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Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

The Quest for Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's
The Edible Woman

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2015-2016

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus in a feminist reading of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* and the quest for female identity of its protagonist. I attempt to demonstrate that the structure and the elements of the novel constitute a parallel and a helping hand to the protagonist's quest, respectively. After a brief introduction to my work, I examined the structure of the novel whose parts mirror the stages of the protagonist's quest. I then explained in detail the elements and symbols through which this quest is carried out: consumer society (food and drinks) and the subject/object dichotomy, language, archetypes of gender and activity and passivity roles, and *normality* as it is presented in the novel. The conclusion reached at the end of the paper is that the protagonist goes on the quest for her female identity, rejecting her forcibly assumed social self and regaining her true female self.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, quest, identity, female, feminism.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo, me centro en una lectura feminista de la novela *La mujer comestible* por Margaret Atwood y la búsqueda de la protagonista de su identidad como mujer. Intento demostrar que la estructura y los elementos de la novela constituyen un paralelismo y una ayuda a la búsqueda de la protagonista, respectivamente. Tras una breve introducción a mi trabajo, he examinado la estructura de la novela cuyas partes reflejan las etapas de la búsqueda de la protagonista. Después, he explicado detalladamente los elementos y símbolos a través de los cuales se lleva a cabo esta búsqueda: sociedad consumista (comida y bebida) y la dicotomía sujeto/objeto, lenguaje, arquetipos de género y los roles de actividad y pasividad, y la *normalidad* tal y como se presenta en la novela. La conclusión alcanzada al final del trabajo es que la protagonista emprende una búsqueda de su identidad femenina, rechazando su yo social asumido por la fuerza y recuperando su verdadero yo como mujer.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, búsqueda, femenina, feminismo.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *State of the question*

The Edible Woman has raised a wide variety of essays, dissertation, journal articles, etc. Most of these written works have a direct relationship with the feminist movement, analyzing the women status in the patriarchal and consumer society. In order to analyse the importance of the quest for the female identity that the protagonist carries out, I have focused in the works that have been written in relation to the protagonist's journey of the self. I have followed a more metaphysical approach, for example, Rutherford's *Objectification, Fragmentation, and Consumption: A Consideration of Feminist Themes in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman*, in which the author goes beyond the plain concept of objectification and delves into the fragmentation of the self of Atwood's protagonist, caused by the oppressive patriarchal and capitalist system. Another example of this would be Pundir's "Marian's Search for Self in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*." which also deals with the theme of the recovery of the identity. Lakshmi's "Loss of Self in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*." provides background for the analysis of the theme of fragmentation and loss of the self in the novel. Another aspect related to the loss of identity of the protagonist is the passive role inherently attributed to the female gender by society, I have based some sections of my work in Bouson Brook's "The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Character in Margaret Atwood's "The Edible Woman"", which addresses this cultural burden that women experience and its influence in their loss of their identity as women. I have also dealt with other topics like language, anorexia and objectification. Food and eating disorders are main issues in the novel, most of the texts that refer to *The Edible Woman* deal with food, anorexia and body image or perception. Emma Parker's "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." and Lahikainen's "*You Look Delicious*" *Food, Eating, and Hunger in Margaret Atwood's* deal with the issue of the protagonist's anorexia. Some other authors, like Sanchez-Grant's "The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*." not only explore the theme of language, and more particularly language through the body, but also the possibility that eating disorders constitute a way of

communicating. Since these works did not examine this matter thoroughly, I expanded on that, proposing a feminist interpretation of the eating disorder that the protagonist of Atwood's novel suffers: a vision of anorexia as a way of communicating within the oppressive social order. The theme of objectification and consumer society applied to Atwood's novel has been dealt with in many works such as Khurana's "Female Self Objectification and Counter Discourses in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.", for example. Most essays written about this matter involve a harsh criticism against capitalism and consumerism or explore to which extent women comply in their own objectification.

The Edible Woman stimulated many critical works; most of them taking a feminist approach. However, the topic addressed in my work, the issue of the protagonist's quest for the re-attainment of her lost female identity requires further investigation.

1.2. Methodology

In order to elaborate my topic, I have carried out a thorough reading and subsequent analysis of *The Edible Woman*. Since the study of the main source was not enough to carry out my investigation, I had to broaden my analysis to a wide variety of sources. Some of them were not strictly allude to the novel, but are instrumental to explain some themes and topics that *The Edible Woman* explores, such as Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Lovaas and Mercilee's *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, Adam's *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. Aside from these readings, I have also consulted the dissertations and journal articles that I mention in the previous section of this introduction, to expand on some issues which I consider that required further analysis. I provided first a brief insight into the author's biography and some context to my research. Then, I defined my topic. My proposal is that in *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist, Marian McAlpin, goes on a quest for the recovery of her own female identity lost due to the subjection to male desires and the internalization of patriarchy. I intend to demonstrate how this quest for the female self

is reflected in the novel's structure, divided in three parts, and how certain symbols and elements present in the novel guide Marian through this quest and I provide ideas from documented sources and new approaches in order to do so. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the key points to my analysis.

1.3. *The author of the novel and its socio-cultural context*

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa on November 18, 1939, in Cătană's words "as the second child of a family with modest financial possibilities but with a deep love for knowledge". (Cătană 529) She is a very prolific writer and many of their works focus on women's issues. She planted her feminist ideas in many of her novels. However, when referring to *The Edible Woman*, Atwood is reluctant to describe it as feminist; she rather uses the word "proto-feminist". In *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Atwood claims that:

The *Edible Woman* appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as proto-feminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I am not gifted with clairvoyance though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors (Atwood 1982).

We have to point out that the feminist movement in Canada did not advance at the same pace than in other countries like North America. When referring to Canadian feminism, the second wave was not set in motion until the decade of the 1960's. This was due to the aftermath of the World War II, since women joined the work force because most of the men were sent to fight overseas. After the war, the "Baby Boom" phenomenon caused that many women would be relegated to be housewives. Working class women (who also had to dedicate themselves household duties) earned an inferior salary in comparison to their male counterparts. The wage gap was still present since the 1950s. It was middle class women who led the Canadian second wave, and this was possible because on the one hand, these women have had access to a superior education, and on the other hand, the contraceptive pill allowed women to have more control over their bodies and their

sexuality. Contraception and birth control enabled women to concentrate in their career.

According to Gray and Boddy:

Second-wave feminists challenged prevailing notions of the women's role in the family, workplace, and society. They highlighted the sexual division of labour and were instrumental in promoting women's equality in the labour market. Second-wave feminists sought to address diverse issues, relating to *inter alia* access to childcare, equal pay, employment and education opportunities, reproductive rights, and women and children's safety. (Gray 370)

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood focuses in de-constructing the gender politics and in how consumer society perpetuates these power relations among genders, privileging men. Because of this, and in spite of being described as "proto-feminist", this work raised an abundance of texts from the feminist literary criticism genre.

2. Theme: the journey of re-discovery of the female identity in Margaret

Atwood's The Edible Woman

2.1. Structure of the novel as a parallel with Marian's quest

The parts of *The Edible Woman* identify with the parts of the protagonist's journey towards regaining of her female identity.

The first part (From Chapter 1 to Chapter 12): the novel starts with Marian taking care of her roommate Ainsley that had a hangover, by making her breakfast, and she eats breakfast with her. This shows that Marian is totally integrated in the consumer society. Even though she is fully aware that she has a dead-end job, she is a woman with appetite – not only for food but for life. That is until her relationship with Peter gets more and more serious. Despite he thinks that women only want to marry men and catch them, he is the one that proposes to Marian. After becoming engaged she starts to be assimilated by him: she evens finds difficulty to express what she really wants, letting him decide for her. In Lakshmi's words, "Her identity becomes divided between what Peter would like her to become and what she believes herself to be. Soon, the former usurps the latter and Marian senses that she is being pulled apart like an animal in a disassembly line, piece by piece." (Lakshmi 2014)

A hunting story that Peter tells a friend of Marian in her presence, triggers the protagonist's anorexia (as in lack of appetite) because she starts to think of him as a hunter, as a ruthless predator. She begins to feel identified with food, starting with meat products. In this part, until this point, the story is told in first person singular. Marian is the narrator

of her own story, she is still in control of herself. But after Peter's proposal, she feels as though her mind has been emptied: "my mind was.....as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left me only with the rind to think with." (EW, 83). At the end of this chapter, Atwood deliberately shifts the point of view from the first person to the third.

The second part (From Chapter 13 to Chapter 30): in this part, the progressive alienation of Marian is shown in the form of the narrative technique: it is narrated in third person singular just after she has accepted Peter's proposal. Marian does not tell her story but the narrator is omniscient. The person used in the narration shifts when Marian starts to detach from her female self. She is not able to consume food, starting with meat-based products (animal victims), rejecting eggs and ultimately vegetables. During this stage, Marian gets closer to Duncan, a philology student which is the total opposite to her fiancé Peter. When Marian gets engaged to Peter, she is encouraged by her family and co-workers to quit her job and dedicate her to his soon-to-be husband and even start thinking of having children like her friend Clara. It is not Marian's desire but a societal expectation for young woman at the time: women were expected not to work and become housewives and mothers if they marry. Marian is not aware yet, but she rejects the traditional roles of femininity that are epitomized in the novel by the amalgam of female characters. The climax of the novel takes place in this part, when Peter throws an engagement party with his lawyer friends and their 'trophy wives' and she ends up fleeing the party and rejecting everything that Peter represents. After having completed the beauty ritual for the party, Marian looks herself in the mirror and she does not recognize herself. She feels completely detached of her genuine self, but Peter "especially loves her" in that fancy dress and

artificial hairdo. This is an important detail, as he loves her especially when she attempts to recreate the traditional female model of patriarchy: worried about her looks and submissive. After that, Peter wants to take a picture of her with a camera from his vast collection. She does not want to be photographed and she considers the camera to be a threat, and identifies it with a weapon. She fears that she is going to be captured forever in that artificial look and consequently in that artificial marriage that she does not want. As stated before, she eventually flees the party. She runs away when Peter takes one of his cameras out again and attempts to take a group picture. The protagonist goes in search of her special friend Duncan and sleeps with him. It is clear that, like Peter, Duncan has used Marian too but he has pushed her in her quest for regaining her true self. While both characters are lying in the snow, Marian tells him that she cannot go back to Peter and to the promise of an unappealing marriage and an unfulfilling life for her. Duncan encourages her to figure her situation out on her own and at the end she acknowledges that she cannot escape forever and has to face her problems. Atwood puts the emphasis on the fact that Marian cannot rely on anyone but herself to gain back her identity as a woman.

The third part (Chapter 31): it is the shortest part of the novel. This last part brings back the first person singular, a sign that the protagonist has regained her identity. Marian goes back to her place after spending the night with Duncan. Being unable to wash the dishes before as she considered the mould in the dirty dishes had the same right to live as her, her new self manages to clean the kitchen. Then she starts baking a cake shaped like a woman. This edible woman that gives the novel its title is very pretty and elegantly dressed in frills, wearing makeup and symbolizing the patriarchal ideal of beauty for women. Marian invites Peter over, serves him the cake and accuses him of trying to assimilate her and destroy her.

Peter is shocked by Marian's behaviour, so he leaves without even tasting the woman-shaped cake. Afterwards, Duncan comes over and both he and Marian eat the cake. Marian has regained her lost appetite and her lost female self. That is the reason why Marian narrates in first person the ending to her story as she has supposedly recovered her identity as a woman. However, it could be argued that this is an open ending and not necessarily a positive one. When Duncan learns that Marian has left Peter and is able to eat again she tells her that she's back again in society. Thus, Marian is back in the consumer and capitalist society, eager and ready to consume and be consumed again. She has come back to a patriarchal society where men victimize and women comply in their own victimization. Our protagonist might as well be in square one again, the story could be rewritten the same way once more, since the options for a young woman at the time remained quite limited.

These three parts, which are not only explicitly divided in the original text of *The Edible Woman*, but also separated by the usage of different persons in the narration, reflect the three stages of Marian's quest. Thus, the structure of the novel mirrors the stages of the quest for the recovery of the female identity that the protagonist performs.

2.2. Symbols and elements through which the quest is carried out

Marian performs her cathartic journey towards the recovery of her female identity through a series of components and symbols, being some of them mundane activities or common daily elements.

2.2.1. Consumer society: Food and drinks

The importance of the food in the book is shown in several aspects. For example, the fact that the novel starts with breakfast (and Marian feeling good, even hungry) and more importantly with Marian taking care of her roommate Ainsley's hangover by cooking her breakfast emphasizes the healing power of food. "She had a hangover, which put me in a cheerful mood —it made me feel so healthy —and I poured her a glass of tomato juice and briskly fixed her an alka-seltzer, listening and making sympathetic noises while she complained" (EW, 11).

The relevance of food is also shown in the fact that the novel ends with the consumption of a cake shaped like a woman's body, giving Atwood's work a sense of a circular structure organized around food. "He scraped the last chocolate curl up with his fork and pushed away the plate. "Thank you," he said, licking his lips. "It was delicious."" (EW, 281) And there are also many descriptions of food through the chapters of the novel. Atwood's fiction is filled with references to food and depictions of different kind of meals. In fact, according to Parker, "While literature is suffused with scenes of men eating, there is a conspicuous absence of images of women engaged in the same activity. Margaret Atwood displays a sensitive awareness of how images of women have been suppressed and erased" (Parker 349). Food is also an important motif in *Lady Oracle*, another novel by Atwood. It could be argued that food is a relevant theme in its relationship to women in some of Atwood's work. It acts as a way of revolution against established norms and society standards. There are constant similes and comparisons to food in the novel. We see this very clearly in this particular extract where Marian describes the office she works in, Seymour Surveys: "The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust and our department, the gooey layer in the middle" (EW, 19)

The absence of food or Marian's inability to eat or progressive loss of appetite it is also central to the development of the plot and Marian's quest: at first meat products, then eggs and finally vegetables causing Marian to be unable to consume any type of food whatsoever. This uncanny eating disorder that manifests in the protagonist plays a central role in the development and resolution of the plot, acting as a unifying theme through the

novel. Marian regaining her appetite for food and for life constitutes the ending to Atwood's work, the conclusion of its plot. Marian's anorexia requires a more extensive analysis since it is one of the most important aspects of the novel. Marian starts developing an eating disorder that has symptoms that are traditionally characteristic of 'anorexia nervosa': Marian has to hide 'her condition' from others. She is ashamed that people could find out that she is unable to eat anything, hence, she lies and hides like other anorexics. However, Marian is not like the typical patient suffering from anorexia nervosa. She does not count calories nor is obsessed about losing weight or her physical image. She is dissociated from herself, from her body, but she does not suffer from body dysmorphia, she does not see herself fat. While Marian sometimes acknowledges that she is in fact hungry – even though she still remains unable to eat– anorexics will not recognize they are hungry, and if so, they will feel ashamed, punish their selves and fast or purge. Anorexic's paradox is that having totally lost all control of their lives because of their illness, they are still controlling their calorie intake and restraining their selves: they are in control even though they have lost control. According to Lahikainen, "Sometimes the effort to lose weight can be the only way to feel empowered and in charge of one's own life" (Lahikainen 64). However, Marian is not in control of herself: she wants to eat, she wants to be "normal", but her condition is rather a physical reaction than a mental disorder. In Lakshmi's words, "Her fragmentation has initiated a fear within her that she is spilling over, (...) and is no longer able to contain herself. So while an anorexic woman may fear spreading out physically, Marian fears spreading out emotionally and losing control." (Lakshmi 2014). This fear is no other than the fear of actually occupying a space, of expressing herself freely, of subverting the patriarchal symbolic order. However, just as other anorexics, Marian feels dissociated from herself and her body, like we can see in the episode where she is in the bathtub:

Looking down, she became aware of the water, which was covered with a film of calcinous hard-water particles of dirt and soap, and of the body that was sitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle. (EW, 218)

Marian does not suffer from anorexia nervosa (in the traditional clinical sense) but she does suffer from an eating disorder and she meets some of the diagnostic criteria for

this illness. Marian's eating disorder could be read as a way of rebelling against the patriarchal rules of society. Although being a symptom of her powerlessness, the protagonist's eating disorder may also constitute the means to regain control and recover her identity as a woman. Thus, an eating disorder could be both a manifestation of the lack of power and space in patriarchal society but also the way of empowering oneself through the rejection of all the patriarchal rules and dictates that are imposed to women by taking to the extreme the ideal of beauty. Food has traditionally been a way to control women since Victorian times when abstaining from food or certain meals was seen as a positive feminine trait. According to Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*:

A culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience. Women's dieting has become what Yale psychologist Judith Rodin calls a 'normative obsession,' a never-ending passion play given international coverage out of all proportion to the health risks associated with obesity, and using emotive language that does not figure even in discussions of alcohol or tobacco abuse. [...] Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women's history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one (Wolf, 187)

It will also be further on explained how women have traditionally been relegated to the consumption of certain meals. Meat was assumed to be essentially a male food. Since women were considered second class citizens they were commonly assigned the consumption of second class meals. This is argued by Adams in the first chapter of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*:

Women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class foods in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits, and grains rather than meat. The sexism in meat eating recapitulates the class distinctions with an added twist: a mythology permeates all classes that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity. (Adams, 26)

Consumer society is present all through the novel and it is depicted by Atwood quite skilfully, sometimes subtly and some other times not so subtly. Consumerism and capitalism are also applied to the interpersonal relationships between the characters of *The Edible Woman*, and the author establishes a subject/object dichotomy between them. Aside from the fact that it is very clear that both Duncan and Peter use Marian (although they use her in different ways) there are some important examples of criticism to capitalist and consumer society. Marian's fiancé Peter possess a collection of cameras, he is keen on photography, and therefore he has several books on how to work his objectives, and how to shoot the best pictures. He

wants to learn everything about photography and make the best use out of his cameras. And when Marian and him get engaged, she wonders if he has purchased a book on marriage, in order to make the best use of her, tame her to his will:

Maybe he had got hold of one of those marriage-manuals; maybe that was why. It would be just like Peter, she thought with fondness. If you got something new you went out and bought a book that told you how to work it. She thought of the books and magazines on cameras that were part of the collection on the middle shelf in his room, between the law books and the detective novels. And he always kept the car manual in the glove compartment. So it would be according to his brand of logic to go out and buy a book on marriage, now that he was going to get married; one with easy-to-follow diagrams. She was amused. (EW, 150)

Atwood is portraying a very serious thing in a humorous way. She is implying that some men would like to read manuals on how to operate women. It is as if they think that women were objects and marriage was an economic transaction: you buy a partner and you need to know how to use it.

As it has been aforementioned, there is also a relevant critique of the consumption of meat and animals. Animal oppression is put in parallel to the objectification of women. Marian identifies herself with the animal victims and this identification starts when Peter and her go to a restaurant, he chooses her meal like he has gotten used to and they argue about their prospective children's educational future. When she is trying to eat her steak, she reflects on how society disguises the suffering of animals:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane, with name-labels and price-labels stuck on it, and it was just like buying a jar of peanut-butter or a can of beans, and even when you went into a butcher shop they wrapped it up so efficiently and quickly that it was made clean, official. (EW, 151)

Marian realizes that consumer society disguises the oppression and killing of animals and serves it in a nice clean package. In Pundir's words, "As Peter begins to gain control over her in every aspect, her identification with the hunted and the consumed reaches the precipitation point. She comes to view 'eating' as a violent action concealed behind the social facade of dining." (Pundir 3) We could set this in parallel when women take a lot of effort to dress up and get ready for male consumption and lose their true self in the process and. We can see another reference to this matter when Marian is in the supermarket getting

groceries and she compares people in the supermarket, or rather consumers in general, with cows in farms.

Every time she walked into the supermarket and heard the lilting sounds coming from the concealed loudspeakers she remembered an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them. But just because she knew what they were up to didn't mean she was immune. These days, if she wasn't careful, she found herself pushing the cart like a somnambulist, eyes fixed, swaying slightly, her hands twitching with the impulse to reach out and grab anything with a bright label. (EW, 172)

She is aware that consumers are pushed into consuming against her will, but that does not make her less of a slave of consumerism. She is still in the market, in all meanings of the expression. It is a realist view: despite the fact that Marian is aware of the social order and the consumer society; this does not make her less integrated in it. She is an active part of the consumer society, she consumes and she is consumed, like every other individual. However, her subconscious self literally cannot stomach this social order and develops an eating disorder both as a reaction against it and as a language to regain her lost self.

Another key part is the ending of the novel, when Marian and Duncan are eating the cake that Marian had baked in the shape of a woman, and when he learns Marian is able to eat again, Duncan tells her the following "What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer." (EW, 281) Marian is able to eat again, thus, she is able to consume and consequently back in consumer society, the reality of our lives. So it is not entirely correct to talk about a resolution of the conflict posed in the novel, but rather an ending open to several interpretations. It is certain that Marian regains her true self thanks to becoming aware of the social order and consumer society, but she ends up consuming again and susceptible to being consumed, therefore contributing to the existence and perpetuation of the prevailing consumerist social order.

The subject/object dichotomy established between the characters is strictly linked to consumer society. The objectification of people, particularly women, is a consequence of the capitalist and consumer society and that is shown for example in advertising and magazines. Atwood is not unaware of this issue, and we can find examples of this in *The Edible Woman*. For example, when Marian is going to the laundromat, she notices a poster featuring a woman with three pair of legs advertising a girdle. Marian then reflects on how

ads supposedly aimed at women display women that are attractive to men, women that fit into the domineering ideal of beauty. She is also aware of how publicity can impact on women's minds and can impose beauty standards:

Then I concentrated on one of the posters above the windows, a colourful one of a young woman with three pairs of legs skipping about in her girdle. I must admit to being, against my will, slightly scandalized by those advertisements. They are so public. I wondered for the first few blocks what sort of person would have enough response to that advertisement to go and buy the object in question, and whether there had ever been a survey done on it. The female form, I thought, is supposed to appeal to men, not to women, and men don't usually buy girdles. Though perhaps the lithe young woman was a self-image; perhaps the purchasers thought they were getting their own youth and slenderness back in the package. (...) You have to be careful about things like that, I reflected; they have a way of creeping up on you before you know it. (EW, 92-93)

Marian knows that these advertisements are dangerous because they impose women impossible standards and leads them to have unattainable expectations. But this does not make her immune to them and to consumer society, so she has to be careful.

Another example of the subject/object dichotomy is the character of Leonard Slank, who practically epitomizes female objectification. Marian describes him as a "self-consciously-lecherous skirt-chaser" (EW, 87) and there are several references to his misogynist character in the novel. Marian also says that:

His blend of cynicism and idealism had a lot to do with his preference for "corrupting", as he called it, greenish girls, as opposed to the more vine-ripened variety. The supposedly pure, the unobtainable, was attractive to the idealist in him; but as soon as it had been obtained, the cynic viewed it as spoiled and threw it away. (EW, 87)

Len uses girls to his own benefits. He enjoys corrupting innocent girls and seducing them into getting into bed with him, and once they have fallen into his trap, he rejects them since they are no longer innocent and pure, they are corrupted and they lost all their worth to him. Ainsley decides to use Len as means for her own purpose, which is fulfilling her deepest femininity by getting pregnant. She meant to carry out this scheme without Len finding out. When Marian and Peter go meet Len at a bar, Ainsley shows up disguised as an innocent schoolgirl, faking a new identity, playing the "naïve little girl" act with him. She then carefully comes up with plans that involves getting Len drunk and make him think that he has seduced her, despite it has been the opposite situation. When Len finds out about

Ainsley's pregnancy and that she has tricked him, he is shocked that someone would want to get pregnant on purpose, and so he tells Marian.

"She did it on purpose. She wanted to get pregnant."

"That's ridiculous!" Len said. "Nobody wants to get pregnant. Nobody would deliberately do a thing like that!" (EW, 157)

He does not conceive the idea that a woman would want to get pregnant, assuming that pregnancy is unfortunate, something that happens by accident, and therefore is undesirable for everyone just because he considers it to be. Then, Ainsley appears and they have a fight because Len is outraged by what has happened between them. Len accuses Ainsley of having used him but he does not seem to recall that he intended to use her as well, since he was after her body and he was only keen on having sexual intercourse with her because she seemed young and pure. For Len, it is perfectly natural and *normal* to use women to his will but it is outrageous and abnormal if a woman uses a man, as it is the case.

"All along you've only been *using* me. What a moron I was to think you were sweet and innocent, when it turns out you were actually college-educated the whole time! Oh, they're all the same. You weren't interested in *me* at all. The only thing you wanted from me was my body!" (...) "I'll have to think of myself as a father now, it's indecent and all because of you" – he gasped: the idea was a novel one for him – "you seduced *me*!" He waved his beer-bottle at her. "Now I'm going to be all mentally tangled up in Birth. Fecundity. Gestation. Don't you realize what that will do to me? It's obscene, that horrible oozy..." (EW, 159)

Len's point of view is characteristic from patriarchal mind-set: women are not individuals, they are mere objects naturally created to be used by men, and not the opposite. Len is a parody of male chauvinism, the idea taken to the extreme. Atwood portrays in an exemplary way the hypocrisy of this movement with the character of Len. He is egocentric and cannot get over the fact that he is vulnerable to being used as an object too. He had never thought about this because of his gender: men are supposed to use and not to be used. He is also grossed out by the idea of something so related to femininity like gestation and birth. Pregnancy is obviously linked with women, but in the novel it is also an important issue because for Ainsley is the way of fulfilling her deepest femininity, and for Clara it becomes part of her character features. It is also the option of future that is presented to Marian, either getting married and pregnant or carry on working a dead-end job. Len is

disgusted at the idea that he may be linked with something traditionally feminine (or at least strictly related to women in the novel) because he considers feminine as something negative.

Another example of this dichotomy between subjects and objects is found when Marian goes to the hairdresser's salon. The medical and clinical description of the salon is Atwood's way of portraying the objectification that women passively give in to. They go through uncomfortable beauty rituals because society imposes this idea on women since young age, and makes them want to perform these rituals, or even think they do so of their own free will. Society implants on women the idea that they have to do all those things in order to be attractive to men, which is one of the ultimate purposes of women according to patriarchal society.

As soon as she walked into the large pink room (...) she had felt as passive as though she was being admitted to a hospital to have an operation. (...) Marian had closed her eyes, leaning back against the operating-table, while her scalp was soaped and scraped and rinsed. She thought it would be a good idea if they would give anaesthetics to the patients, just put them to sleep while all these necessary physical details were taken care of; she didn't enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object. (EW, 209)

Atwood goes further on with a more graphic and detailed surgical description of the process of getting one's hair done. For the character (and most likely for the author too), it is clear that this kind of actions reduce women to objects. However, this passage also shows how women abide by this objectification, as Khurana argues: "Her awareness of objectified treatment and following it mechanically just to please her fiancé shows her approval of self-objectifying process." (Khurana 208). Patriarchy tells women that their purpose and duty is to be beautiful, beautiful meaning attractive to men. Women's beauty has to be aimed at male consumption, otherwise is not worthy beauty or any kind of beauty at all. This turns them into objects aimed at men's pleasure, and they will be subjected to unattainable beauty standards and to the (self-)enslavement of beauty rituals for most of their lives. Female objectification is a widely explored theme in *The Edible Woman*. While society presents men as active subjects, women are presented as objects and therefore passive. But Atwood goes far beyond to that simplistic view, and shows how women often comply in

their own enslavement and objectification (and subsequent loss of identity), and even reverses these roles, showing that this can be possible too.

When talking about alcoholic beverages, there are two moments in the novel where Marian drinks alcohol to the point of being ‘tipsy’ or even drunk: the first time is when her fiancé and her meet Len at a bar and the second time is at the engagement party. These are both turning points in the novel, especially the last one which constitutes the climax of *The Edible Woman*. These two moments happen to be the ones where Marian reacts to the situation with her true emotions, and she is aware that she is losing her authentic self. When Marian drinks, she escapes from Peter: she literally runs away. Even though her rational self which is influenced by patriarchal standards does not understand what she is doing, why she is making such a scene, she cannot stop herself from fleeing either. The loss of inhibition that comes with alcohol consumption allows her to be herself and avoid being constrained by societal expectations or rules for a woman in those times.

It is believed that in Native American rituals, particularly healing rites, rites of passage and vision quests, they used mind-altering substances. This is linked to alcohol consumption in *The Edible Woman*, which could be read as a necessary element in her quest to “heal” and regain her female identity. Furthermore, in these rituals, according to McWhorter, “the child candidate was sent, unarmed and without food, to spend a given time—perhaps only one night, or possibly a week—in fasting and silent contemplation in the solitude of mountain or desert” (McWhorter, 297). Thus, it could be argued that Marian’s fasting (even though it is not strictly voluntary) is a key element to her quest.

Consumer society, the consumption of food and drinks but also the inability to consume food and the dichotomy object/subject established between the characters in *The Edible Woman* help Marian to carry out her own personal vision quest towards the recovery of her identity as a woman.

2.2.2. Language

This section has to do with food too. Language and communication are very important in *The Edible Woman*, especially women’s language. Women lack a language for

concerns and it is also fruitless to unmask the social order and destroy it. It is only natural that women come up with new or unusual ways to communicate their feelings or speak their minds. In the case of Marian (and many other women with eating disorders) it is food and more particularly behaviour towards food. Marian uses her eating disorder to express her rejection to Peter's control – and even rebel against it. According to Pundir, “The rebellion in her is carried on through the ‘body language’ in which the body makes it impossible for her to eat one thing after the other.” (Pundir 2) It comes to the extent that it is Peter who places the order when they go to restaurants. In one particular occasion, Peter orders a ‘filet mignon’ for Marian and ever since that moment Marian is unable to eat meat-based products. This ‘filet mignon’ represents male power both in their relationship and in general, and Marian subconsciously knows it:

That was another nice thing about Peter. He could make that kind of decision so effortlessly. She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her. It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away. His taste ran towards steak and roast beef: he did not care for peculiar things like sweetbreads, and he didn't like fish at all. Tonight they were having Filet Mignon. (EW, 147)

Marian is indecisive and lets Peter decide what she eats, but in this paragraph Marian is not referring only to food in the menu but also to what she wants in the relationship with Peter, and it is later seen when they start talking about her future children's education. Peter is the person that has all the power in their love relationship, and Marian complies in her own romantic enslavement, but her subconscious starts to reject these ideas and the social order in general. Marian also says that Peter prefers meat rather than other kind of food and meat is a traditionally male food and associated with violence and hunting.

In this novel, food is not only used to contribute to language through similes, comparisons and descriptions but also constitutes a language of its own. We can see an example of how food is a language when Marian goes to the movies alone and Duncan sits next to her constantly eating something that Marian does not know what it is, and when he leaves, she finds the traces on the floor.

But when the lights went on after a brief shot of a waving flag and some tinny music, she took the trouble to examine the floor beneath the seat where he had (possibly) been sitting. She found a little pile of white shells. They were like some primitive signal, a heap of rocks or a sign made with sticks or notches cut in trees, marking a path or indicating something ahead, but though she stared down at them for several minutes while the handful of moviegoers straggled

past her up the aisle, she could not interpret them. At any rate, she thought as she left the theatre, this time he left a visible trail. (EW, 126)

Duncan does not communicate with the language created by the social order; he uses a primitive language that Marian cannot understand yet. Duncan points Marian the way out of her alienation and towards the regaining of her true self, and he does it by leaving a trail of food, which is a current motif in popular stories. The fact that Marian at that time is unable to decode what this sign means is crucial to understanding her inability to communicate and consequently to express her true desires. However, food is not the only uncommon means of communication that Marian presents in the novel. Silence or ellipsis in the narration is very important in *The Edible Woman*. We can see an example of this when Marian and her fiancé meet a friend of Marian, Len, at the bar. She is quiet while Peter and Len talk about hunting and cameras. What Marian does not say out loud, what she omits is what it is relevant to the readership. By not speaking at all, she is indeed communicating how she feels: “The quality of Peter’s voice had changed; it was a voice I didn’t recognize” (EW, 69) and also “I leaned forward, my arms on the black table-top. I wanted Peter to turn and talk to me, I wanted to hear his normal voice, but he wouldn’t” (EW, 69). She is not uttering any word but she is being very eloquent, not only to the readership but also to herself. Although she attributes these feelings to the consumption of alcohol, the reader starts to notice what is happening. Marian is starting to see the real Peter. Thus, Marian is rejecting with her silences and her eating disorder. It is clear that Marian’s inability to eat is a way of expressing her unconformity with the engagement to Peter at first instance and ultimately a rejection of the patriarchal order and the expectations that society holds for her. The traditional belief is that women suffering from eating disorders want to be beautiful and achieve the beauty standard for women imposed by society. However, this argument proves to be simplistic and reductionist because according to Susan Bordo, it lowers women to the condition of ““cultural dopes,” blindly submitting to oppressive regimes of beauty” (Bordo, 30), objects without a will of their own or a will influenced by societal impositions. In Bordo’s words in the Introduction of *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*:

People *know* the routes to success in this culture—they are advertised widely enough—and they are not "dopes" to pursue them. Often, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it. (Bordo, 30)

It is true that eating disorders are diagnosed mental diseases and it is also true that they are highly determined by socio-cultural and even institutional factors. Mass media sets up new beauty standards and since the decade of the 60s, this beauty canon is presented with the image of a skinny woman, looking vulnerable and fragile. However, this model is not new; it existed in the Victorian age too: it was desirable for a woman to look thin, delicate and defenceless. It is worth analysing the fact that society takes effort in perpetuating the notion that anorexic and bulimic women are so because they seek to be beautiful and desirable to men since it prevents the patriarchal order to be revealed and reverted. All women are different and it is the same regarding anorexic or bulimic women. Although some common grounds exist when it comes to women suffering from eating disorders trying, it is very dangerous to over-generalize women and particularly these women. It can be argued that eating disorders, namely anorexia and bulimia are ways of communicating, especially used by women. Despite the fact that there are some male patients, if we examine the genealogy of anorexia nervosa, for example, there is a huge difference amongst genders: the number of female patients is larger. In opposition to collective thinking, it has been suggested that some anorexic women are so because they are aware of the patriarchal social order and they take the beauty standard of female thinness to an extreme, using their bodies as battlegrounds for the fight against patriarchy. It has also been said that these women seek to have a child-like body again (and they achieve that due to the physical consequences of anorexia), and as a self-defence mechanism, they return to a pre-adolescent stage where they cannot be sexual objects and where they are not prone to be sexualized and abused by men. But women cannot fight the patriarchal order while using a language culturally produced by that order itself. Women need to create a language of their own in order to deconstruct the prevailing social order. In that process, they have come up with different 'provisional' languages like eating disorders and silence, which are used by the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*.

Women desperately seek new ways of communicating as they lack a language of their own. Language is seen as a way of fighting against the oppressive social order, but

women cannot communicate with the traditional language: it is not possible to unmask and dismantle social order with a language that has been created to support it. Food as a language, Marian's own language (anorexia) and silence are different ways of women's language in *The Edible Woman* and constitute essential elements that guide her throughout her quest for female identity.

2.2.3. Archetypes of gender: masculinity (active) vs. femininity (passive)

Atwood not only presents a series of archetypes of gender in the novel, both male and female, but also the blurred lines between the active or passive character traditionally attributed to male and female gender respectively. The realization and rejection of these gender archetypes and roles lead Marian in her quest for the re-attainment of her identity as a woman.

Male power is presented and described all along the novel. The figure of Marian's fiancé Peter epitomizes the patriarchal normative interpretation of masculinity. Peter is the maximum archetype of masculinity. We can see this depiction of masculinity through the usage of certain elements and symbols such as guns, cameras and meat. Guns and hunting are traditionally associated with masculinity and virility. The fact that Peter is a proud hunter and shows off his guns' collection depicts him as a violent man and reinforces his 'macho' and predatory character. In addition to the gun collection, Peter possesses a fine collection of cameras too. In the novel, cameras are identified with weapons since they 'shoot' too. When Peter wants to take a picture of the dressed-up Marian at the engagement party, she feels like she is the prey that he is going to hunt, she feels threatened. She also feels as if the camera would trap her forever under Peter's yoke in an unfulfilling marriage. Another symbol of masculinity would be meat. This has been aforementioned in the consumer society section, but it is instrumental when analysing masculinity as depicted in the novel, so a further analysis is required. Since prehistoric times, women were consigned to preparing meals while men provided the food as they were hunters. Meat consumption has always been linked to masculinity or virility and it is stated in the novel that Marian's fiancé would rather order meat at a restaurant than other meal. The hunter character of men

is not only related to food providing but is also linked to their behaviour towards women. Men are predators and women are their prey. Women are often seen as just meat, ounces of flesh ready to male consumption. However, in Atwood's fiction, women also play the role of hunter, and some women comply in their own hunting too. So it is only logical that Marian begins to identify herself with meat-based products, with murder animals, with the prey and the victims of hunting. There is a particular paragraph where Peter tells a friend of Marian, Len, a hunting story and that is where this identification starts:

“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, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards...” (EW, 69)

In this case, Atwood deliberately adds some gory details so that Marian and the readership notice that Peter is violent and even a predator. When Marian starts to blend with the consumed and therefore she is not able to consume. This story of hunting told by Peter anticipates Marian's inability to eat and this is not the only bloody depiction of meat that Atwood presents in the novel. In the second part of the book, when Peter and Marian are already engaged and they go to a restaurant and Peter decides what Marian is going to eat, which is a 'filet mignon', a meat-based meal. When Marian looks at Peter and sees him cutting his steak, she truly sees him as he is: a hunter. She is also shocked at the conversation they have just had about the education of their hypothetical children. She starts to be in conflict with herself, as to see him as a predator, as the man that controls everything, even her seems incongruous to her at the time: “She watched the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. How skilfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting; and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her” (EW, 150). It seems that Marian is conflicted with her thoughts regarding Peter at that time, even though she is not fully aware of the control and power that Peter exerts over her just yet. This dinner marks the beginning of Marian's eating disorder since she begins to feel identified with animal

victims. When she looks at her meal, she conveys a pretty graphic description of the ‘filet mignon’:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar (...) But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it. (EW, 151-152)

Leonard Slank, aka Len, a friend of Marian, is also an archetype of masculinity. He is described as a “lecherous skirt chaser” and “misogynistic” and according to Rutherford, “Len’s gigolo-like lifestyle feeds his ego through the seduction of young and naive women” (Rutherford 8). Although this character epitomizes traditional masculinity and even constitutes a parody of the typical male chauvinist, it has been explained above how he ends up being used by a woman. It seems perfectly natural for him to use women but not the other way.

The character of Duncan, a graduate student of English, is depicted as the opposing counterpoint to the traditional masculinity represented by Peter: he is described as cadaverously thin, effeminate and even androgynous. However, he constitutes another archetype of masculinity even if it’s a non-normative masculinity.

There are many different archetypes of femininity portrayed in this work of fiction: Ainsley (as the parody or satire of the extreme feminist), the woman living in the apartment downstairs (as the Puritan or Victorian rectitude and hypocrisy), Clara (the woman who left her studies and her prospective labour future to become a housewife and a mother, consequently leading an unfulfilling life), Mrs. Bogue and the ‘office virgins’ (the bossy and nosy woman and the women whose only purpose in life is to catch a man, a husband who would take care of them financially). These roles which are basically imposed to Marian are all rejected by the protagonist and according to Brooks Bouson:

Atwood’s Marian McAlpin suffers from a deficient sense of self. Fearing that her “core” identity is threatened by the female roles she is expected to assume—those of wife and mother—she experiences recurrent, and increasingly frightening, episodes of disintegration anxiety. (Brooks Bouson 231)

At first she only dismisses subconsciously since she is not able yet to define her true desires and nature, so she rather lets society mark her path until she loses her true identity. When she gets engaged, the women at her office take for granted that she is going to leave

her job and dedicate herself to being a wife and a mother, and she does not quite understand why people assume that. In Lahikainen's words:

She would like to progress in her career, but this seems impossible for a young woman of her time, and the only way out of it is marriage, which means that she cannot work anymore, at least full time and seriously. It appears she cannot have both. (Lahikainen 58)

The realization and posterior rejection of these traditional roles of femininity leads Marian to a quest with the aim of regaining her lost identity as a woman. When she is attending the office party at her workplace, she fears that she is becoming like her co-workers who are negative female archetypes, and she feels asphyxiated by this toxic femininity that these women exude:

For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be — or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. (EW, 167)

These male and female archetypes connect with the notions of passive and active applied to both genders. According to Brooks Bouson, "Because Marian McAlpin is depicted as a passive victim, readers wish to see her rescued. Indeed, one of the central premises of Atwood's narrative is that women are defined by their culture as passive objects for male consumption." (Brooks Bouson 232) But while being fully aware that the society that is portrayed in the novel considers that the ideal of femininity is the passive and submissive woman, Atwood does not display women as inherently passive in *The Edible Woman*. The negative portrayal of active women and the praise of passive women has traditionally been the tendency in literature since its themes concerned women. However, this trend is reversed with feminism and its cultural influence and the rise of contemporaneous women writers like Margaret Atwood. At first, in *The Edible Woman*, we see a passive Marian: she accepts her professional failure (she works a dead-end job in Seymour Surveys), she adjusts to her lover's desires and moods and follows societal manners and rules; whereas her roommate Ainsley is presented as an active woman, who decides to be a single mother that does not need a father for her baby. She tricks a friend of Marian, Leonard Shank, so that he gets her pregnant. She plays a role where she is an innocent, submissive and passive schoolgirl waiting to be seduced by the wise mature man.

Ultimately, she achieves her goal and gets pregnant. But as the plot progresses, she learns that she has to have a father for her unborn child because she heard a psychologist say it. This stands for society itself which plants that idea in the minds of young girls, to prevent them from being independent). Thus, Ainsley who at first opposed to marriage and to having a father figure for her baby eventually ends up with Duncan's roommate Fisher. So the active Ainsley disappears and is replaced by the passive, influenced by the social order Ainsley. But at the same time, the passive Marian discovers the oppressive patriarchal order and tries to actively resist by rejecting every food and even finally fleeing from Peter's side. The ultimate fight she puts up is when she confronts Peter and eats the woman-shaped cake that she had previously baked, and then she becomes the active Marian. This image of the woman-shaped cake, according to Khurana, "(...) symbolically refers to male's desire and women's image in patriarchy." (Khurana 209) Men are naturally designed to be active according to patriarchal mind-set, while women have to remain passive and obedient. With this novel, Atwood is telling us that women can be active too – not only men are. These positions (active/passive) are interchangeable and possible for every subject regardless their gender, but society still keeps this position for men. And at the end of the novel, it is clear that Marian has become active, has refused to be passive, but she is part again of a social order that will try to annihilate her active character. She will only be accepted as active if the social order is reversed, deconstructed or destroyed. Women like Marian, can be active but they are not able to occupy an active position in the social order still.

The archetypes of gender shown in *The Edible Women* and the shifting between passivity and activity in terms of gender are instrumental to the development of Marian's quest for her lost female identity.

2.2.4. "Normality" as presented in the novel

Another key concept for Marian's quest is "normality" as it portrayed in the novel. When Marian realizes she is unable to consume certain kinds of food, she asks her

roommate Ainsley, her friend Clara and her fiancé for reassurance, she asks them whether she is normal or not:

“Ainsley,” Marian said, “do you think I’m normal?”

“Normal isn’t the same as average,” Ainsley said cryptically. “Nobody is normal”. (EW, 204)

She turned her head on the pillow and smiled at Peter. He smiled back at her, his eyes shining in the semi-darkness.

“Peter,” she said, “am I normal?”

He laughed and patted her on the rump. “I’d say from my limited experience that you’re marvellously normal, darling.” She sighed; she didn’t mean it that way. (EW, 207)

“Clara,” she said, “do you think I’m normal?” Clara had known her a long time; her opinion would be worth something.

Clara considered. “Yes, I would say you’re normal”, she said, removing a button of Elaine’s mouth. “I’d say you’re almost abnormally normal, if you know what I mean. Why?”

Marian was reassured. That was what she herself would have said. But is she was so normal, why had this thing chosen to attack *her*?” (EW, 206)

All of them tell them she is normal, but they do not understand what Marian means by that question and Marian is not sure of what she is asking. She is worried that she does not fit the expectations that society holds for her, even though she subconsciously rejects them. She is aware of the social conventions and the patriarchal rules that make her issues with food an undesirable behaviour for a ‘normal’ young woman like her. Being unable to eat means something is wrong with her, that she is abnormal. She has to hide her condition from others because not eating, or rather being incapable of eating, will be regarded as a strange behaviour. Social life is organized around food (and we can see this in *The Edible Woman*: it starts with a breakfast, lunch and dinner meetings are conveyed through the pages of the novel, and it ends with the consumption of the cake in the shape of a woman) and not being able to eat means not taking part in it: it means being abnormal, an outsider. Marian thinks she wants to be part of the social order but her subconscious is by all means fighting against being part of the oppressive social order.

We can see other mentions to the word ‘normal’ in *The Edible Woman* and it shows us how normality is portrayed in the novel. For example, when Lucy, one of the “office virgins”, tells a story about a girl who was living with some friends of her and one day stopped washing for months – but behaved normally in every other sense.

Oh this *girl* who was living with some friends of mine in England and she just stopped *washing*. Nothing else was wrong with her, she just didn’t wash, even her hair even, or change her

clothes or anything, for the longest time, and they didn't want to say anything because she seemed perfectly *normal* in every other way, but obviously underneath it she must have been really *sick*. (EW, 165)

It is possible that this girl is using her own kind of language to reject the patriarchal order and it is considered to be abnormal because it is not the conventional way of communicating. We can see another mention to the concept of "normal" when the pregnant Ainsley comes crying, seeking the comfort of our protagonist because she had attended a talk by a psychologist in the clinic and he stressed the importance of the 'Father Image': "He says they ought to grow up with a strong Father Image in the home," she said when she had composed herself. "It's good for them, it makes them *normal*, especially if they're boys." (EW, 181). She is worried that if her unborn child lacks a father figure, he is going to be abnormal, and even goes further: "Oh no Marian, it's really a lot more drastic. He has all kinds of statistics and everything. They proved it scientifically." She gulped. "If I have a little boy, he's absolutely certain to turn into a ho-ho-ho-homosexual!" (EW, 181)

This passage connects with the concept of heteronormativity, which is the socio-cultural assumption that there are only two distinct and complementary genders (man and woman), associated with the biological sexes, which have innate and natural roles in life. According to Karen Lovaas and Mercilee Jenkins in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, the heteronormative system assumes "that there are two sexes and therefore two genders" and therefore "requires that all discussions of gendered identity and opportunity be framed strictly in terms of this dichotomy" (98). If Ainsley's child turns to be homosexual, it would be abnormal and undesirable, and also it would be a consequence of not having a father image in his life. Leaving aside the fact that this is an exaggerated homophobic belief (which is precisely the intention of the author) it is unfounded. But in this paragraph, Ainsley explains that this psychologist has scientific evidence to prove his points and that is how Atwood is telling us that social order and institutions try to maintain heteronormativity and gender roles and dismissing other options such as independent unmarried women deciding to be single mothers like Ainsley. In a heteronormative society the norm is that a family has to be constituted by a father and a mother, and the only acceptable and normal relationships are heterosexual, where the gender roles traditionally

attributed to each gender are played and not subverted. This is progressively changing, but it was latent in Canada in the 60s, where the novel is set.

It is also remarkable that in both examples the world *normal* is in italics in the original text. By doing this, Atwood could be making the readership reflect on what is *normal* and how the concept of *normality* is created and influenced by social conventions. From these examples that are provided here and from the novel itself we can draw that the *normal* behaviour for women is to be submissive and subjected to male power and control, and most of the female models that Marian is in contact to in her daily life are archetypes of female normality – at least according to the patriarchal social conventions and rules, since these females archetypes behave *normally*, like patriarchal society expects them to do. Normality is a key concept in the novel and particularly to Marian's journey towards the re-discovery of her true self. Marian regains her lost self by transcending normality and transgressing normal language and societal conventions with her eating disorder as a way of communicating.

3. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* attempts to subvert the traditional gender roles, present both in society and in literature and other mainstream cultural productions. I carried out an extensive analysis of the target text and others that dealt with issues present in the novel, from the point of view of feminist literary criticism. My focus is on the quest that the protagonist of this novel goes through in order to take back her true female self, which had been replaced by a socially assumed self as a consequence of her engagement and the social situation that left hardly any options available for Canadian women at the time (end of 1960s). My approach is supported by sources and quotes, and original ideas that I argue in this work. In this quest, whose stages are mirrored by the division in three parts of the structure of the novel, Marian completely dissociates from her true self and is assimilated by the will and desires of her fiancé. There are some elements that help the protagonist through her quest: food and drinks (consumable products), the reflection of consumerism in interpersonal relationships, the archetypes of gender portrayed in the novel—both masculine and feminine—and the activity and passivity features traditionally attributed to each gender respectively, the notion of *normality* as it is displayed in the novel (leaving out any deviation from the social order and its rules or any behaviour that goes against the *normal* or the heteronormative) and the most important element amongst all, language. Language is represented in several ways in *The Edible Woman*. Atwood does not confine herself to the traditional means of communication. The protagonist's eating disorder acts as a way of communicating, as her unconventional own language. This is because women have been denied their own language and they have to come up with new forms of communicating that transcend *normality* or *normal* language. Women cannot unveil and dismantle the oppressive social order with a language that has been created by it and whose aim is to perpetuate the system that oppresses women. It is necessary for women to use other communicative devices to assert their female identities. The protagonist, being unable to eat, uses her anorexia as a language of their own (at first subconsciously) that will guide her through her quest for her own female self. She emerges victorious from this quest for the

recovery of her female identity, but we cannot categorically conclude that thus she is exempt from being part of the patriarchal and consumerist order since the ending is open for interpretation. However, we can conclude that she has rejected the forcibly assumed social self and has regained her own female activity.

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