

Female and Animal in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*

Somasree Sarkar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Salesian College, Siliguri, West Bengal, India &
Research Scholar, Department of English, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India
E-Mail: somasree.2008@gmail.com

Abstract - The philosophy of European Enlightenment has valorized the supremacy of man, owing to his rational faculty. The universal notion of human centrism is responsible for creating the 'other', also perceived as the 'lesser'. The Western philosophy for long has upheld binaries – human/non-human; soul/body; sex/gender; man/woman and so on. Such crippling binarization has led to discriminations, claiming the dominance of one over the 'other'. It has facilitated the subjugation of the 'other' by the assumed superior power through the politics of prejudiced representation of the 'other'. The postmodern philosophy along with feminism questions the politics of universal representation. The postmodern studies have looked into the crevices of the Enlightenment enterprise and have argued that the endeavor has been the prerogative of white males. So, it is necessary to debunk the long nourished notion by decentering (hu)man. The body of postmodern studies seeks to represent the marginal through the unprejudiced lenses of tolerance. It is important to note that any non-(hu)man – whether it is an animal or a woman, is considered to be the 'other' of man. Both are subjected to violation by male. In the consumerist society, animals and women both, suffer from the threat of consumption. The male centric society has encroached upon the realm of animals as well as of women, depriving them of their fundamental rights of living freely and independently. The research paper critically argues the ethical violation of animals and women, both marginalized by the male dominated consumerist society. A parallel is drawn between the two "lesser-than-man" communities. To serve my purpose, I have chosen Atwood's novels – *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*. Both the novels explore the issue of woman's identity in the patriarchal system. The novels seek to redefine the identity of woman by identifying them with animals.

Keywords: Enlightenment, other, animal, woman, identity, consumption

I. INTRODUCTION

I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (Atwood, *Surfacing*, p.173).

"One of the hallmarks of humanism", highlights Cary Wolfe, is "its penchant for the kind of pluralism, in which the sphere of attention and consideration (intellectual or ethical) is broadened and extended to previously marginalized groups, but without in the least destabilizing or throwing into radical question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralization" (Wolfe, 2010, p.100). Human's predilection to include plurality has allowed

connection between human across the world, but the process has vastly excluded the species other than homo sapiens. Wolfe has argued, "debates in the humanities and social sciences between well-intentioned critics of racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, and all other -isms that are the stock-in-trade of cultural studies almost always remained locked within an unexamined framework of speciesism" (Wolfe, 2003, p. 01). 'Humanism' stands on the belief that man is at the center of the universe. The notion has its basis in the Bible, which says that God has created man in His own image. The Humanist philosophy thus, holds its basis in religious faith and prefixed notion. It is important to recall Foucault's essay "What is Enlightenment?" at this juncture. He notes,

It is a fact that at least since the seventeenth century what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse" (Foucault, 1984, p. 41).

Foucault points out that 'humanism' is replete with its own prejudices and assumptions. Though the Darwinian theory of evolution has dismantled the long held humanist faith and has shown clear resemblance of man with animals, the post-Darwinian world has seen an increase in the repression of animals and other non-human beings by human. Perhaps, man has taken greater effort to subdue and subjugate his 'other' (animals). Human has shown "absolute responsibility" (in Derridian sense) towards his fellow human beings, while being irresponsible to the 'other' (animals) and innumerable living things (known or unknown) on the Earth. For Derrida, 'absolute responsibility' towards the 'singular other' (human in this case) is constituted by the irresponsibility towards the general 'other' (animals and numerous other living beings). The "absolutes of duty and of responsibility" call for a "betrayal of everything that manifests itself in general" (Derrida, 1992, p. 66). In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida writes:

By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen [. . .] I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billion of

my fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows) . . . (p. 69)

Human sacrifice of the 'other' has led to the treachery towards animals and has caused an encroachment upon their space. The growing consumerist society has consumed the non-human space in the recent decades, ignoring the ethics of responsibility towards the 'other'. The violation of ethics towards the 'other' has come under serious criticism. Several environmentalists and writers, who have empathized and identified with the 'other', have voiced their opinions directly or symbolically through their writings.

Margaret Atwood's novels often indicate at the violation of animal life by human, simply for the sake of human mirth or for human advancement. Atwood's female protagonists seek to redefine and reinterpret their position in the male dominated consumerist society. In the process they often identify themselves with animals that are also losing their space in the consuming human world. Atwood draws a parallel between the marginalized conditions of animals to that of woman in the patriarchal society. With this respect the paper endeavors to analyze Atwood's novels *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972).

II. IDENTIFICATION WITH ANIMALS

The protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin, otherwise, displaying a 'normal' conforming behaviour, reacts strangely, beyond her ability to comprehend the nature of her own action, while listening to an anecdote of hunting a rabbit, narrated by her fiancé, Peter. He narrates:

So I let her off and Wham. One shot, right through the heart. The rest of them got away. I picked it up and Trigger said, "You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts'll fall out". So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me . . . (*The Edible Woman*, p. 80)

Marian visualizes the scene as a slide projected on a screen in "a dark room, the colours luminous, green, brown, blue for the sky, red" (p. 80). She imagines Peter with his back to her and his group of unknown friends with their faces are clearly visible in the sunlight "splashed with blood, the mouth wrenched with laughter" (p. 80). But she does not see the rabbit. For Marian, the rabbit has been reduced to naught by the cruelty and treachery of Peter and his companions. So, the rabbit is not visible in her vision. She fathoms the meanness and destructiveness involved in this bloody deed of slaughtering an animal for the trivial purpose of mirth. She realizes that it is a way of claiming superiority of man over 'others'. She experiences a moment of epiphany and identifies herself with the rabbit, entrapped by the hunter, Peter. She perceives her body as an object of

slaughter and consumption. She also realizes that her body can be imprisoned, subdued and disciplined forcibly. This moment of epiphany causes uneasiness in her body, it ejects tears, as an implication of a rebellion. It is a profound expression of deep rooted anxiety and an urge to emancipate, by transcending the defined borders, marked by the socio-cultural norms. From this moment onwards she begins to perceive herself as a victim, as the hunted rabbit. The feeling of victimization by identifying herself with the prey develops into a strange eating disorder. Marian repels away from meat. While eating, she imagines the stage of slaughtering a living animal:

She looked down at her own half eaten steak and suddenly saw it as hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. (*The Edible Woman*, p. 185)

Marian does not see the steak as a food, but as a cow which has been 'knocked' down and killed for consumption. She suddenly becomes aware of the 'absent referent', as coined by Carol J. Adams. Adams observes, "Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat" (Adams, 2010, p. 66). Marian sees through the linguistic disguise, assumed by animals (like 'cow' becomes 'steak') when served as food, as she conjures the phase of butchering a living animal. The 'absent referent' acts as a metaphor and triggers Marian's imagination that equates her body to a butchered piece of meat. For Marian, the equation between meat and female body, defines the violence and oppression imposed by the male dominated consumerist society upon women and animals both. She is threatened by the fear of being consumed, when Marian realizes the striking similarity between a woman and an animal in terms of edibility. Adams explains,

Butchering is the quintessential enabling act of meat eating. It enacts a literal dismemberment upon animals while proclaiming our intellectual and emotional separation from animals' desire to live. (2010, p. 66)

Marian's epiphany unveils before her the deep rooted discriminatory politics, existing in the patriarchal society, depriving 'others' (animals and women) of their basic rights to live independently. Entrapment of animals and women is an act of proclaiming intellectual superiority of man over them (the 'lesser/minor other'). In fact it is presumed women are lesser intellectuals, technically unsound, and lack "universal faculty" in Hegel's words. When Hegel claims women lack 'universal faculty', he claims in disguised words that anything 'universal' is associated with man. Therefore, the ideas related to Enlightenment, upholding the universality of knowledge, cater to the Western white male society, conveniently excluding women. Hegel with a high tone of skepticism towards women's abilities of intellectual proficiency further opines,

Women are educated – who knows how? – as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion. (Hegel, 1952, p. 67)

Such philosophy has been nourished by the Western society for long and it is responsible for the misogynist ideas, engrained in the society.

III. SUBVERTING THE CONVENTION

Identification of women with animals is a conventional response to the politics of identification of men with hunters and food gatherers since the beginning of human civilization. The image of man as hunters assigns power to him. Man solely is equipped with arms to tame animals and to claim superiority over them. Being the food gatherer, man is therefore, the source of living, in turn empowering him, placing him up the social order. The Humanist philosophy assumes man to be an autonomous entity, asserting his superiority over the ‘other’. ‘Other’ not only refers to animals, plants and rest of the non-human or inhuman beings, but it also bears a clear reference to woman, the lesser counterpart of man. Woman is the ‘other’/ ‘lesser’ of man. The European enterprise of Enlightenment with the motto “sapere aude” (have courage to use your own reason), as coined by Immanuel Kant, “rests in part upon a deeply gender-rooted sense of self and self-deception”, notes Jane Flax (1987, p. 626). Feminists in the recent decades have suspected such claims and have denied the claim of universality of experience, as such notions are predominantly the preoccupation of white males. Flax asserts, “These transhistoric claims seem plausible to us in part because they reflect important aspects of experience of those who dominate our social world” (Flax, 1987, p. 626). Man occupies a superior position in the social hierarchy and shapes the dominant experiences. It is largely an outcome of the politics of representation that leads to the systematic oppression of the ‘other’. Throughout the history of civilization, man has been perceived as active. His physical activities demand high protein and energy which is derived from meat. Often meat is said to be the food of man, whereas women can presumably thrive on carbohydrates and vegetables, presumed to be low in quality and considered as base food. Hegel in *Philosophy of Right* writes:

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand universal faculty such as more than advanced sciences, philosophy, and certain forms of artistic production . . . (Hegel, 1952, p. 167)

Hegel differentiates between man and woman by drawing a parallel to the difference, presumably existing between animal and plants. Hegel opines,

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals,

while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid . . . (Hegel, 1952, p. 167)

Interestingly, on one hand man is projected as superior to animals, while on the other hand, he is associated with animals, on account of his active physical abilities. Women are identified with plants, or vegetables, for their passive, ‘vegetable’ condition. Such discriminatory associations mold the culture of consumption. Food is not just a biological need, but it has a socio-cultural relevance as well. Food is not equally distributed among all, it rather varies from person to person, depending upon class and gender divisions. Food with high protein and high fat (meat, milk) is the prerogative of the upper class and more specifically upper class male. While, food with carbohydrates are to be consumed by the working class and women (both considered to be second class citizens). Adams observes, “Dietary habits proclaim class distinctions, but they proclaim patriarchal distinctions as well” (Adams, 2010, p. 48). When Marian discards meat and any kind of animal protein, she responds to the conventional assumptions on one level. Rejection of meat is a sign of her desperation to rebel against the male power, symbolized by animal meat. At the same time, the adoption of veganism marks Marian’s conformation to the cultural conventions, directed by the politics of sexuality, laced with food. Veganism provides her with a sense of security, a means of possible escape from edibility. The anxiety of identification with edible meat, causes the eating disorder in her. *The Edible Woman* highlights the symbolic cannibalism of the patriarchal system. Each man is a potential cannibal by nature. A woman needs to satiate the gluttony of male desires in order to fit into the social framework, defined by so-called ‘femininity’, to gain social acceptance. Marian regains her appetite after she desperately breaks away from her engagement with Peter whom she sees as a hunter, entrapping animal and woman both. She begins to see herself in disconnection with meat or food, only after breaking away from the engagement. She realizes that she has well resisted the web of oppressive system of patriarchy that engulfs a woman, who is identifiable with a helpless rabbit, hunted by male hunters for mirth; or a cow that is slaughtered for gastronomical presentation as steak. Regaining of appetite is a mark of redefining her identity after a period of confusion and struggle with the trauma of loss of identity. The novel makes a subtle dig at the unethical deprivation of animals in the advanced modern world by drawing a parallel between the deprivation of animals and the subduing of women in the male centric society. The subtle undertone of empathetic identification with animals in *The Edible Woman* finds a radical assertion in Atwood’s later novel, *Surfacing*.

IV. ATROCITIES METED OUT TO ANIMALS, HIGHLIGHTED IN *SURFACING*

Surfacing strongly highlights the issue of animal subjugation and deals with the ethical violation of animals. It is a narrative about the protagonist’s rigorous attempt to

identify with animals. The key moment of realization for the narrator comes when she encounters with a dead heron shot by a hunter and she meets with its dead gaze:

I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye. (*Surfacing*, p. 116)

The bird's fixed gaze with its 'mashed eye' instantly communicates with the narrator. For the first time the narrator's body reacts with disgust at the presence of an animal corpse. The contrast between the narrator's reaction and the cultural discourse is clearly marked by David's response to the dead bird. He captures it with lenses to portray it as a modernist art-film, ". . . it looks so great, you have to admit" (p. 117). The dead body of the heron is framed immediately to cater to human artistic vision. To the hunters, it caters to their mirth of sport. The response of David to the dead heron is representative of the anthropocentric view of animals as the 'other'. The carcass of the bird appealing to the aesthetic delight of man, proves the ruthlessness of man, who accepts atrocities on animals as natural that hardly demands any attention. The lackadaisical attitude of her companions intensifies her concern over the cruel act, as the narrator broods:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. (*Surfacing*, p. 118)

The motif of human is highlighted in the above quoted lines. The bird is killed for a display of power over animals, to flaunt human superiority and to prove their ability to ravage it and 'destroy it'. Such atrocities of human fill the narrator with hatred towards human beings, "men and women both" and she decides to "choose sides". She "wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, button (she) could press that would evaporate them [. . .] that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued" (*Surfacing*, p. 155).

V. MOVING TOWARDS ANIMAL

The third part of *Surfacing* gives a thorough account of the narrator's struggle to identify with her chosen side with animals. She secludes herself from other human beings in the forest which may be 'absurd' from the rational point of view, but for her "there are no longer any rational point of view" (p. 173). She cuts herself off of her human companions by deliberately making herself forlorn in the forest. She willingly gives up her rationality as she is no longer one among the rational beings (humans). The narrator peels off her clothing from her flesh and shuns the last bit of civilization. By shedding off clothes she goes

closer to nature and it becomes easier for her to identify with animals. Her naked body encounters with the gaze of a loon. Later, however, her nakedness is ignored by the loon. The narrator says, it "accepts me as part of the land" (p. 183). Her nakedness is no longer foreign to animals as she is one among them. In "The Animal Therefore I am", Derrida says:

I have trouble repressing a reflex dictated by immodesty [...] Against the impropriety that comes of finding oneself naked, one's sex exposed, stark naked before a cat that looks at you without moving, just to see (p. 372).

This feeling of 'impropriety' is unique to human beings because of their consciousness of nakedness and therefore, they are ashamed of being naked before the gaze of animals. Animals are naked without knowing it. "They [animals] wouldn't be naked because they are naked. In principle, [...] no animal has ever thought to dress itself. Clothing would be [...] one of the "properties" of man", claims Derrida (p. 373). There is only "experience of existing in nakedness" and animals are naked "without existing in nakedness", as animal(s) "neither feels nor sees itself naked. And it therefore is not naked" (p. 373). Animals are not conscious of their nakedness as they are always already naked. For animals, nakedness is not a part of a discourse or does not bear any social stigma. There is no opposite of nakedness in the form of clothing among animals. The narrator of *Surfacing* becomes naked by shedding off her clothes which she calls her 'false body'. She transcends the realm of discursive interpretation of nakedness and the feeling of impropriety and shame. She 'is naked' like her fellow beings, animals and not humans. The narrator deliberately annihilates her human identity to assimilate with animals. She expresses her anxiety about her identity, caught between the mistaken identity as a human being and her actual identity as an animal:

They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket [. . .] They won't be able to tell what I really am. But if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by feet from a tree. (*Surfacing*, p. 189- 190)

VI. CONCLUSION

Atwood's novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* seek to identify their female protagonists with animals, but from different perspectives. In *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist identifies herself with dead animals and she suffers from the psychosis of being consumed. Her anorexia is not a willing decision, but is a forced action directed by her body, acting independently, controlling her entire existence. Infact, it is through the suffering and eating disorder, she redefines her identity. Marian at the end, sees herself in disconnection with food or meat, that signals her return to her own self and coming to terms with her identity, once lost. Whereas, in *Surfacing*, the narrator-protagonist willingly chooses to reject human side to join the side of

animals, as she becomes aware of the resemblance existing between the victimization of women to that of animals. She deliberately strives to eradicate her identity as a human. It is her way of proclaiming liberation from an oppressive male centric society which makes a woman a powerless victim. The narrator asserts towards the end, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless . . ." (*Surfacing*, p. 197).

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