



FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

Who Eats a Woman? Food and Desire in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Ljubica Matek, PhD, Associate Prof.

Dept. of English

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Osijek

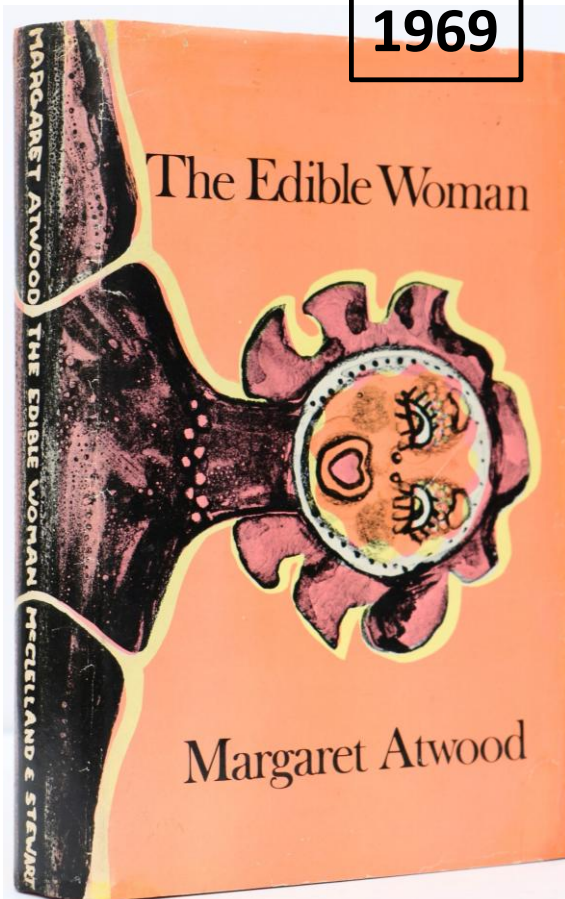


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1969



Debut novel

- outlines the novelist's career-long interest in women's issues
- limited roles available to women, pressure to conform
- motif of food, eating → relevant themes: gender, power, desire, identity, and consumption

Epigraph

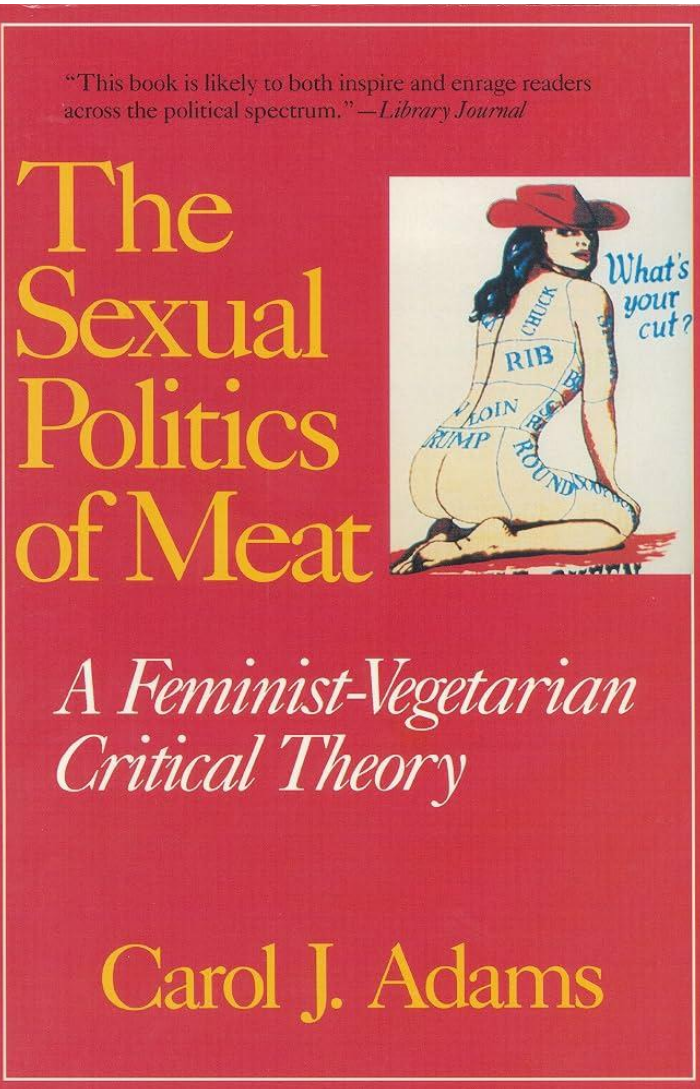
“The surface on which you work (preferably marble), the tools, the ingredients and your fingers should be chilled throughout the operation. . . .”
(Recipe for Puff Pastry in I. S. Rombauer and M. R. Becker, *The Joy of Cooking*.)

- cold and clinical approach to cooking
- adds emphasis on the fact that patriarchy “consumes” women: *objects* of male interest
- foreshadows the dynamics between the protagonist, Marian McAlpin and her fiancé Peter

Methodology

- “In some respects we all acknowledge the sexual politics of meat. When we think that men, especially male athletes, need meat, or when wives report that they could give up meat but they fix it for their husbands, the overt association between meat eating and virile maleness is enacted” (Adams 25).

- meat-eating is inherent to patriarchy → it constructs male identity
- consumption and domination define patriarchal capitalist and carnist society



1990

- “Meat becomes a symbol for what is not seen but is always there--
patriarchal control of animals and of language” (Adams 96).
- male dominance over women resembles the oppression of animals
- both women and animals are *objectified* and discursively turned into desirable flesh, enabling consumption
 - “female piece of meat” (Adams 72)
- rejection of meat – rejection of patriarchy
 - “If the body becomes a special focus for women’s struggle for freedom then what is ingested is a logical initial locus for announcing one’s independence. Refusing the male order in food, women practiced the theory of feminism through their bodies and their choice of vegetarianism” (Adams 213).

The Edible Woman

- Dating ritual as a conflation of food, particularly meat, and sex:
 - “Usually we went out for dinner, but when we didn’t the pattern was that I would walk over to Peter’s and get something to cook at a store on the way” (Atwood 56).
 - “His [Peter’s] taste ran towards steak and roast beef . . . Tonight they were having Filet Mignon” (Atwood 159).
 - “Peter stretched and yawned beside me, grinding my arm against the porcelain. I winced . . . ‘How was it for you?’ he asked casually, his mouth against my shoulder. He always asked me that. ‘Marvellous,’ I murmured; why couldn’t he tell? One of these days I should say ‘Rotten,’ just to see what he would do; but I knew in advance he wouldn’t believe me” (62).

Peter – symbol of patriarchal virility

- typical man, which makes him desirable:
 - **violence and focus on image:** "Peter's collection of weapons: two rifles, a pistol, and several wicked-looking knives" and "cameras" (58-59).
 - "Peter is impressed by people's jobs" (64).
 - "'good-looking'; that was probably what had first attracted me to him. People noticed him . . . because he was **ordinariness raised to perfection**, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads. But sometimes **I wanted a reassuring wart or mole**, or patch of roughness, something the touch could fix on instead of gliding over" (61).
- for Marian, he seems *too perfect* → wishes for more authenticity, less conformity

”Edible” Marian

- ”I bet you’d look great in a kimono,” he whispered. He bit my shoulder” (Atwood 63)
 - ”He put his hands on her bare shoulders and kissed her lightly on the back of the neck. ‘Yum yum’ he said, ‘new perfume’” (Atwood 227).
 - ”Peter had suggested that she might have something done with her hair. He had also hinted that perhaps she should buy a dress that was, as he put it, ‘not quite so mousy’ as any she already owned . . . [at the hairdresser’s] they never did what you wanted them to. They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented” (Atwood 228-29).
- “edible” → powerless

Awakening

- Peter's retelling of a hunting story provides a new perspective on their relationship:
 - "One shot, right through the heart. . . . 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 . . . 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 . . . I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. . . . I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to break down and make a scene, and I couldn't" (69-70)
- feels empathy and sympathy for the rabbit and identifies with her → recognizes the same dynamic in their relationship

- attempts to escape
 - "He was treating me as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline. . . . And Len had looked at me that way because he thought I was being self-effacing on purpose, and that if so the relationship was more serious than I had said it was. Len never wished matrimony on anyone, especially anyone he liked. . . . I let go of Peter's arm and began to run. . . . Peter yelled, "Marian! Where the hell do you think you're going ?" I could hear the fury in his voice: this was the unforgivable sin, because it was public" (71-72).
- Peter's reaction: proposal
 - "When do you want to get married?" he asked, almost gruffly. My first impulse was to answer . . . "What about Groundhog Day?" But instead I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at 'myself.' I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before" (Atwood 90).

Crisis

- her formal commitment to marriage sets off an identity crisis manifested in the form of an eating disorder and dissociation
 - ”She had caught herself lately watching herself with an abstracted curiosity, to see what she would do” (Atwood 188).
- treats her veganism as some kind of visceral occurrence beyond her force of will:
 - ”She was becoming more and more irritated by her body’s decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled. . . . she had concluded that the stand it had taken was an ethical one: it simply refused to eat anything that had once been, or (like oysters on the half-shell) might still be living” (193).
- unable to articulate the reason for rejecting meat → rejection of marriage to Peter

- unable to perform independence → pressure to conform
 - "what would they all think when they saw her not eating any of it? She couldn't possibly explain; if she didn't understand it herself, how could she expect them to?" (Atwood 192)
- consumption as a **gendered sociocultural practice**:
- carnivores have control, are free agents, unlike herself (a vegan) who is powerless:
 - "She felt like a rabbit, crunching all the time on mounds of leafy greenery. How she longed to become again a carnivore, to gnaw on a good bone!" (Atwood 189).

Liberation

- unsettling gender roles and expectations
 - Ainsley: strong, proactive, decides to be a single mother
 - Duncan: sexually inexperienced, likes ironing, childlike face, thin
- they were people "who really knew her" (Atwood 242) → authentic self, not pretending just to please Peter
- test: bakes a cake shaped like a woman to see P.'s reaction
 - "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork," she added somewhat prosaically. Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She wasn't smiling. His eyes widened in alarm" (299-300).
- Peter refuses to eat the cake, whereas Duncan relishes in it

Conclusion

- the cake assumes the role of the edible woman → she is the one who eats ("cannibal") and reclaims agency over her life
- breaking the engagement cures her eating disorder
- does not reject romance or men, but she wants partnership built on equal ground

Thank you!