelistic ideology that insists on marriage as the end point of the story of female maturation’ (Ibid: 37). Therefore, the reduction of people to objects to be traded in the consumerist marketplace exposes the objectification of women (but of men too, who need to comply with certain gender roles and are forced into the position of consumer) – their diminishment and complicity. The control exercised by the consumerist society through alluring advertisements induces accumulation and forced consumption.

In this context, the relation with food permeates the whole narrative, defining ‘the main characters’ growth and development’ (McWilliams, 2009: 76). It is ‘an ideological weapon’ (McWilliams, 2006: 69) that implements a political protest in power relations where eating and not eating mark the difference between authority and subject and where the body is a battlefield.⁹ At the end of the novel, the protagonist ‘operates’ the cake, pulling, scooping, nipping and decorating it in a symbolic repetition of the painful and diminishing process she has undergone. By eating the cake, she metaphorically cannibalises the female stereotype she was trapped in (Sanchez-Grant, 2008: 90), which underlines the impossibility of avoiding a cannibalistic reciprocity in the consumerist society. It also envisages a possible alternative in refusing to be totally moulded by the consumerist society in a more conscious and disciplined relationship with the products, which implies creativity. Consumption becomes ‘a passion that needs to be tamed into accepted, rational forms of capitalization or self-improvement’ (Asquer, 2012: 3). Therefore, the body needs ‘to be controlled and restrained, but also had to be transformed, modified, and expanded by the self’ (Ibid: 3). A reshaping of the body and the self in a more conscious consumer perspective entails creative potential and, at the same time, aims to avoid addictions and manipulations (Asquer, 2012: 15).

In this perspective, consumption is linked to the different interpretations of cannibalism. It is considered ‘a product of European imagination ... a tool of Empire’ (Barker et al., 1998: 3) and a white man’s fabrication denoting a voyeuristic attitude (Price, 2003: xviii). At the same time, it is also a practice testified to by ancient and modern texts and interpreted as a way of ‘making sense of human life’ (Burley, 2016: 1) and coping with death. Therefore, cannibalism is considered a different conception of being human, as Montaigne points out in his seminal essay.¹⁰ It is a

complex concept that 'at some level tells us what it means to be human, on another level it separates the human from the bestial' (Price, 2003: 23). Simultaneously, consumption cannot be avoided, though it needs to be tamed.

This ambiguous meaning of cannibalism is reflected in the consumerist world of *The Edible Woman*, disguised in symbolic consumption (Parker, 1995: 363) that upholds profiteering. This generates behaviour that 'is perceived as normal human behaviour' and exposes 'the disturbing underside of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only thinly disguised as civilization' (Ibid). Therefore, consumerism feeds on the subjects, transforming them into objects, commodities to be traded in the production-selling chain where they are, simultaneously, cannibalistic consumers forced to stuff themselves. In this way, society itself is the symbolic coloniser that 'deceives the consumer through mimicry' (Mijomanovic, 2016: 70), forcing individuals into roles that control and exploit their behaviour. At the same time, being a consumer, and therefore a cannibal, seems to be part of being human and therefore cannot be avoided in the context of the novel.

Does Consumerism Equal Cannibalism? An Intertextual Reading of Consumerism in *The Edible Woman*

The cannibalistic nature inherent in the consumerist society is highlighted by the intertexts and allusions in the novel. Atwood exposes the artificiality and incongruities of modern society which hides a profit-aimed logic under the apparently harmless world of advertisements. It is a logic disentangled from rational discourses and linked instead to postcolonial strategies. Atwood's approach is critical; she questions the status quo, exploring possible alternative paths, but does not give a final solution. The open ending envisages uncertain alternatives without defining what will come afterwards and emphasises the necessity of a creative reshaping that encompasses a cultural re-embodiment in a possible new ontological vision. This does not deny a consumer/consumed relationship and envisages a possible more conscious way of consuming.

The allusions and intertexts work as citations and pastiche in an intentional self-reflexive discourse and expose the parodic significance of the story. Becker notes that for Atwood 'irony – like parody – presupposes a certain complicity with that which it contests, and that paradox remains unresolved' (Becker, 2000: 33). The novel's parodic intent and intertextual essence expose obsolete roles and patterns 'by mirroring them' (Hutcheon, 1980: 10), and parody is intended in its etymological sense as 'near' but also 'against' the text; it legitimises and is complicit with what it subverts – it is 'an exploration of difference and similarity' (Hutcheon,

1986–1987: 185-86). Parody is not only ‘mockery, ridicule or mere destruction’; it is a way to create a new form, which is ‘just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass’ (Hutcheon, 1980: 25). It is ‘an ironic form of intertextuality’ that deconstructs the ‘male-dominant culture’, revealing ‘the hidden gender encoding’ (Hutcheon, 2012: 110). Irony and parody are, therefore, critical tools Atwood offers to decode the implications of the text, presenting the intertexts and the events in an inverted oppositional way. Thus, she reveals the artificiality, incongruities and contradictions of the consumerist world and the contrived construction of women’s (and men’s) roles in society. Furthermore, according to a postmodern view, they ‘are never separate from political [concerns]’ (Ibid: 157) and from power implications. There is a hiatus between the apparently logical discourses of modern society and the disruptive narrative of the novel that prompts irony, whereas parody is an imitation that entails ridicule and defies traditional discourses. They both reveal intertextual references and allusions (Dentith, 2000: 6) that, in this case, criticise the consumerist society, emphasising the cannibalistic undertones of its narratives.

The protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin, is in search of her identity in a world of consumers where human beings are commodities, dispensable items in advertisements and commercials like all other products. Marian works for a survey agency, Seymour Surveys, her first job after graduating from university. The name ‘Seymour’ suggests ‘see more’, a pun that ironically comments on the claims of the company. As a matter of fact, ‘see more’ implies surveillance and clairvoyance but actually the company’s only aim is to find ways to ‘sell more’. This job gives her an inside view of the artifice of consumerism and, though her job is not clearly defined and does not satisfy her, it gives her some experience of the outside world. This is a world to which she would like to ‘adjust’, which she frequently repeats in an attempt to lecture herself, like Alice, and also to physically adjust to comply with the requirements of society, growing or diminishing according to the role expected.

Testing and tasting food are part of her job, obsessions that reveal Marian’s eating disorder. She is almost bulimic in the first part of the novel (she is constantly hungry), anorexic in the second (her body starts to refuse food but she feels it is still alive, until it cuts itself off) and seems to reach a balance in the last chapter. Her relationship with food reflects social disorder; her body rebels against the roles and rules imposed by society and refuses to consume, to absorb food, and to adjust to it. Her alienated, or split, self is also stressed by the shift from the first-person narrative in the first part of the novel to the third-person narrative in the second part, then the return to the first-person narrative in the last chapter.¹¹ At the narrative level, this highlights an attempt to reappropriate the self at the

end of the novel where the transformation has been enacted by body language in a reshaping that is both physical and mental.

The body, especially the female body, is where sociocultural control is staged in an act of power that aims to guarantee individual survival through nourishment and the survival of the species through procreation. Marian's body voices her unconscious rejection of survival and procreation in power relationships that threaten her individual integrity and are dangerous for her own being. She cannot and does not wish to survive in such an oppressive and aggressive environment, eventually flees it and looks for possible alternatives. Metaphorically, her body is aware that by absorbing food she is also absorbing the ideology of the consumerist society, as food means survival and dieting is a way to control the body image and consequently the body itself, from a social, cultural and political point of view (**Sceats, 2004: 62-63**). She risks becoming an advertisement in a false world where the 'real' is a combination of models; as Baudrillard states, it is a world of images that have no referents and are in a constant play of illusions (**Baudrillard, 1994: 6**). In fact, 'The generalized consumption of images, of facts, of information aims ... *to conjure away the real with the signs of the real*' (**Baudrillard, 1998: 126, emphasis in original**).

In this consumption-obsessed society, Seymour Surveys is described as a 'layered ... ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and ... the gooey layer in the middle' (**Atwood, 2009: 95, 345**). The gender division is clear as only men (executives and psychologists) work on the upper floor, engaging in intellectual work and directing whoever is below; women are in the middle, doing mechanical repetitive jobs (filing questionnaires, answering clients' letters and releasing surveys) and taking 'care of the human element' (**Atwood, 2009: 13**) – that is, the interviewers, low-paid housewives and interviewees, who make up the consuming public. Below the women are the machines, on a factory-like floor where anonymous workers print and distribute what is decided and filed above. The hierarchy reflects a rigidly structured society where roles seem unchangeable. Women's roles are vital but undermined and powerless, as are the roles of workers and machines on the bottom floor; the only difference between the two is that women seem to live in a more comfortable environment. In fact, while 'the operatives seem frayed and overworked and have ink on their fingers' (**Ibid: 13**), the women's floor is homely, with a 'chintz-curtained lunch room' (**Ibid: 14**), a tea and coffee machine and the gender-denoting pink washroom, though their spaces are, significantly, narrow and confined. This apparently pleasant female area not only denotes the construction of gender but also the imprisonment of women in prescribed roles that are alluring but seclude them in a tower of domesticity and femininity.

The influence of advertisements and commercials is obsessively present in every part of the characters' lives. Of course, the purpose of the commercials is to improve sales, which is the reason why Seymour Surveys exists, but also to dictate gender roles. Their targets are mainly women, who do the daily or weekly shopping and provide the household not only with food but also with cleaning products, clothes, tools and appliances. Though the main case study of the story is Moose Beer, which is targeted at men, women, as the main shoppers, are the tasters and buyers of food. As Becker claims, Atwood's protagonists 'resist and refuse representation without forgetting the seductiveness of media images of women' (Becker, 2000: 34). In the novel, women are seduced and cherish the products displayed in the supermarket aisles and soothed by 'gentle music', like cows who give 'more milk when sweet music [is] played to them' (Atwood, 2009: 213), as Marian notices. Therefore, advertisements are ambivalent shifting signs, 'figure[s] of dissimulation', as Kristeva states, with non-disjunctive characteristics; they mock and reaffirm, allure and deceive, and allow multiple interpretations (Kristeva, 1980: 47). Commercials train and force people to consume, as Baudrillard argues, without giving them real satisfaction and enjoyment (Baudrillard, 1998: 80, 84). Marian consciously defends herself from adopting this mentality, 'willing herself to buy nothing' (Atwood, 2009: 213) except what is on her list, which will lead her to become a more conscious and creative consumer. Nevertheless, she feels attracted by advertisements and by the apparently self-assuring role they grant; she wishes to comply with them eventually, to be sensible.

Similarly to the Moose Beer commercial which Marian needs to pre-test, the advertisements of the 1960s represent a man's world. Women make cakes, feed babies and do the laundry (actions which Marian performs in the story); or they are totally responsive to men's whims. This not only confirms and reinforces the confined roles of women assigned by society and mirrored in the narrative of the text, but also exposes the striking contradiction between the constructed world of the advertisements and ordinary people's lives. In this way, the rules are enforced (for example, pregnant and married women cannot keep jobs) and the roles are far from being ideal and satisfying. Marian's friend Clara is worn out by pregnancies, and Marian sees drab and sceptical housewives at the department store after she has been 'operated' on at the beauty parlour for Peter's party, a masquerade she does not enjoy but cannot avoid (Sanchez-Grant, 2008: 85).

The Moose Beer commercial is an intertext Atwood creates in the narrative that refers to the commercials of the 1960s, such as Canada Dry ginger ale commercials, in which 'a girl and a Canada Dry' are all a man

needs to be pleased, and women's role is to pour the drink (as Marian does repeatedly for Peter) or show off in a bikini or in a pretty outfit. It reiterates the performatively constructed essence of male and female roles and insists on the toughness of the 'real man', whose main hobbies are hunting and fishing in the wilderness. Confronted with the men's figures in the story, the advertisement's discourse reveals itself as parodic and comical but also threatening. In fact, Peter is a hunter – he has a display of his guns, rifles, knives and cameras in his room. Shooting an animal and 'shooting' a photo become synonymous in the course of the narrative; it is 'an issue of power', as Davies points out (Davies, 2017: 386). Besides, Wisker remarks that 'Peter's fascination with "shots", both by camera and gun, suggest death and imprisonment to Marian, who feels Peter will trap her in this role, this performance' (Wisker, 2012: 42). Davies also connects the 'predatory' use of the camera to Sontag's interpretation of photography, in which 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed' (Sontag, 1979: 4). This suggests that surveillance is control, and therefore power (Ibid: 4-5, 8). Sontag also points out that '[t]here is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera' (Ibid: 7), which implies an observation that looks like 'sexual voyeurism' (Ibid: 12). Nevertheless, Peter lacks the real 'tang of wilderness' as he is always well groomed and smells of soap, so he is more similar to a man in an advertisement than a 'stout-hearted fellow'; he is becoming a product of a commercial, a simulacrum, and even a copy of a copy, as Baudrillard claims (Baudrillard, 1994: 87). Peter is losing his integrity and identity, like Marian, though, being a man, he seems to be in control by exercising power over her.

The Moose Beer commercial comes to Marian's attention again at the restaurant while she observes Peter's 'capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressure ... and yet it was a violent action, cutting' (Atwood, 2009: 184). The aggressive and violent quality of the apparently innocent advertisement is revealed. The scene is followed by the report about a shooting by a young boy 'who had gone berserk', and his violence is referred to as 'remote violence ... a violence of the mind' (Ibid). This renewed attentiveness to the Moose Beer commercial has a palimpsestic quality (Genette, 1997: 399). It is a recurring sign, a 'process of resignification', that indicates 'shifting interpretations of the same sight ... depict[s] amended abductions' and denotes 'the narrator's growing awareness' (Shead, 2015: 30-31). Marian has different interpretations of the commercial, which form a map that guides her to an increasing understanding of the controlling and frightening quality of the advertisements and consequently of the consumerist society.

Thus, the advertisement intertexts are produced using a parodic technique that highlights the artificial, frustrating and destructive quality of the roles assigned by society in both a comic and a disturbing way. They expose patent incongruities that engender confusion and fear in the participants. Avoiding the rules is unsettling but sticking to them can be frightening. As Hutcheon claims, the parodic subversive quality of the trope of irony reaffirms and negates the power structures and attempts to change the sign from within to create an alternative (**Hutcheon, 1989: 154**). Marian's body opposes her refusal; it tries to break the circle, resisting the game of alienation and self-destruction imposed by the advertisements. She attempts to find an alternative path to reshaping her body through starvation to assert a new self.

By using parodic techniques of juxtaposition, reversion and contradiction in *The Edible Woman*, the world of consumerism and the romance plot are demystified and revealed as very different from what is depicted in the jolly, easy-going commercials. They are a glossy layer that covers a grubby society whose relationships are based on constructed, enforced rules that engender confrontational and threatening behaviours. Men are predators disguised as rescuers (but are also manipulated in their turn) and women are objectified entities at their disposal, potential victims (but also self-victimised) who nurture 'fantasies of power and revenge' (**Bouson, 1993: 12**) and try to find their voices.

In this perspective, Marian's friend Duncan, whom she meets during the Moose Beer commercial interviews and at the laundromat, is considered a mentor and a double, or a function by most critics.¹² It is Duncan who points out cannibalism's connections to the Moose Beer commercial, citing the *Decameron*, two Grimm Brothers' fairy tales and *Titus Andronicus* (**Atwood, 2009: 58**). He refers to the first and ninth stories in Fourth Day in the *Decameron*. Both stories are about the killing of the male lover (by the father in the first story and by the husband in the ninth). The hearts of the dead lovers are offered to the unfortunate female lover in each story, who eventually commits suicide. The Grimm Brothers' stories about cannibalism are 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Snow White'. *Titus Andronicus* has a notoriously violent sanguinary plot involving multiple murders, rapes and cannibalism. All the stories involve cannibalism, in the specific offering and possibly eating of the lover's (or the enemy's) heart, or of the whole body. The heart is also ironically and metaphorically evoked in the Valentine heart-shaped cake Marian buys and offers to Peter. Significantly, he eats the cake after making love, a performance in which Marian is guided and objectified, but Marian spits out the cake, feeling it spongy against her tongue 'like the bursting of thousands of tiny lungs' (**Ibid, 258**).

Moreover, the women in all these stories have horrible deaths, like Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* (who is violently raped, her tongue and hands are cut off and she is then executed) and the girl in 'The Robber Bridegroom', who is raped, cut into pieces and eaten by the robber. Snow White is momentarily saved, and the huntsman takes an animal's heart instead of her heart to the queen, but then Snow White is poisoned by the queen. Significantly, the only woman who ends up alive and free is the robber's bride, who witnesses the murder and keeps the severed finger of the dead girl to prove her story. This is a warning for Marian, whose love life is in crisis and whose failure to attain love may lead to real or symbolic death in the form of starvation or self-effacement. Therefore, the intertextual link made by Duncan between advertisements and violent stories of women's murders is a metaphoric anticipation of what is going to happen to Marian when she chooses to marry Peter in accordance with the conventions of the modern fairy tale and fake romance in the commercials. This is her fate, unless she becomes aware of her state and keeps a record of what is happening, like the robber's bride.

Cannibalism emerges again when Duncan calls Florence Nightingale a cannibal, as 'hunger is more basic than love' (**Atwood, 2009: 120**). This reveals 'all-consuming female hunger', an aspect of Marian's self she is not aware of, and reverses the selflessness inherent in the nurse figure (**Bouson, 1993: 26**). This is stressed even more by the quotation in the advertisement, 'GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE' (**Atwood, 2009: 121**), in a sinister suggestion that highlights the wish of the woman to be in control and to subdue the invalid male, presenting herself as a saviour (**Hill-Rigney, 1987: 31**). Once again the allusion to the advertisement inverts expectations and problematises gender roles.

In this context, Marian's split role is reiterated in her uncanny experience of getting dressed for Peter's party and seeing the reflection of the two dolls in the mirror that she wishes to dispose of in her new married life. The blonde one looks like Marian dressed up for the party; the other one is older, with an open mouth and a 'red felt tongue inside and two china teeth' (**Atwood, 2009: 125**), which are reminiscent of women's cannibalistic hungry side suggested by Duncan. They are 'two overlapping images; drawing further and further away from each other; the centre ... would soon be quite empty ... they were trying to pull her apart' (**Atwood, 2009: 275**). However, neither of them seems to represent the role Marian wishes to acquire in her search for an alternative self and in the reshaping of her body.

Absorbing the 'Enemy'

In the progress along her 'corkscrew path' (Carroll, 1994: 81), Marian runs away from Peter's party. He, threateningly, wishes to freeze her in a doll-like photograph in an 'aesthetic consumerism', as Susan Sontag states about photography in general, and wants to imprison her, to make her 'stand still' in her dolly image (Sontag, 1979: 24, 163). She repudiates the masquerade of the glossy party doll and her objectification implemented at the beauty parlour where they beautified her head 'like a cake', 'an operation' (Atwood, 2009: 261, 262) Marian undergoes rather than chooses.

Though Marian does not seem to know her definite route, the effects of the episodes of awakening and self-awareness she experiences throughout the narrative, both consciously and unconsciously, take her to the final production of the woman-shaped cake and to the breaking of her engagement to Peter. In this search she is guided by her body, which speaks a pre-linguistic code that acts instead of her mind, which is too constructed by the dominant roles and is distracted by the charm of consumerism.

After Marian's rejection of the simulated world of advertisements and in her search for an alternative identity, her immersion in the ravine, a womb-like cavity but also the wilderness, at the end of the story, is 'close to absolute zero' (Atwood, 2009: 333). Her being 'as near as possible to nothing' (Ibid) suggests a wish to start from zero, from a prehistoric past – a reappropriation that is also an inevitable misplacement. Looking for a safety net, Marian retries playing the usual role of damsel in distress, asking Duncan to speak with Peter, but this role is rejected in Duncan's discourse and she finds herself climbing up the path alone. This confirms the protagonist's complicity in her role of victim and objectified doll.

Marian's rejection of the narratives of the consumerist society and of its dictated roles entails the need to efface ancient and materialist myths and go back to a prehistoric, pre-amphibian past connected to the Canadian wilderness, a concept that Atwood develops further in *Survival* and *Surfacing*. The ending of *The Edible Woman* is ambiguous and fragmented. Marian regains her appetite and devours the woman-shaped cake, metaphorically cannibalising the glossy doll Peter and the consumerist patriarchal society wished to transform her into. Nevertheless, in her act of eating she affirms her complicity, becoming a consumer again, though for survival and pleasure. In this perspective, fiction itself becomes consumable (McWilliams, 2009: 76). In a disseminated world, as in Atwood's poem 'A place: fragments', 'there is no centre;/the centres/travel with us unseen' and 'identity:/something too huge and simple/for us to see' (Atwood, 2012: 87). As Baudrillard and Derrida state,

there is no referent, no centre and a loss of the centre (**Derrida, 1967: 427**). The consumerist society only apparently grants safe roles; its signs are shifting, ambivalent and menacing. Its binary power structures devalue human beings, reducing them to advertisements that exert power and aim to sell more and to dictate roles.

At the end of the novel, the preparation of the woman-shaped cake Marian was supposed to personify is Marian's performative pre-language and body language response to all the attempts at assimilation she has endured. It is an offering mainly conceived for Peter but also for the other characters in the story, as an edible substitute that should satiate their consumerist hunger and grant her freedom and survival (**Atwood, 1992: 15**). But no one seems to appreciate it except Marian and Duncan. In a final act of metaphorical cannibalism that negates and reaffirms the roles of consumer and consumed, Marian eats the body and Duncan, significantly, eats the severed head of the cake. This is an act of reappropriation and consumption to ensure that the 'enemy', that is, the role of the glossy party doll they were enforcing on her, is definitely destroyed and, simultaneously, assimilated. Duncan's final remarks communicate the multiple perspectives in which the 'so-called reality' can be interpreted. Misquoting 'Burnt Norton' as 'mankind cannot bear too much unreality' (**Atwood, 2009: 352**), he unbalances the quality of the quotation and alludes subversively and ironically to the metanarratives of the whole story. Suggestively, he ends the novel with the word 'delicious', an appropriate conclusion that, though open-ended and unresolved, seems to grant that at least two people from the story are going to attempt a different path in an endless process of cultural re-embodiment. This is not just a point of departure for Marian and Duncan (**Shead, 2015: 36**), who end with an uncertain future, having no roommates, no jobs and live in an unchanged society, but a question mark that implicitly asks the reader to take a stand.

In Marian's negotiation with the body (her body, marked by starvation, manipulation and objectification), she finally compromises in a search for wholeness that entails domesticity and acceptance of the basic rules of survival: eating. She is still a consumer, but a more conscious one, who is not so easily deceived by advertisements. The final acceptance of her female body and the reshaping of her self through starvation have prompted a transformation that envisages a more conscious way of being a consumer. Simultaneously, the parodic use of intertexts reveals and exposes the dangerous cannibalistic implications of the consumerist society that entail defending oneself from its alluring and threatening roles. Marian resists conventions in her progress towards self-affirmation and attempts to find a different path at personal, national and ontological levels.

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Endnotes

¹ Wilson highlights that 'Marian in *The Edible Woman* consumer-product-tests a society in which everyone and everything, including nature, is product and consumer' (Wilson, 1993: 64). She also remarks that 'The Robber Bridegroom' is one of the central intertexts of the novel where the different motifs of the fairy tale are repeated in a parodic key (Wilson, 1993: 87-88).

² According to Mies, in the passage about moving from feudalism to capitalism, a new role was created for women; it is 'the creation of the women ... as consumers and demonstrators of luxury and wealth, and at a later as housewives' (Mies, 2014: 100).

³ Federici also links the persecution of the witches in Europe and in the New World with the colonisation of new lands and to the creation of enclosures that expelled the peasants from their lands in Europe (Federici, 2004:

12), connecting the devaluation and erasure of woman's power with a political movement that aimed to exploit 'natural' resources and accumulate capital.

⁴ Hobgood claims that anorexia is a misnomer because it is not lack of appetite but 'absence of desire' (Hobgood, 2002: 154). She remarks that '[i]n Marian's case, her body rejects foods that have the quality of vitality' and that 'critics have read Marian's anorexia as a resistance to consumerism or to preformed models of femininity' (Ibid: 155).

⁵ Howells states that Marian's eating disorder is not proper anorexia nervosa but 'a pathological condition of self division' where the mind and body act against each other and where the body rebels against the female institutionalised roles that surround her (Howells, 2005: 27-28).

⁶ About Tolan, see endnote 1. Coulthard claims that the politics of the Canadian government has changed from genocide and assimilation to recognition and accommodation, confirming the colonial praxis and domination to 'facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority' (Coulthard, 2014: 6-7). Therefore, colonialism becomes a form of 'structured dispossession', which is linked to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation.

⁷ Coulthard recognises a similar strategy concerning Indigenous peoples when she says that they need to recognise themselves as 'free, dignified and distinct contributors to humanity' (Coulthard, 2014: 43).

⁸ The concept of motherhood in the novel is very different from Adrienne Rich's re-evaluation of motherhood. As we will see, pregnancies wear women out and married women are supposed to quit their jobs.

⁹ Notably, in the introduction to *The Canlit Foodbook*, Atwood notes the significant number of texts about cannibalism in Canadian literature at a metaphorical level and at actual levels and positions the act of eating as 'our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk' (Atwood, 1987: 2). Therefore, it is a pre-language act linked to survival that permeated human beings before there was any constructed societal influence. In Chapter 9, she includes the extract from *The Edible Woman* where Marian makes the cake woman.

¹⁰ Montaigne believes there is nothing savage or barbarian about cannibalism 'sinon que chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage' (except that each of us calls barbaric what is not one's custom (author's translation)) (Montaigne, 1969: 254). This situates cannibalism, and consumption, in a wider perspective as part of being human in certain contexts and therefore as shaping the self. Furthermore, the Christian Eucharist meal involves a relevant ambiguous aspect because it implies the need to offer oneself to satisfy the cannibalistic demands of the other.

¹¹ Wilson remarks that the 'distant third person' suggests 'alienation not only from society but from herself' (Wilson, 1993: 84-85).

¹² Tolan speaks of Duncan as 'an embodiment of Marian's subconscious' (Tolan, 2007: 30), while Bromberg states that Duncan has an important role but does not wish to rescue her; on the contrary, he establishes a relationship of 'otherness and separateness' which seems more genuine than the traditional romance (Bromberg, 1988: 19-20). However, Duncan is a character rather than a pure function (though he accomplishes some functions in Marian's search for identity) and has a fundamental role in Marian's self-discovery and reflects Marian's lack of eating in his 'emaciated figure' (Atwood, 2009: 53); he is her alter ego or double (Grace, 1978: 93; Hill Rigney, 1987: 29-31; Banerjee, 2016: 22).