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Education and Virginity in Margaret Atwood's *The
Edible Woman* (1969)

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Dedications

To our families, friends, and relatives.

Abstract

This piece of research attempts to investigate the notions of “education” and “virginity” as two important issues that have deep impact on women’s lives in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* (1969). To reach our aim, we have relied on Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist theory included in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). In our analysis of this topic, we have divided our discussion into two chapters. The opening chapter stresses on the notion of women’s education which has always been an area of concern and considered as being a threat to patriarchal societies. This idea is highlighted by both educated and non-educated female characters of the novel including Marian, Clara, and the lady down below to demonstrate the harsh reality in which they lived and the subordinate position they occupied in work place and all aspects of their life. In its turn, the second chapter analyzes the notion of virginity through the other subordinate female characters: Ainsley and the three virgins: Emmy, Millie, and Lucy by depicting the negative impact of virginity on their lives and the way the patriarchal society used it as a weapon to oppress women morally, physically, and socially. By analyzing Atwood’s novel, it is revealed that women’s education did not end patriarchy. Educated or not, women face hardships to achieve equality in society; their inferior position and submissiveness is due to society negligence of their education. Additionally, it is also displayed that virginity as a social construct continues to make life difficult for women, it curtail their opportunities and freedom and chains them with fear of losing it.

Keywords: education, feminism, patriarchy, virginity, women.

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I. Introduction

Throughout the history of human-kinds, Women, were, and are still treated as being inferior to men and the most subjugated category in most societies; they were to a certain extent enslaved, humiliated, and constantly marginalized by society standards which considered them as being weak. Women were trained and taught to become good housewives and professional housekeepers instead of following their education and dreams which means that they were best suited to the domestic sphere and could not obtain any important position in society.

Because of the fixed stereotypical views and distorted image, women started to question their existence and protest against the traditional roles and many of the beliefs that were commonly held by society at large. As a result, they gained some of their rights such as education which is the most important one. However, they are still perceived as being sexual objects for males' pleasure. Educated or not, women are still controlled by many oppressing aspects such as virginity which determines their value and worth; therefore, female education as well as virginity received a large interest all around the world especially in the western societies. Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's renowned feminist literary figures who talked about these issues in her fiction.

In this paper, we intend to examine Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) in order to analyze the notions of virginity and education and how they negatively affect women in work-place, marital status, and all aspects of their life through her protagonist and the different female characters.

Review of the Literature

For several years, Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* has been a center of interest for many scholars who approached it from many perspectives. In fact, a large number of critical analysis were produced on it due to the varied subjects and different issues such as mothering, cannibalism, body, and many other concerns that would affect women's status in society. For instance, Dorothea Rae Morrison examines the issue of mothering in *The Edible Woman*. In her thesis entitled "Surviving The Patriarchy (Mostly) Intact: Mothers and Daughters In Selected Works of Margaret Atwood" (2020), she states that,

By presenting two different versions of motherhood through the character of Ainsley and Clara, Atwood reveals that the valorizations of motherhood, and the simultaneous vilification of mothers, are rooted in the same patriarchal values which render women powerless and passive while also relying upon them to perpetuate the system which oppresses them.¹

In the same perspective, in her article entitled "Unraveling the Mysteries of Childhood: Metaphorical Portrayals of Children in Margaret Atwood's Fiction" (2018), Teresa Gibert writes,

The most burdensome and unpleasant features of bearing and raising children are emphasized throughout *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood's first published novel, which underscores the oppressive aspects of motherhood while frequently resorting to grotesque humour[...], Marian McAlpin contemplates her friend Clara as model of the woman she would become if she got married and had children.²

Moreover, in her thesis entitled "Maternity and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" (1989), Halen, M.B. argues that "a continuing and growing concern with questions of maternity and the ethics of motherhood is present in Margaret Atwood's novels and can be traced in the narrative strategies used by Atwood"³, she adds: "In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood explores the life of Marian McAlpin, who is afraid that by some magic transformation she will become the thing she most fears, an adult woman, a wife and mother."⁴

These statements show how motherhood affects negatively women in different ways and Clara's life is an example of an exhausting and generally frustrating experience of a desperate mother that Marian fears to become. These critics claim that Atwood's novel presents motherhood as an element of patriarchy which is considered as a cruel system upon women.

In addition, cannibalism is another important theme in the novel. In her article entitled *Consuming and Being Consumed: Cannibalism in the Consumerist Society of Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman' (2020)*, D'Antonio, C.S., writes: "In Atwood's novel, the concept of cannibalism is linked to postcolonial discourses in the sense of the colonialism, exploitation, and objectification of woman's bodies[...] society can be said to be cannibalistic"⁵, she adds: "cannibalism emerges again when Duncan calls Marian MCAlpin a cannibal, as 'hunger is more basic than love' "⁶. In the same perspective, in her article entitled "Feminist Elements and Ideas of Margaret Atwood the Edible Woman" (2017), Ms Toor, G.K., claims that "the issue of cannibalism is one of the most dominating elements throughout the novel in which women are dominated by men and they lack control on their own life"⁷, he adds:

Marian conceives that she is being consumed by her boyfriend as she consumes food. When sex becomes the medium of consumption, she feels caught in a sex role trap and wants to break out of or else she would lose her identity and self-respect. Through this, Atwood depicts how women are always treated as objects for someone's pleasure.⁸

Last but not least, other critics chose to study another important issue in the novel which is woman's body. in her article entitled *Consuming and Being Consumed: Cannibalism in the Consumerist Society of Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman' (2020)*, D'Antonio, C.S. writes: "The female body is fetishised and mechanised to transform it into a profitable machine, a resource that is appropriated and manipulated so that it can be exploited to supply commodities in a consumerist society"⁹. She adds:

A woman's body is constructed to for a man's pleasure and adapted to his desire and to the needs of society. The society's apparently rational discourses hide ruthless exploitation of women's bodies and the logic of profit of the consumerist society.¹⁰

In the same perspective, in her article entitled "Female Body and Sexual Politics in Margaret Atwood's Selected Novels" (2015), Soofastaei, E. claims that the female's body is used by the patriarchal society to control women's lives; she argues: "The protagonist's [Marian] body becomes a touchable space for outer and observable factors which are exposed to medical glimpse that examine her body with the purpose of measuring her mentality in order to control her subjectivity"¹¹. In addition, in her article entitled The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* (2008), Sanchez- Grant. S. says that: "The female body, as a site of oppression, has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women."¹².

These statements show that women's body is a source of weakness and domination used by the patriarchal societies to exploit and control women's lives

2. Issue and Working Hypothesis

From the review of the literature, and due to the diverse themes which are eminent in the novel, it has been made clear that many literary studies and much criticism had been devoted to the study of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* from different perspectives including the issues of motherhood, cannibalism, and body on which many critics put emphasis. However, to our best knowledge, we think that no study has already dealt with the notions of education and virginity in the novel. Therefore, this supports our belief that this theme is an important subject matter for study.

Our research paper attempts to study the themes of education and virginity as reflected in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible woman* (1969). It is clear that the author focuses on

how education failed to provide both educated and uneducated women with equitable rights and how society uses virginity to control and limit them and this is shown through her protagonist Marian McAlpin and her subordinate female characters.

As a matter of fact, the issue of education is portrayed through both the educated and the uneducated female characters including the protagonist, quiet girl Marian, the desperate housewife Clara, and the lady down below who are affected by the societal assumptions and laws. In addition, Atwood highlights the issue of virginity through the novel's female characters including Ainsley and the three virgins: Lucy, Emmy, and Millie who suffer because of their virginity as it is used by the patriarchal society as a weapon of oppression. Consequently, both education and virginity find full expression in Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*.

To deal with these issues and as a theoretical framework to our work, we will principally rely on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory included in her book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949). It deeply examines and illustrates the oppression of women in the male dominated society.

3. Methodological Outline

At the methodological level, our mémoire will be conducted following the IMRAD method including the introduction, methods and materials, results, and finally the discussion. The introduction of our research paper includes the review of the literature written on Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and the Issue and Working Hypothesis which are introduced in the first part of the dissertation.

Concerning the Methods and Materials section, it summarizes the theory that we will apply in our research, which consists of Simone de Beauvoir's major ideas of women's

oppression as written in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). In the second part of this section, we will also provide some biographical elements about the author followed by a short synopsis of the novel. As far as the “Results” section is concerned, it will display the findings of the present dissertation, which in turn, will be tackled in the “Discussion” section.

This dissertation includes a discussion part which will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the study of the different ways through which the patriarchal society oppresses both uneducated and educated women who are considered as objects, as if they have no feelings, opinions, or rights of their own. In its turn, the second chapter highlights the notion of virginity and the way it is used as a way to limit and control women’s lives. Finally, the conclusion section is devoted to the summary of the main issues discussed in the present work.

Endnotes

¹, Dorothea Rae, Morrison, *Surviving the Patriarchy: (mostly) Intact, Mothers, and Daughters in Selected Works by Margaret Atwood*, University of Lath bridge, Faculty of Arts and Science. 2020 URI: <https://hdl.handle.net/10133/5919>.

² Teresa, Gibert. “Unraveling the Mysteries of Childhood: Metaphorical Portrayals of Children in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction.” *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 39, (2018): 30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.29-50>.

³Halen M.B, *Maternity and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, University of Calgary. *Atlantics* Vol.15 No.1. Autumn 1989.

⁴ Halen M.B, *Maternity and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*.

⁵ D’Antonio, C.S., 2020. Consuming and Being Consumed: Cannibalism in the Consumerist Society of Margaret Atwood’s ‘*The Edible Woman*’. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 7(2), 24 Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v7i2.446>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷Gur Kiran, Toor; *Feminist Elements and Ideas of Margaret Atwood in The Edible Woman*, May 2017.

⁸Ibid.

⁹ D’Antonio, C.S., 2020. Consuming and Being Consumed: Cannibalism in the Consumerist Society of Margaret Atwood’s ‘*The Edible Woman*’. P.37.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ S.A Mirenayat, & Soofastaei, E, "Female body and sexual politics in Margaret Atwood's selected novels". International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, (2015): 55.
<https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/>.

¹² Sofia ,Sanchez- Grant. "The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle". Journal of International Women's Studies, 9(2), (2008):77.
<https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss2/7>.

II. Methods and Materials

1. Methods : Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949)

This part of our research aims to highlight the theoretical basis of our work. In fact, for the purpose of relevance to the issues treated in our research paper, we intend to borrow some concepts from Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory as expanded in her book *The Second Sex* which is written in 1949 and referred to as the "feminist bible"⁷. As a French existentialist philosopher and one of the most influential authors in feminism, de Beauvoir discusses the treatment of women throughout history; she publically writes on women's issues such as "virginity".

Simone de Beauvoir outlines the notion of "virginity" in her book *The Second Sex* in part three entitled "Myths". She claims that virginity is very controversial but still used as a weapon to determine women's destiny. On the one hand, some societies have totally different views on virginity; they consider a virgin woman unwanted by men and not worthy because they believe that women have magical powers and their body is full of snakes bites and other dark powers. So in fear of being sick and dominated by women's power, men want their wives to be not virgins and to be deflowered before the day of their wedding by others; for instance, de Beauvoir says: "if a man gets married and finds that his wife is a virgin, he says 'if you were worth something, men would have loved you and one of them would have taken your virginity.'"⁸ This led the patriarchal societies to take girls' virginity from their childhood in barbarian ways; de Beauvoir argues: "Malinowski describes an indigenous population in which, because sexual games are allowed from childhood on, girls are never virgins. Sometimes, the mother, older sister, or some other matron systematically deflowers the girl"⁹ whereas in other countries like Rome and Samoa, they make ceremonies to deflower girls at puberty by raping them or using instruments like "stick and bones."¹⁰

On the other hand, there are other societies which stress the importance of being a virgin; it is valued and considered as a sign of loyalty. De Beauvoir writes: “there are villages in France where the bloody sheet is displayed to parents and friends the morning after the wedding. Man became the woman’s master”¹¹ which means that women must prove their virginity the day of their wedding otherwise the marriage would be concealed. So, de Beauvoir shows the importance that the patriarchal society gives to the notion of “virginity” and the ways virginity harms and affects women’s lives and future.

Due to the different views on the importance of “virginity”, de Beauvoir defines it as “the highest form of feminine mystery”¹²; it is a myth used for the purpose of creating the woman as “the other”¹³ to man. For her, “Man is fascinated by shadowy and closed places never yet touched by animating consciousness, waiting to be lent a soul; it seems to him that in fact created what he is the only one to grasp and penetrate”¹⁴. Thus, she compares virgin women to virgin lands and men to explorers; “virgin land had always fascinated explorers”¹⁵ which means that man, being the first to discover woman’s virginity, is the only responsible of it and the one who “possesses the femininity body”¹⁶. So this shows clearly the way the patriarchal society puts standards on women and oppresses them through their virginity and the way man keeps himself in this position of the possessor.

Furthermore, “virginity” is not only a way to exploit and oppress a woman, but also gives power to men to control and dominate her, de Beauvoir says: “through demanding that his wife be a virgin or through demanding that she is not, man is either taking control of the unknown powers of woman or views woman as captivating and disturbing.”¹⁷ Since a “woman is her husband’s prey, his property”¹⁸, he always expects her to be virgin because “women’s virginity is demanded more imperiously when man considers the wife as his personal property”¹⁹ and “he expects that property to be unsullied”²⁰ This means that by taking

away her virginity, man makes his woman a passive object that he owns and asserts his hold on so that he can control her as he wants.

In addition, Simone de Beauvoir seeks to answer the question “what does it mean to be a woman?”²¹ because there is still a controversial debate over this subject; she bases her ideas on the relation between men and women in different perspectives of life; she demonstrates women’s position and their social conditions in the patriarchal society being defined as the other in relation to men since they are always oppressed and subjugated. She prompts the idea of woman’s oppression, alienation, and subordination to men and that man creates for her a situation of otherness; this idea is reflected in her famous quote “one is not born, but rather becomes; a woman”²². Through this citation, she wants to emphasize that women are not born oppressed, rather it is society and culture which conditions them to be women and force them to be passive and dependent to easily marginalize and place them in the secondary status in society. These stereotypes confined women in the role of a wife and mother which are their most important duties. In this context, de Beauvoir claims, “Man is the norm and standard in the patriarchal society whereas woman is sex; she is considered as inferior to man and she is often forced to adhere to the strict stereotypical roles that are given to her”²³, she adds:

Historically has shown that men have always held all concrete powers, from the patriarchy’s earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence. Their codes were set against her...she was thus concretely established as the other.²⁴

However, being an advocate of equality and liberation for women, de Beauvoir believes that in order to a woman to define herself to herself, she must start with “I am a woman”²⁵ and in order to achieve liberation, she argues that: “women must recognize many of these social norms: as constructions only then will they have freedom to escape their context and determine their own destiny.”²⁶ This demonstrates that de Beauvoir is one of the feminist

theorists who defend the rights of women; she works to explain the suffering that women lived in the male-centered society.

2. Materials

This part will offer some biographical elements on Margaret Atwood, which are of great importance to examine our work. In addition, we will provide a brief summary of the novel entitled *The Edible Woman* (1969).

a. Life and Times of Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is one of Canada's most famous and talented feminist writers; she is an internationally honored novelist, poet, and critic. Atwood was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She got her Master degree at Radcliffe College, Massachusetts in 1962. Between 1962 and 1967, she studied Victorian literature at Harvard for her Ph.D and then she taught English at the University of British Columbia. In 1966, she got a governor General's Literary Award for poetry (Canada). She has written over 35 books including novels, short stories, poetry, books for children, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts, and her works have been translated into over 30 languages. Atwood is one of the bestselling authors in her country as she attracted the attention of many critics and readers. George Woodcock, a distinguished Canadian critic and writer evaluates Atwood in these words: "No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use of Margaret Atwood."²⁷

As a feminist writer, Margaret Atwood aims to explore women's inner psyche, their conflicts between self and society, and their search for identity. Her works focus on problems such as gender inequality and women's oppression in the patriarchal system. Atwood

challenges the inferior status of women in society and portrays the suffering of her female characters confined in their feminine roles and the discriminations they encounter in their lives because of their sex.

b. Short Synopsis of the Novel

The Edible Woman (1969) is Margaret Atwood's first novel that deals with women's condition in the male dominated world with the emphasis on the female subordination. It describes a society which enslaves women through biology and sexuality; it denies their basic freedom and oppresses them through many factors including pregnancy, marriage, virginity, and the unequal rights in work-place and personal life. In fact, the novel maps out women's struggle and their relationships to men and to society through the different female characters of the novel including Ainsley, Clara, and three office virgins: Lucy, Emmy, and Millie.

The novel centres around the protagonist Marian, a recent college graduate working for Seymour Survey, a highly stratified three hierarchical market research organization where all important positions are held by men. Marian is described as a sensitive ordinary young woman who is influenced by her surrounding to get married in order to have an admirable position in society; but soon after her engagement to Peter, Marian starts to lose her appetite and sense of self as she tries to satisfy him and be an ideal woman. She realizes that this engagement is devouring her personality and true identity; she feels that she is being eaten and consumed first by her society and then by Peter and that her life would never be under her control. This led Marian to run away from this engagement, which helped her regain power to reject the roles prescribed by society and fight to achieve her identity and self- respect.

Endnotes

⁷ Simone, de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* Tran. Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany Chevallier.(Ed Guallimard, Paris: 1949; reprint, New York: Vintage books, 1st

edition, 2010) 11.

⁸ Ibid, 206.

⁹ Ibid, 207.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 208.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 26.

¹⁴ Ibid, 208.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 172.

¹⁸ Ibid, 206.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid,

²¹ Ibid, 25.

²² Ibid, 330.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 14.

²⁵ Ibid, 25

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ George Woodcock, "Capering", The Great Canadian Anecdote Contest. Harbour. (1991). 28.

III. Results

This section of our research contains the main findings we have reached after having analyzed Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory included in her book *The Second Sex*. It is clear that Atwood attempts to uncover many reasons which contribute to prevent women from being free citizens including education and virginity; her concern with women's oppression is reflected through the protagonist Marian MCApin and her subordinate female characters. To reach our findings, we have discussed two important themes in the discussion section.

The first chapter which is entitled "The Notion of Education in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*" is about Atwood's interest on the issue of education and the way both educated and non-educated women are oppressed by men and society. It is well demonstrated through the uneducated women whose inferior position and submissiveness in patriarchy is due to the society negligence of their education. Society encourages them to quit their education and concentrate on other occupations such as marriage in order to assure that they will always be powerless and unable to contradict the conventional rules. In addition, society also tends to oppress the educated ones, and this is shown through the focus on real factors that differentiate women from men such as the patriarch's oppression in workplace and other aspects of their lives and the way they were expected to behave following the society's assumptions and rules which condemned their own opinions, thoughts, and ideas. These prominent factors are portrayed through the female characters of the novel including Marian, Clara, and the lady down below.

With regard to the second chapter, which is entitled "Virginity as a Weapon of Control", we have tried to analyze the notion of virginity which is used by the patriarchal society as a system of oppression and control. We have also explained the ways in which society began to

set limits to women's freedom. Atwood uses different female characters including Ainsley and The Three Virgins to demonstrate the bad effects of virginity on women's life and liberty and how the patriarchal society views the non-virgin ones as whores and prostitutes.

IV. Discussion

This section of our work is the most expanded as it discusses in depth the notions of “education” and “virginity”. The opening chapter centers on women’s education and the barriers they encounter in the patriarchal society. The second chapter investigates the issue of virginity and its effects on women’s lives.

Chapter One: The Notion of Education in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969)

This part of our work seeks to spotlight the notion of “education” in *The Edible Woman*. Throughout this chapter, we want to demonstrate the way education fails to provide an independent life for women when it is supposed to be their way to light. This part involves the ways through which both uneducated and educated women meet several problems in their daily life. Thus, the novel is considered to be a good example of how the patriarchal society uses many barriers to deny women’s education and this is shown through the different characters of the novel.

“Education” is a key factor in the evolution of women’s conditions. It provides them with more opportunities and opens many doors to reach both freedom and independence; it is very necessary in women’s lives since it is the only way to achieve equality with their male counterparts and reach self-empowerment to fight against patriarchal rules. However, in many societies including the Western one, educated women encounter multiple obstacles at all levels; their rights, capabilities, and competences are denied in order to have control over them. In the Western cultures, family is essential; they support the idea that women’s place is at home pleasing and serving their husbands and children and that “family and books don’t mix”¹. Even though western women are educated, they are discouraged to follow their dreams and ambitions as well as having professional careers. In his article entitled “Western Women

and True Womanhood Culture and Symbol in History and Literature” (1848), Underwood J.O. writes,

Domesticity was a reality as well as an ideal in western women’s lives and in western literature [...] in reality; however, it gave women an ideology that allowed them to move into public roles and to serve the social needs on uncivilized nation. “Home Protection” and “Municipal Housekeeping” were the slogans that expressed the deeply held cultural sentiments of women.²

In the same context, he adds: “In western literature, the best woman is the private domestic one; women who combine in groups to affect public reform are anathema to the individualistic ethic of the western male”³, which means that many women are dominated by social norms and trapped in the traditional roles that have denied most of their rights.

In addition, women in the Western societies are given the right for education but they do not have many opportunities to prove themselves in society; they are always considered as being inferior and that men are the reason behind their oppression and subordination. In her book *The Excellent Woman Described by her True Characters and their Opposites* (1715), Dorrington. T. claims that

If women are still designated as "the weaker sex" it is only because men have inconsiderately, and even brutally, kept them from doing anything to develop their minds. Rather, men have practically forced them to preoccupy themselves with trivia, such as fashionable clothing and trinkets. What harm so ever they do to the present Age, and whatever their share may be in the Vices and Follies of it, this we may justly blame the Men for; who take upon them to govern all Things, and condemn the Women to such an Education, as can render them but very little useful, and leaves them apt to be only mischievous and hurtful to the World. Certainly there cannot possibly be a greater oversight, than to banish them to those little, trivial and useless Employments which usually take up their precious Time of Leisure, and a single Life.⁴

From the above quotation, it is clear that men and society place women in a marginal position to prevent them from realizing their dreams. Instead of teaching them to achieve an education level and build a strong personality and a successful life, they make them concentrate on marriage.

a. Uneducated Women

In Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, women's education is a dominant issue. Even though most of the novel female characters are educated, they still face many obstacles and limits since their education is still questioned. Society tends to firmly establish in their minds that women are expected to play a certain role in society which is that of wives and mothers instead of focusing on their education carrier. As a result, most women drop out college at an early age for the sake of getting married and having children, de Beauvoir declares that "women never had their chances in either freedom or education."⁵, she adds: "women's inferiority is created by the absurdity of her education."⁶ On the other hand, even if they are educated, women are unable to prove themselves in society because their education is perceived as a threat and creates problems with their partners, at their workplace, and with society in general. This means that in all cases, the Western woman is seen as inferior and this is reflected in this quote: "in the majority of western novels women are depicted as 'the other'"⁷ and this is clearly demonstrated through the female characters including Clara, the lady down below, and Marian.

Marriage is considered as one of the barriers set by the patriarchal society to prevent women from attending school and achieving their goals, de Beauvoir says that "marriage meant to enslave woman and limits their freedom."⁸ It is seen as a sacred act that women should target from their birth. As little girls, they are taught how to behave with their future husbands and that marriage is their ultimate goal in life. On this basis, de Beauvoir argues that: "the destiny that society traditionally offers to women is marriage [...] Marriage is the reference, by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to that institution."⁹ Therefore, parents and society make pressure on women which leads them to quit their education and forcefully submit to the role dictated by the

patriarchal society. Indeed, marriage is regarded to be so important that the unmarried women are socially viewed as “wastage”¹⁰ and are called “the redundant woman-women not fortunate enough to marry, who in place of compelling, sweetening and embellishing the existence of others are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own”¹¹, but, in fact, it is a barrier used by the male-centered societies to dominate, control, and oppress women, as well as a way to prevent them from realizing their own dreams and having an important position in society just as their male counterparts.

In the novel, marriage as a barrier for women’s education is amply displayed through the character of Clara. Atwood highlights the consequences of dropping out school in early age and uses Clara as a good example of a woman who gives up her education for the sake of raising a family and fulfilling the duties imposed on her; she lives a life that, at that time, is thought to be the most fulfilling for a woman like her. Society and mainly her husband have succeeded to convince her that her only task is taking care of her family; however, society exigencies make Clara unable to do anything for her children and for herself. Furthermore, because of the burden on her, she does not succeed in maintaining the role set by the patriarchal society and this is seen in her way of managing her home and personal life; “she just lies there and that man does all the work! She lets herself be treated like a thing.”¹²

Atwood’s description of Clara’s disordered house shows the way her role as a woman, a wife, and a mother takes control over her life; she always complains about her situation and finds it hard to perform her womanly role which makes her seem always “tired”¹³, “helpless”¹⁴, “pale”¹⁵, and “fragile.”¹⁶. De Beauvoir argues that “the wife is abused because of her sex; she has a parasitic existence; she is poorly educated; she needs exceptional circumstances if she is to envisage and carry out any concrete project.”¹⁷ This quote illustrates the way marriage shapes and influences women’s condition and especially how it deprives them from proving themselves as important individuals in society just as men.

Besides, contrary to what society promised women that marriage, rather than education, is their salvation, the author shares different opinions. Soon after her marriage, Clara does not only lose her sense of life and happiness but also her beauty because of the pregnancies; “her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers”¹⁸; and this reflects the idea of de Beauvoir that “She [woman] passively submits to her biological destiny, because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor which locks her into repetition and immanence”¹⁹ and that “motherhood relegates woman to a secondary existence, it is natural for her to stay at home”²⁰ which means that pregnancy is a means of controlling and treating women as objects.

Clara’s lack of education results in her alienation as she isolates herself from the outside world and finds herself locked in the house; she feels lonely and has no one to talk to as her husband Joe confirms: “Clara has so few people she can really talk to”²¹ apart Marian who is her only friend from school days. Marian considers Clara’s life miserable and out of control as she gets pregnant several times; this makes her feel sorry for her. She says that,

the babies had been unplanned. Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her and her second with dismay, now, during the third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism.²²

This demonstrates that women become no more than machines for bearing children; this reflects de Beauvoir’s notion of how men and society perceive women; she says: “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers, she is a womb, an ovary; she is female”²³; she adds: “there is an absolute human type that is masculine, woman has ovaries and uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity.”²⁴ The patriarchal definition of women is a burden on Clara’s shoulders which led her to neglect her duties towards herself and others; she stands helplessly watching her life slipping from her own

hands; Marian declares: “lately she had taken to make bitter remarks about being just a housewife”²⁵. She lives in chaos with three kids at this early age and her “life seemed cut off from her, set apart, something she could only gaze through a window”²⁶. In this context, de Beauvoir considers marriage as ethically wrong and “oppressive”²⁷ to women. Therefore, one can conclude that marriage may have a negative influence on women’s schooling because patriarchal societies use it as a trade or a means to oppress women and oblige them to depend on men instead of themselves. Thus, “Early marriage is a harmful traditional practise that continues to affect millions around the world. Though it has declined over the years, it is still pervasive in developing countries.”²⁸ This shows how early marriage denies girls’ rights and forces them out of education.

In Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), the consequences of lack of education are also highly presented by the lady down below who is described as a manipulated character because society prevents her from having an educational career and an open mind. In this context, de Beauvoir says: “they [women] lack sufficient education for higher aims and besides no objective is even proposed to them; action remains forbidden for them”²⁹, she adds: “she barely receives no education and is raised with no regard.”³⁰ The lady down below is a good example of the old conventional type of woman who believes in the traditional norms imposed upon women. This is shown in her way of controlling Marian and Ainsley’s lives, who are her tenants, as she obliges them to fit to society standards and find a husband to depend on rather than living with each other. In addition, she also keeps an eye on what they buy especially if it is drinks because she has fixed beliefs that respected girls should not drink; she always asks them to avoid things that can harm their good image and believes that the “two young ladies were surely more to be dependent upon than two young men”³¹; Marian claims in this excerpt,

I suspected the lady down below had taken note of all the bottle –shaped objects we had carried upstairs, though I tried my best to disguise them as groceries. It was true she had never specifically forbidden us to do anything-that would be too crude a violation of her law of nuance- but this makes me feel I am actually forbidden to do everything.³²

Also, the lady down below is always in disagreement with Ainsley because of the latter's character as she does not follow the rules including her way of dressing; the lady down below finds that wearing sleeveless and short dresses makes a woman unrespected. This shows how it is easy for society to influence and control uneducated women and force them to believe in the patriarchal norms and act exactly according to what society dictates.

Besides, Atwood uses Joe, Clara's husband, as a good example of how society perceives unmarried women and educated ones. Despite his educational level, Joe has severe opinions about women's role in society. For instance, he thinks that unmarried women are weak and need men to help them manage their life; "he tends anyway to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection."³³ He, as society, believes that women should pursue the dream of marriage rather than education and that women's life is limited to the private sphere. This is shown in his role as a supportive and caring husband, which is in fact, his strategy to prevent his wife from taking control over her life and making any step or decision, she depends on her husband in all aspects of her life (financially and in domestic spheres. So, for Joe, women are destined for child bearing and domestic chores; thus, "a normal existence is to be a wife and a mother."³⁴

Furthermore, Joe also confesses his negative attitude towards educated women; he thinks that they should never go to university to make it easy for them to accept the role of a housewife. For him, women should drop their education in order to marry and maintain a good relationship with their partners, he affirms: "I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university, she gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say they treat her like a thinking human being; when she get married her core gets

invaded”³⁵; he adds “maybe women shouldn’t be allowed to go to university at all; then they wouldn’t always be feeling later on that they’ve missed out on the life of the mind.”³⁶ For him, uneducated women are silenced from birth, so they are not against living all their life dominated and obedient, whereas educated ones have greater confidence to make decisions and do not accept easily the role of being a mother and a housewife.

In addition to Joe, Duncan, who is Marian’s second lover, is another character who believes in the traditional rules; he is described as a patriarchal figure who underestimates Marian’s status as an educated and a working woman as he criticizes her job and this is shown when he says: “now what’s a nice little girl like you doing walking around asking men all about their beer? You ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you”³⁷; he adds: “why do you have a crummy job like this?”³⁸. So, Duncan deliberately expresses his views about women’s role and position in society and believes that women’s duty is to stay at home and be dependent on men instead of following their professional careers.

Finally, the author uses Leonard Slank as another male character who expresses his opinion about educated women. He is against girls who go to school. For him, education ruins women’s mind and personality as they learn silly ideas and neglect their real objectives in life which are being good and obedient housewives. They focus on their self-worth instead of their families and husbands and this reflects the way his girlfriend Ainsley behaves with him. Ainsley’s education and character are one of the reasons that push him to reconsider his relation with her. He does not want to be with an intelligent and independent woman that knows what she wants as he considers education as a source of problems; he says: “so, she’s been to college, I should have known. That’s what we get then,” he said nastily “for educating women. They get all kinds of ridiculous ideas.”³⁹ For him, Ainsley’s daring attitude with him is a result of being educated and this reflects de Beauvoir’s idea that “If the custom were to

put little girls in school and they were normally taught since like the boys, they would learn as perfectly and would understand the subtitles of all the arts and sciences as they do.”⁴⁰

b. Educated Women

In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Margaret Atwood shows that society tends to control and oppress not only uneducated but also educated women who still cannot celebrate their freedom and independence; this is well demonstrated through her female protagonist Marian. In fact, Marian is an educated woman; she is a graduate student with a high degree in English. Although she has access to education, her actions are still questioned by society and men especially her fiancé Peter. This shows, as Simone de Beauvoir claims that “a woman cannot escape from the traditional feminine world, they get from neither society nor their husbands the assistance they would need to become in concrete fact the equals of the men.”⁴¹ This means that society impositions are always a barrier to women’s achievements; they do not give them a chance to go forward or even express their own opinions, so “The prospects for women transforming themselves outside the masculine are limited.”⁴²

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood describes the protagonist Marian as being calm, passive, and undemanding; she is known for her gentleness whether at work or in daily life. She pays attention to what others think on her and believes that it is her duty to behave reasonably and take care of everyone else. This reflects society’s ignorance of women’s intellectual capabilities and how they are taught to be passive instead of relying on themselves and how society oppresses and exercises authority over them. These characteristics show how society succeeds to make Marian a dependent instead of an independent woman and her relationship with her fiancé Peter is a vivid illustration of how her education fails in maintaining a fair relationship as she is always in an attempt to please him while repressing her thoughts and ideas in order to fulfill his will and needs. In fact, Peter is described as an

educated man and a successful lawyer influenced by social norms; his education is not enough to take over social rules. Marian, at first, believes that he is a perfect man; she describes him in the seventh chapter of the book as being “ordinariness raised to perfection”⁴³; however, he has an immense control over all aspects of her life; he is in charge of all the important decisions. For instance, despite Marian’s conviction about the inconvenient effects of alcohol, Peter always obliges her to drink more than what she can, which makes them in a disagreement even though she always pretends enjoying it. Marian says,

At the age of ten I wrote a temperance essay for the united Church Sunday –School competition, illustrating it with pictures of car crashes, diagrams of diseased livers, and charts showing the effects of alcohol upon the circulatory system; I expect that’s why I can never take second drink without a mental image of warning sign printed in coloured crayons and connected with the taste of tepid communion grape juice. This puts me at a disadvantage with Peter; he likes me to try and keep up with him.⁴⁴

In addition, Marian’s ways of choosing her words and ideas is a great evidence of how society changes the minds of educated women. Before her relation with Peter, she always expresses her own thoughts and ideas; however, once she met him, her conversations and way of communicating becomes full of hesitation. She always considers what to say and how to behave in Peter’s presence; she concentrates on his comfort and forgets about herself. Even though she deeply feels awful of not saying what she really wants, she always answers with “marvelous”⁴⁵. In their intimate moments she does not tell him how she wants to be treated in fear of hurting his feelings and this is shown through this passage:

I was wondering why he had insisted that we get into the bathtub. I hadn’t thought it was a good idea, I much prefer the bed and I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortably hard and ridgy, but I hadn’t objected: I felt I should be sympathetic because of Trigger. However I had taken the bath mat in with me, which soften the ridges.⁴⁶

This passage shows Marian’s obedient behavior with Peter; although she is not comfortable and dislikes Peter’s invitation to make sex in that place as she sees “the bathtub as a coffin”⁴⁷ and makes her skin mortified, she does not protest against it and does not express her unease with that situation only in an attempt to please him. Moreover, he always expects her to shop

and cook for him; Marian says: “I walk over Peter’s and get something to cook at store on the way”⁴⁸; she adds: “I went to the kitchen and carefully assembled the drinks, remembering not to leave out the twist of lemon-peel Peter like. It takes me longer than average to make drink: I have to measure”⁴⁹. Indeed, Marian is obliged to satisfy him in order to secure her position in their relationship by silencing her own thoughts and feelings.

Furthermore, Peter’s stereotypes on Marian’s role in the kitchen shows the suffering and the condition of educated women within their homes and with their partners and demonstrates how women are not appreciated for what they are; and whatever they do, they are still considered as being invaluable. Even though Marian always tries to take care of Peter, he never values the meaning of her efforts and keeps making hurting remarks about her “why can’t you ever cook anything”⁵⁰; he adds “come on out to the kitchen and help me get things ready. Women are so much better at arranging things on plates.”⁵¹ Because of all those bad remarks, she feels pain; as she claims: “I was hurt. I considered this unfair” “I was about to make sharp comment, but repressed it”⁵²; she tends to find excuses to mask Peter’s wickedness. In this context, Atwood uses this cooking example to satirize the role of women in the patriarchal society and to make clear that a woman’s place is in the kitchen since cooking is considered their primary responsibility. In this respect, de Beauvoir claims,

A woman is shut up in a kitchen, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly. Let a future be open to her and she will no longer be obliged to settle in the present.⁵³

In the same perspective, in “Sharp Appetite: Margaret Atwood Consuming politics, Food, Consumption and Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction” (2003), Sceats. S. claims that “[t]he way to man’s heart is through his stomach and providing food for a husband is a maternal responsibility.”⁵⁴ These quotations demonstrate the way women, instead of focusing

on their educational enhancement, they are taught to master the entire household and to serve men without any objection or complaint.

Besides, Marian's changed view about the subject of marriage is another example of how her education does not save her from social obligations; she is easily fooled to accept a fate that she is not ready for. Marian and Peter's relationship, at first, is not based on any future plans because he does not want to get married. He dislikes the idea of getting bound to someone else and he succeeds to convince Marian of that too; he gets so angry about his friends who get married and also mad about their wives; he tells her that he has an unpleasant experience with what is called "the other kind"⁵⁵ i.e. women. But, for him, Marian is the type of girl that would not try to take over his life and bother him with this idea of marriage, or, at least, that is what he convinces her to do because he affects her mind and actions. This reflects de Beauvoir's notion that the man is "Absolute" while the woman is the "Other."⁵⁶ Marian believes that she has to fit into his behavior and not argue about it which means that the education of women

is ought to be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, and to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this what she should be taught.⁵⁷

This excerpt highlights the duties of women toward their husbands and children by following their will and needs without taking into consideration what they want and desire. This is shown also in Marian's words: "Of course I had to adjust to his moods, but that's true of any man, and his were too obvious to cause much difficulty"⁵⁸ So, she is obliged to change her personality in order to make their relationship work by never talking about marriage and tries to do all the things that comfort him.

As the story moves on, Peter for his own sake, proposes to Marian by saying: "how do you think we'd get on as... how do you think we'd be, married"⁵⁹ because he thinks that he

reaches the appropriate age to get married like all his friends; he declares: “A man’s got to settle down sometime, and I am twenty six”⁶⁰ and this reflects de Beauvoir’s notion that a woman is “Nothing other than what man decides, she is thus called ‘the sex’, meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute.”⁶¹ Indeed, Peter justifies his sudden change of mind about marriage by saying: “A fellow can’t keep running indefinitely. It’ll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you’ve got a wife, people get suspicious of a single man after certain age.”⁶². Marian, once again, falls prey to Peter’s authority and is obliged to accept his proposal because she does not want to disappoint him; she is also charmed by his words and the way he describes her when he said:

And there’s one thing about you, Marian, I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrained but you’re such a sensible girl. You may not know this but I’ve always thought that’s the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife.⁶³

In other words, Marian accepts Peter’s proposal despite her discomfort with the situation; she tries to convince herself and defend her choice by saying:

“I’d always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does...I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is...She is against it on principle, and life isn’t by principles but by adjustments”⁶⁴

and also by Peter’s words when he said “you can’t continue to run around indefinitely; people who aren’t married get funny in middle age.”⁶⁵ So, remaining quiet and satisfying Peter’s needs strongly demonstrate Marian’s passive feminine position and how she allows Peter to govern her. In other words, her own thoughts and ideas are silenced by him. Even her roommate Ainsley believes that Marian is not ready for this kind of commitment as she tells her “I don’t think you know what you are doing”.⁶⁶ By doing this, it is clear that Marian is manipulated by Peter as she accepts the role and norms that are traditionally foisted upon women. De Beauvoir asserts that a “married woman becomes subject to husband’s

authority”⁶⁷; she adds: “Man is the superior being and his “ideal woman” is one that will unquestionably submit to his domination.”⁶⁸

It is clear that even educated women have no power and decisions to make; they are, then, dominated by the male authority and cannot contradict the old rules. In this perspective, Halen Meekosha claims: “Gender, as a relationship between sexes in societies, is usually seen as operating hierarchically, men being more powerful and dominant, while women are less powerful and weaker.”⁶⁹ In the same perspective, Alfred Lord Tennyson conveys: “Man for the field and woman for the hearth: Man for the sword and for the needle she: Man with the head and woman with the heart: Man to command and women to obey; all else confusion.”⁷⁰ These citations show that men are more dominant than women.

Moreover, the idea of women having to be stereotypically beautiful in order to be loved and appreciated by men demonstrates that women’s education does not free them from their subjugation in the male dominated society. Marian is changing her appearance under Peter’s demand and spending the whole day dressing and caring for her hair and skin is a relevant example of the patriarchal imposition upon women. Atwood puts it,

Marian had spent the afternoon at the hair dressers: Peter had suggested that she might have something done with her hair. She had also hinted that perhaps she should buy a dress that was as he put it “not quite so mousy” as she already owned, and she had duly bought one. It was short and red, and sequined. She didn’t think it was really her.⁷¹

Therefore, all the make-up, hair, and night dresses that she prepares for the party are shown to be against her will since “she didn’t enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object”⁷²; however, as a compliant woman, she is obliged to do it to obey him. So, Peter’s desire to dominate Marian illustrates that the female’s body is treated as an object to fulfill men’s desire and needs. In this respect, in “Margaret Atwood’s Edible Woman: Transforming of the Protagonist from an Innocent Victim to a Matured Victor”, Sarkunam.S. writes,

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill, he has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind[...] ⁷³

Likewise, Marian does not only allow Peter to make the major decisions but also the minor ones. She does not only let him choose her dress but also her food; when they are together in a restaurant, she said: “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... she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away”⁷⁴. This clearly shows that Marian’s relationship with Peter is a good evidence of how education cannot save women from social exploitation in which men are always the decision makers and women are the followers; their beliefs and feelings are of no importance.

In addition, even though most women attend school and have the chance to work, they do not have equal rights. Men and women have unequal positions in the professional life; women are treated unfairly and differently in the workplace. Indeed, patriarchal societies tend to reinforce stereotypical ideas and perceptions: men are given the opportunity and encouraged to occupy better and higher positions whereas women are always expected to fill the subordinate ones without regard to their educational and intellectual level. Simone de Beauvoir argues:

Woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man’s, and often puts her at a considerable disadvantage. Even when her rights are recognized abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs. Economically, men and women almost from two cases; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions. ⁷⁵

From the above quotation, it is clear that women can have neither the same nor the high position as men; though they have the same level of education, they occupy subordinate positions and poor working conditions.

In Atwood's novel, women subordination is strongly experienced at Marian's work place in Seymour Surveys where she is exploited. In this male dominated Market Company, great differences between men and women are made; de Beauvoir writes: "Women in general are today inferior to men; that is their situation provides them with fewer possibilities"⁷⁶, She adds: "society has always been male, political powers has always been in men's hands. Political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men"⁷⁷, so all the important positions are held by men which makes Marian believes that she deserves much better and wonders what is her role in this company; she says: "At times I'm certain I'm being groomed for something higher up... I wonder just which things are part of my job."⁷⁸. She describes the company as a layered ice cream sandwich with three floors: the upper floor is reserved to men; it is "referred to as the men upstairs"⁷⁹ and women are not allowed there and this reflects the idea of de Beauvoir that "Any male office is forbidden for them [women]"⁸⁰ and that "She is of course excluded from public affairs and prohibited from any "masculine office."⁸¹; the below floor is for machines whereas the middle one is devoted to housewives, mothers, and female in general who get less payment than their male colleagues; "they don't make much, but they like to get out of the house. Those who answer the questions don't get paid at all."⁸²

Atwood gives a detailed description of men's offices in which all the facilities of work are provided: "their offices have carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of group of seven paintings on the walls"⁸³ contrary to women whose office lacks all facilities of work; Marian says: "The humidity was worse inside. I waded among the ladies desks to my own corner and had scarcely settled in behind the type writer before the back of my legs were stuck to the black leatherette of the chair. The air conditioning system, I saw had failed again."⁸⁴ This upsets Marian as her place in the company is given to her according to her gender and this is shown through her words: "I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire -marking ladies, as that would

be a step down.”⁸⁵ .So, the hierarchical system within the company is used as a metaphorical parallel to demonstrate how “men profit in many other subtle ways from woman’s alterity”⁸⁶. “The three layers”, according to Salat M. F. in her book “*A Delicious Fare: Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman*” *Perspective on Canadian Writing*”, represent the “three planes of reality: mind, body and matter. The men are mind; the women are bodies.”⁸⁷

Moreover, this survey company does not only control women’s work but also their personal lives as Ms Bogue, the head of the department, shows to Marian her dissatisfaction with one of her workers who gets pregnant “she regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company.”⁸⁸ She controls their appearance as women because they are obliged to wear “the high heels expected by the office”⁸⁹ even in cold weather “their heels clicking and granting on the bare sidewalk it had not yet snowed”⁹⁰; they have no word or opinion to express. In his article entitled “Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide”, Tyson. L., states:

This oppression of women is, among other things, being upheld by traditional gender roles that make it possible to justify unequal conditions in the workplace and in society as a whole. These gender roles prescribe different qualities and abilities to the sexes that produce a view that men are more suitable to be in high positions in politics, corporations, and the academic world.⁹¹

In the same perspective, in “Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education?”, David M. E., says:

Even though higher education leads individual returns in the form of higher income, women often need to have more education than men to get some jobs... Women continue to confront discrimination in jobs, disparities in power, voice and political representation and laws that are prejudicial on the basis of their gender. As a result, well-educated women often end up in jobs where they do not use their full potential skills.⁹²

These quotations highlight the extent to which women’s qualifications are denied in work-place; men contrary to women are given more opportunities, high payment, and better working conditions. The patriarchal society does not give much importance to women’s education; it fools them with jobs that have lower payment and bad conditions and tend to put them away from light and away from all the important chances which means that “women are

concentrated in low-productivity, low-paying jobs. They are over-represented among unpaid workers and in the informal sector, and they rarely rise to positions of power.”⁹³

To conclude, this chapter underscores the notion of “education” and how the male centered-society oppresses not only uneducated but also educated women more specifically in *The Edible Woman*. The novel provides us with different female characters who are controlled and dependent on men, especially the protagonist Marian McAlpin. In fact, throughout this chapter we have seen how education did not save women from occupying the subordinate position and living under the male authority and societal stereotypes not only in workplaces but also in their personal life; and how society expects them to be by silencing their own thoughts, and forcing them to follow the old traditional thinking and rules.

Endnotes

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- ²⁴ Ibid, 25.
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Chapter Two: Virginity as a Means of Control in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969)

This second part of our research seeks to spotlight the notion of virginity and how it is used by the patriarchal society to exploit women in *The Edible Woman* relying on the theory of feminism as explained in the book of Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex*. Our task in this section is to analyze and point out how society uses the notion of “virginity” to limit and oppress women and how women suffer in society.

a. The Notion of Virginity in Western Societies

In human existence, the masculine world has always been favored to be the authority while the feminine one is the oppressed. Indeed, many negative stereotypes have been used to keep women under control and virginity is one of them. The notion of virginity has historically impacted women's value, status, and survival; it holds an immense cultural significance for humans. The word virgin is originated from ancient times; it comes from Latin “Virgo”, which means “a girl” or “never married woman”; the popularity of virginity is often attributed to Mariology, the Roman Catholic Worship of the Virgin Mary, i.e., the mother of Jesus.¹

“Virginity” is not a scientific discovery, but rather a cultural creation invented by the patriarchal societies to sexualize, dominate, and treat women as second class citizens. These cultures use this concept to signify purity and worth; thus, “virginity has long been a key factor in determining a woman's worth”²; it is used as a way to control women's lives and seeks to subordinate them to men. Virginity is perceived as women's treasure that represents personal and family honor which defines purity and dignity. On this basis, Mitchell J.P. argues:

Shame is directly related to honour, in that a reduction of the shame of a household's women becomes a direct reflection on the honour of its men. The man whose wife is adulterous or who fails to demonstrate the virginity of his new bride, is dishonoured.³

Therefore, virginity is one of the most important issues that affects women's destiny and determines their value in both personal and public life. Virginity splits women into two different categories: if a woman is a virgin, then she is viewed as a pure girl; however, if she is not, she is considered as a whore and a prostitute. So the patriarchal societies tend to forcibly establish in their minds that women's virginity is of a prime importance that must be protected by their fathers and brothers until marriage to become the property of their husbands with the sole duty to bear their children. In this context, de Beauvoir writes: "under the patriarchal regime, she was the property of a father who married her off as he saw fit; then attached to her husband's household, she was no more than his thing and the thing of the family(genos) in which she was placed"⁴. They tend to blame women if they lose their virginity before marriage because, according to society, women can control their desires and needs not like men who cannot, de Beauvoir says "Man can enjoy women without worrying or having to defend himself against himself or her" and that a man is a "slave of his desires."⁵ Women are raised with the belief that they must hide themselves whereas men are taught to be proud of their masculinity, so they can do whatever they want and cannot be judged because they are symbols of power and being males gives them freedom and activity .

"Virginity" is sacred and crucial in the life of many people in order to build up an ideal society; it is a strong sign of chastity and a source of shame and honor in many communities. Indeed, it is considered as a moral issue which is a taboo in many cultures mainly in western societies. These cultures are particularly restrictive in their attitudes about sex when it comes to women and sexuality. For instance,

The United States prides itself on being the “land of the free”, but it is rather restrictive when it comes to its citizens’ general attitudes about sex compared to other industrialized nations. In an international survey, 29 percent of US respondents stated that premarital sex is always wrong.⁶

Even though they are known for their evolution in many fields such as in economy, industry..., their focus on female premarital virginity is often regarded as the most important aspect; they expect women to be virgins. In addition, in her article “The Cult of True Womanhood”, Barbara Welter writes,

In a society where values changed frequently, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same – a true woman was a true woman, whatever she was found- The true woman was supposed to be pure(sexually innocent or sexually faithful).⁷

Women, contrary to men, are not allowed to have a sexual relation without a lawful marriage. In her article entitled “Western Women and True Womanhood Culture and Symbol in History And Literature”, Underwood, J. O. argues that “Men, according to the myth, had no interest in formalized religion; it was woman’s duty to carry on the traditions. Men were subject to sexual desires they had a right to satisfy, but good women were pure.”⁸. Regarding virginity in western societies, women have this expectation placed on them; if they want to be conservative girls, they have to remain virgins until they are married and protecting young girls from sexual abuses is the duty of their fathers. Therefore, a woman’s virginity in the west is important and this is reflected in Naguib’s article entitled “Virginity Around The World”; she argues that “Despite the fact that the very notion of an “intact hymen” is a myth, the fetishizing of supposed physical proof of virginity persists even here in the United States.”⁹

The above quotations show that Western societies have laid a great emphasis on the issue of women’s virginity before marriage; women are taught to value and secure their virginity till they get married and they are also forced to prove it in the wedding night because the honour of the family is determined by the chastity of their daughters.

b. Virginity and its Effects on Women in *The Edible Woman* (1969)

The Edible Woman portrays women issues and their situation within the patriarchal society. Margaret Atwood seeks to expose the notion of virginity as a vivid illustration of cultural control made against women. Virginity is a “myth”¹⁰ that defines women’s place and worth in family, so preserving and protecting it until marriage is considered as a great achievement and a sign of a good behavior that only ideal women can have. In this respect, Matswetu V.S., and Bhana.D. assert that: “A woman’s virginity at the time of marriage is highly valued in diverse communities worldwide; it is regarded as a sign that the young woman is virtuous and respectable.”¹¹ In the novel, virginity is a traditional factor that society and men use to oppress and dominate women; thus, the novel is a good example on virginity. Most of the female characters in the novel try to follow the traditional beliefs in order to avoid losing their morals and falling in the label of the whore. De Beauvoir writes, “Woman on earth is surrounded by taboos like all sacred beings, she is herself taboo.”¹²

In Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, “virginity” is better illustrated through her female characters Emmy, Millie, and Lucy. In fact, the three women “are all virgins”¹³ and referred to as the “Three Virgins Office”¹⁴ because they are all obsessed with their virginity and how society will react if they lose it before marriage. De Beauvoir says: “women’s virginity is demanded more imperiously when men consider the wife as his personal property”¹⁵. For instance, Millie believes that a woman is not allowed to have sex before marriage rather it is better to have it after in order to avoid all social judgments and prejudices; she says: “I think in the long run it’s better to wait until you’re married, don’t you? Less bother.”¹⁶. This shows how girls are pushed to believe that premarital relations are not accepted by the patriarchal society.

In addition, Atwood describes Lucy as another character who is affected by this notion. Lucy is very cautious about people's opinion and reaction on non-virgin women and this reflects de Beauvoir's notion that "the young bride has to be delivered to her spouse as a virgin in case of adultery, she is stoned; she is confined to domestic labor"¹⁷. Lucy says: "what would people say which seems to be rooted in a conviction that all bedrooms are weird for sound, with society gathered at the other end turning its earphones"¹⁸ and this is because of the negative image through which the patriarchal societies view the non-virgins; they tend to describe them as unrespectable and bad girls with no principles and chastity who will be discarded and rejected by their family and society. On the other hand, Emmy who is the office hypochondriac believes that having a premarital relation would harm her health and puts her in danger; she claims that "this would make her sick, which it probably would."¹⁹ Hence, it is made clear that all of three virgins are victimized as objects for men's desires both within and outside the legal framework of marriage. They try to follow the traditional standards and believe that a woman must not have a relationship outside social rules.

As a matter of fact, "The Office Virgins"²⁰ are cautious about their look as they keep looking at themselves in the mirror and fixing their make up; "each glanced at herself in the mirror, preening and straightening, before going out to the living room. Lucy reforested her mouth and Emmy scratched hurriedly at her scalp."²¹ They always try to be stereotypically beautiful in order to attract rich businessmen and this is seen through Atwood's description of Millie as she simply tries too hard to find love; she is "encased in pale blue satin which bulged in odd places"²² and Lucy as glamorous and elegant in her "purple velvet, with silver eyelids and false lashes"²³ as she goes to expensive restaurant "wearing a new dress"²⁴; she tries to be perfect to the point of becoming artificial; she "had a face and shape that almost demanded the artificial, nail polish and makeup and elaborate arrangements of hair blended into her, became part of her. Surely she would look peeled or amputated without them."²⁵ For

her, changing her appearance is the only solution to seduce a man and get rid of her virginity which condemns her life. However, Emmy is described as an immature teenager with her “pink chiffon, faintly suggestive of high-school formals... her hair had been sprayed into stiff”²⁶, and she,

Always looks as though she is coming unraveled. Stray threads trail from her hems, her lipstick sloughs off in dry scales, she shed wispy blonde hairs and flakes of scalp on her shoulders and back; everywhere she goes she leaves a trail of assorted shreds.²⁷

Their obsession to find an ideal man is reflected in Marian and Peter’s engagement party as they “were so excited. They were each expecting a version of Peter to walk miraculously through the door, drop to one knee and propose”²⁸. They keep chasing and looking at every man; “every time there was a knock on the door, the three office virgins swiveled their heads towards the entrance”²⁹. In addition, Lucy’s desire to find a husband goes to the point of trying to seduce Peter, her friend’s fiancé, on his wedding party; she says:

“You’re ever handsome than you sound on the phone”, she was complementing him; “gazing up at Peter from under her silvers lids... Marian said “she [Lucy] had always been more astute about those things than the other two. But how touching of her to try instead for Peter; pathetic, actually. After all Peter was off market almost as definitely as if he was already married.”³⁰

This shows the way virginity affects and puts them under pressure to find an appropriate partner and have a legitimate relationship according to society rules. Blank. H. writes,

Defining virginity means directly affecting the lives of nearly all women. Despite what some people appear to think, defining virginity is not merely a philosophical exercise. It is an exercise in controlling how people behave, feels, and thinks, and in some cases, whether they live or die.³¹

This means that virginity shapes women’s life and affects negatively their behavior and attitudes. Because of the restricted norms on the notion of virginity which is firmly established in women’s minds, they end up witnessing both mental problems and lower self-esteem. Lefkowitz. V. and welsh. D. argue that “Understanding perceptions of sexual

behavior is important, as these perceptions may influence their mental health as well as their future perception of decision-making.”³²

As a result, through these descriptions, it is clear that Atwood uses “The Three Virgins” to illustrate the way virginity is dictated by the patriarchal society to control women’s lives and behavior; Frymer-Kensky. T. says that: “Virginity is prized because it provides a specific purpose towards which the patriarchal urge to dominate can be directed, and a way in which it can be measured”³³. So the obsession with their virginity has negatively affected them to the point of changing their appearance and becoming completely different persons.

Furthermore, the oppressive notion of “virginity” is also shown through Ainsley. Atwood uses this character to demonstrate the way society perceives losing one’s virginity before marriage as being a sin and shame, and how non virgin women are given the name of whores and prostitutes as well as the problems they face because of their actions and behavior that contradict social rules. Ainsley is Atwood’s female character who is a good example of a woman who does not respect social norms and criticizes all the other females for their passivity and subjectivity. She is an independent daring woman who does not want to cope with society’s expectations and predictions; she does not fear anything especially others’ opinions about her; “she can go about getting what she wants with a great deal of efficiency.”³⁴

Indeed; her rebellious ideas and deeds make her contradict all the negative myths constructed by society including that of “virginity”. She does not give much importance to her virginity as society does; this is shown in her act of seducing Len and having a sexual relation outside wedlock and losing her virginity in an illegitimate way just to have a child for her own. Contrary to society, she believes that she is a full and an ideal woman with or without

her virginity; she is against marriage and having a serious relationship with a man, she says, “I’m not going to get married”³⁵ because she has a fixed idea that married women are manipulated and they rely on their husbands instead of themselves; the only thing that matters for her is to have a child not a husband. Even though her friend Marian warns her about social norms that disallow women to have an illegitimate child and the way she will live according to social prejudices and take the risk of being a single mother when she says: “The lady down below would certainly not tolerate her once she became round”³⁶; however, Ainsley seems to be willing to face it all.

Additionally, the loss of “virginity” outside the marriage context is shown to have negative implications for women. Ainsley’s loss of her virginity makes her seen as a whore and a slut woman. In her article ‘Virginity’ harms and excludes many of us. Is it time we got rid of it? Scott. K. argues that “Women are under higher scrutiny [than men] and might experience adverse consequences when virginity is considered lost, ranging from ostracisation to physical violence”³⁷. She adds: “in some cultures if a woman is found not to be virgin when she “should be”, she can be killed”³⁸. This also led Ainsley to witness many problems including the landlord’s order to leave her apartment because her illegitimate relationship with Len is seen as an act of no return that has destroyed the social conventions; the lady down below says: “I don’t want any unpleasantness, but now I’m afraid you’ll have to go.”³⁹ In fact, the notion of virginity refers most typically to the honour required for young women before marriage, which means that society obligates women to follow the rules put in place by their parents and society; if not, they will be perceived as unprincipled girls and will witness many problems in their life.

Moreover, because of the negative image through which society views and oppresses Ainsley, she tries too hard to correct her reputation and avoid social judgments on her. So, she makes many changes in her life in order to be a respectable girl and acquire good

characteristics according to social norms. She first started to change her appearance and behavior. She departs from being an “unrespectable”⁴⁰ girl socially wearing “an orange and pink sleeveless dress, which [Marian] judged was too tight across the hips”⁴¹, a rude, and drinking alcohol to become “shy”⁴², “quiet”⁴³, and wearing formal dresses, in addition to giving up her bad habits like drinking. But, in fact, it is not only her habits that are changed, but also her way of thinking; she stops caring about how she looks and becomes inelegant especially after her pregnancy; this is shown in chapter twenty three “when Ainsley came in, wearing her dingy green robe, these days she no longer hummed and knitted; instead she had been reading a lot of books, trying, she had said, to nip the problem in the bud”⁴⁴. This indicates the way she is obliged to follow social assumptions; she becomes obsessed to provide a father to her child in order to live a normal life and be a complete woman because she perceives it as a necessity to be accepted by society.

Additionally, Atwood uses Leonard Slank, Ainsley’s lover, as a good example of how society and men perceive non virgin women. He deliberately expresses his attitude toward virginity loss and this is demonstrated through his reaction after having an illegitimate sexual relation with Ainsley. He does not want to assume their relation and have any link neither with her nor with the child because after taking her virginity, he perceives her as a prostitute and a whore. Now, that she loses the only thing that defines her worth; he sees her only as an object for pleasure. He wants her to get out of his life and even denies and rejects his role as a father. He does not want to assume being a father of an illegitimate child, he does not want to marry a dirty woman like her, he says: “no dammit! You’ll never get me”⁴⁵ as he keeps denigrating her and calling her “rotten bitch”⁴⁶; even his friends assume that Ainsley is not the good type of women for him instead he needs a respectable girl. Clara says that “What he needs is some nice home-loving type who’ll take care of him”⁴⁷. This clearly shows how virginity plays an important role in defining women’s life and future.

To conclude, this chapter underscores the notion of virginity which is an issue that has become a coercive instrument intended to control women and justify their surveillance at all time. It highlights the way virginity is used by the patriarchal society as a weapon to oppress women, and maintain an ideal construct of how they should behave. It is about how women must control their desires and preserve their sexuality in order to acquire male recognition, acceptance, and approval more specifically in *The Edible Woman* that provides us with different female characters who are controlled by social beliefs on “virginity”.

Endnotes

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¹⁵ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 208.

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¹⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 119.

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⁴⁰Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 14.

⁴¹*Ibid*,15.

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⁴³*Ibid*.

⁴⁴*Ibid*,206.

⁴⁵*Ibid*,156.

⁴⁶*Ibid*,244.

⁴⁷*Ibid*,238.

V. Conclusion

Throughout our research paper, we have attempted to illustrate the issues of education and virginity through the study and analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory included in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). Our aim in this dissertation is to demonstrate Atwood's main goal for writing her novel; she uses her voice to discern the different instances of women's oppression stating the major obstacles faced by all the female characters in the male dominated society.

Our analysis of the novel came to the conclusion that education does not end patriarchy; educated or not, women find difficulties to achieve equality in society. Thus, through her writing of the novel, Atwood discusses the abusive traditional structure and problems that women face every day, and outlines educated and uneducated women as being passive and victims of society. In addition, Atwood criticizes the practise of virginity that empowers male dominance and leave women oppressed and limited. Atwood's female characters are controlled by their virginity; this made them victims of male exploitation, and suffer from social oppression.

All in all, the last concluding point of our work is that Atwood interrogates the place of women amongst society; she explores the difficulties associated with their life and tries to remind us about women's everyday problems. Atwood makes her readers understand the false ideas about the defined roles of women who are expected to be always flexible in their professional field and private lives; they are expected to accept the positions that are enforced on them by the male dominance; female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles caused serious threat to their position in society. Women are burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies; they fail to overcome these struggles and change these

systems of oppression. Therefore, through her writings, Atwood vindicates the oppressed women's condition in the male centered society.

At the end of our dissertation, we would like to remind that further researches and analyses may be carried out on this narrative. We suggest that the psychoanalytical study of the protagonist's state of mind is an important theme that can be studied by other students relying on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory.

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