The Body’s Response to Social Pressure: Eating Disorders in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*.

Praca licencjacka
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INTRODUCTION

“Of all the objects in the world, the human body has a peculiar status: it is not only possessed by the person who has it, it also possesses and constitutes him. […] The body is the medium of experience and the instrument of action. Through its actions we shape and organize our experiences and distinguish our perceptions of the outside world from the sensations that arrive within the body itself.”

Jonathan Miller (1978, 14)

For centuries the human body has been used to express one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It was also the designate of the social position and indicator of morality of its owner. Moreover, it was used as a symbol of protest against religious, political, and social pressure. Through its actions and appearance people manifested their views and ideas. As the time passes by, the body is changing its size, shape, and meaning, but it is still used for the same purpose of expression. Due to the fact that the functioning of the human body is dependent on food, it can be claimed that food has played the main role in the body’s history.

According to the contemporary feminist scholar Susan Bordo, food in the present-day sense of being the enemy of a perfect figure appeared for the first time in the Victorian era. Women then started to deny themselves meals in order to live up to the esthetic ideal, which was a combination of daintiness, thinness, and frailty. Before that historical period, food appeared as an instrument of religious, spiritual, and philosophical practices. The regulation of food intake was viewed as a necessary treatment for the development of one’s “self”. For ancient Greeks fasting was a way of achieving self-mastery and moderation in all life’s matters. It was the way in which people could develop an excellent public self. In the Middle Ages, Christians used starvation for spiritual purification, which was reserved for aristocracy and priests. Rituals of fasting were then used to develop a perfect inner self and to move a step closer to God.¹

Contrary to the above mentioned epochs, in the Baroque era, all the positive attributes of man such as beauty and charm or social status were associated with obesity. At this time, overweight was the feature that distinguished the well-born from the vulgar.

Round cheeks, large hips, and an ample stomach were symbols of their owner’s wealth. Overeating was viewed both as a privilege and duty of aristocracy. It was not seen as a social or health problem and it was far away from being called an eating disorder.

In the twentieth century controlling food intake and overweight took over a totally different new meaning. Overeating and anorexia nervosa, which developed from fasting, were studied and described in the nineteenth century by scientists such as Ernest-Charles Lasçgue or William Withey Gull. They stopped being a mystery for medics and they started to be better known to average people, which led to a change in the common attitude toward these eating disorders. Thus, overeating and anorexia nervosa were considered by the twentieth-century society and scientists no more as physical and mental illnesses, but as psychological problems resulting in external changes of the body. In other words, it was pronounced and proved that eating disorders were symptoms of one’s inner conflict.

What is more, apart from the medical studies concerned with eating disorders, writers such as Angela Carter, Willa Cather, Toni Morrison, and, finally, Margaret Atwood started to write about food and they gave to it second thoughts. Hunger, eating, and meals were used by feminist writers to speak of personal and social behaviors, psychological problems, art, sex, politics, poverty, nationalism, gender roles, power, and domesticity. Furthermore, since the development of the consumer culture, the need to be a perfect manager of one’s own life has appeared. As a result, the new culture produced a new type of personality which found its place between two extremes: obesity and self-starvation.

Margaret Atwood is one of the first novelists who emphasizes highly symbolic and evocative nature of food. She uses it in a metaphorical meaning to show the origin and function of overeating and anorexia nervosa among women in modern society. In her books eating is inseparably connected with politics. This point of view is suitable for the twentieth century, when women had to face the capitalist reality and the role that it offered to feminism. In capitalism a woman could be a good wife, mother, and lover or she could take a position of the underrated worker in a company. None of these possibilities was satisfying for feminists, who wanted to overcome the patriarchal model of family, femininity, culture, and life itself. In this context food is considered a metaphor of power, therefore, overeating is interpreted as gaining power and not eating as losing it.

Furthermore, eating disorders in Atwood’s novels mask anger, frustration, sadness, and emptiness which derive from family problems, impairment in social relationships or a

chaotic life story. Marian, the main protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, and Joan, the heroine of *Lady Oracle*, both have an eating problem. In the novels they are initially shown as victims of repressive social system, who demonstrate their powerlessness through their attitude toward food. As Marian stops eating, because of lack of control and autonomy and as a protest against capitalism, Joan eats to much in order to be stronger in her struggle with her despotic, perfectionist mother and cruel peers.

Taking into account the medical, psychological and sociological points of view, as well as Atwood’s usage of eating disorders in her fiction, it may be claimed that overeating and anorexia nervosa are in the twentieth century the reaction and response of the woman’s body to the social pressure and repercussions.

According to Emma Parker, in Margaret Atwood’s novels food functions as a form of female self-expression. Eating and non-eating illustrate resistance to the system of oppression. Atwood’s protagonists are unendingly oppressed by parents, partners, peers, or by society as a whole. They try to protect their selfhoods by psychic distancing of their selves from their bodies and by physical loss or increase of weight.³

In *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* Margaret Atwood shows the correlation between eating disorders and social pressure on an individual. What is the most significant for this paper, she reveals the importance of food and body in women’s life and she describes how they are used by women for the purpose of self-expression. Chapter One discusses anorexia nervosa in *The Edible Woman* as Marian’s renunciation of the patriarchal model of femininity and as her rejection of capitalism. Chapter Two presents the role of overeating in *Lady Oracle* as Joan’s rejection of predefined gender roles offered to her by society and as her refusal to enter adulthood.

CHAPTER ONE
ANOREXIA NERVOSA IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S THE EDIBLE WOMAN
AS A RENUNCIATION OF THE PATRIARCHAL MODEL OF FEMININITY
AND AS A REJECTION OF CAPITALISM

The Edible Woman was written in the 1960s, when the reality was dominated by men and the consumptive culture that they had developed. At this time, post-war feminist movements were trying to overcome the patriarchal model of family and femininity and to distance themselves from the position of consumers. Traditional gender roles such as mother, wife, housekeeper, or lover were unacceptable for modern women. They looked for some alternative, but the only one which was offered by the social system was a position of a worker stuck in a dead-end job, also proved to be inadmissible. This situation led to the rise of feelings of frustration, anger, and unfulfilment among feminist circles. Lacking any reasonable possibilities to change their condition, women expressed their objections, infirmity, and anxiety through their attitude toward food and, consequently, through their bodies.

Margaret Atwood employs an eating disorder in her novel The Edible Woman as a metaphor of a revolt and protest. Through food imagery, she discusses a young woman’s rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. Marian MacAlpin, the main protagonist of the novel, interprets the world in terms of food and negotiates her way through life using it. She is a young, successful woman, working in market research for Seymour Surveys company. Her career, private life, and social relationships seem to be idealistic, but once she discovers her boyfriend’s consumer nature during a conversation in the restaurant, she loses the ability to eat. Marian’s initial lack of appetite finally leads to an eating disorder, very similar to anorexia nervosa, which is her body’s response to the society’s attempt of imposing its rules on the heroine.

Non-eating in The Edible Woman is mainly a metaphor of the renunciation of the patriarchal model of femininity. Although Marian is a college-educated intelligent woman living on her own, she feels manipulated and unable to take decisions for herself. Her fiancé Peter, Ainsley, Clara, and three office virgins, as well as her friends believe in traditional values and try to make Marian think in an old-fashioned way and accept her gender role. In order to show how limited are the models offered by society to adult women, Atwood uses food imaginary. The menu, which appears when Marian goes to the
restaurant with Peter, represents an illusion of choice. Even though Marian can choose anything from the list of meals, she cannot get anything else. By analogy, this situation suggests that the heroine is trapped by the options presented to her at work and in her personal life. What is more, the fact that it is Peter who places an order in the restaurant emphasizes Marian’s passivity and dependency on others: “It got rid of the vacillation she had found herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter made up their minds right away.” (The Edible Woman, 147)

The moment in which the heroine finds out that she is expected by society to adjust to the role of a wife and mother, she loses the ability to eat. The sudden and spontaneous reaction of Marian’s body to the events happening around and to her are the first step on her way to regaining independence. As she slowly discovers the nature and causes of her eating disorder, she starts to understand her own needs and feelings. Attacks of panic, like the one which she experienced during listening to Peter telling Len his blood- and gut-filled hunting history, start to be signals of her inner negation of being a victim of the system of social oppression. According to the famous Canadian writer, Elspeth Cameron, “Marian displays all of the main symptoms of anorexia: a feeling of ineffectiveness, a fear of fat, and longing for autonomy”. Also the structure of the novel, which is divided into three parts, suggests the course of this eating disorder. Part One shows background causes, Part Two indicates the mind/body split, and Part Three reflects the spontaneous resolution of the problem.

The first stage of the development of the heroine’s eating disorder is devoted to Marian’s recognition of gender roles. This part of the novel begins with the protagonist’s hunger and is written in the first-person narrative voice, which suggests that Marian has some control over what is happening to her. Surprisingly, Marian is actually losing her ability to influence her own life. It may be even claimed that the heroine is uncertain about who she is and who she might become. The other female characters such as Ainsley, Clara, and three office virgins: Emily, Millie, and Lucy, represent Marian’s possible fates and versions of herself.

Ainsley is a typical independent woman, who is aware of her own worth and charm. She is a predatory female who uses men to achieve her aims. She pretends to be innocent and vulnerable, but in reality she is dangerous and inexorable. Ainsley presents a rational

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approach to man-woman relationships and an intellectualized approach to maternity. She decides to become a single parent. Her plan is full of ideology and quasi-academic theory, as the narrative suggests in the following passage:

I’m not going to get married. That’s what’s wrong with most children, they have too many parents. [...] Think how confused their mother-image and their father-image will be; they’re riddled with complexes already. And it’s mostly because of the father. [...] Every woman should have at least one baby. [...] It’s even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity. (*The Edible Woman*, 39-41)

To Marian, Ainsley is far too dominating and immoral. It occurs to her during the conversation with her room-mate that it is selfish to grow up a child without a father. When Ainsley chooses Leonard Slank to be the biological father for her future baby, Marian feels disgusted. She is at the same time sorry for Len, who is unaware of Ainsley’s project and angry with Ainsley, who makes her a sleeping-partner of her plot. The role of the devious, aggressive, and emancipated woman is unfamiliar to and unacceptable for Marian, so she rejects it.

Unlike Ainsley, Clara represents passivity and woman’s fulfillment of her biological destiny, which is being a mother. She enjoys being pregnant and giving birth. During Marian’s visit in the hospital, Clara talks about her delivery with true exhilaration and enthusiasm. She says:

Oh marvelous; really marvelous. I watched the whole thing, it’s messy, all that bloody and junk, but I’ve got to admit it’s sort of fascinating. Especially when the little bugger sticks its head out, and you finally know after carrying the damn thing around all that time what it looks like; I get so excited waiting to see, it’s like when you were little and you waited and waited and finally got to open your Christmas presents. (*The Edible Woman*, 128)

Clara also recommends that Marian have a baby and give birth, which renders the latter confused. Beside the fact that she allows for the possibility of having children with Peter sometime, she cannot understand what is so fascinating in the pain and effort connected with pregnancy and delivery. In Marian’s eyes, the pregnant Clara looks like “a boa-constrictor who swallowed a water-melon” (*The Edible Woman*, 25). It is also incomprehensible for her how a woman can recommend being a mother as if it was “a handy trick for making fluffier pie-crust or a new detergent” (*The Edible Woman*, 129).

To Marian, Clara is quite irresponsible and, from her point of view, she is littering the world with children for no rational or specific purpose. Her existence and condition
represent the way in which a woman can lose control over her life if she allows nature to
take its course. Marian expresses her opinion in these words:

> Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a
> thing could happen to her, and her second with dismay; now, during
> her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism. Her
> metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship
> and limpets clinging to a rock. I looked at her, feeling a wave of
> embarrassed pity sweep over me; [...] Clara simply had no
> practicality, she wasn’t able to control the more mundane aspects
> of life, like money or getting to lectures on time. (*The Edible
> Woman*, 36)

In the novel Clara functions as a symbol of a traditional mother. She is also an
extreme example of a woman who has made a very literal self-sacrifice by giving up her
studies in order to have children with her husband. Marian rejects all the values and
qualities that Clara represents. When she left the hospital after visiting Clara, “she had
the sense of having escaped, as if from a culvert or crave. She was glad she wasn’t Clara” (*The
Edible Woman*, 132). One of the symptoms of her unconscious inner rebellion against
adjusting to the role of the mother that Clara embodies is her body’s refusal to eat dinner
with Peter, even though she is hungry.

In contrast with the characters mentioned above, the three office virgins represent
exploited female workers typical of the early 1960s. In order to show the role of these
characters, the narrator uses an image of an ice cream sandwich, which represents the
company’s structure where only men can get the position of the “upper crust” on the top
floor of the office building and women can be only in the middle, like a “gooey layer”.
Housewives working in their spare time were not as well paid as men for doing the same
work. They could not get promoted, either. This role is the first that Marian rejects. Emily,
Millie, and Lucy embody also virginity and sexuality. As Marian sates, they are all
“artificial blondes” and “virgins” (*The Edible Woman*, 22).

Interestingly, the three office virgins are described in totally different manners. Emily
is an office hypochondriac, Millie believes that it is easier to wait until you are married,
and Lucy, who always wonders and cares what people would say, symbolizes the artificial
woman that Marian feels she has become for Peter’s sake. They seem to be very different
from each other but they are very similar in fact. They are all waiting for a man to enter
their lives and they all seek rescue from the daily routine and the vacuity in the future

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5 Jennifer Hobgood, “Anti-edibles and schizophrenia in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*”, *Style*, Vol.36.1, Northern Illinois University, 2002, p.3; hereafter cited in the text as Hobgood
marriage. Marian questions their values and ideas but, at the same time, she feels sorry for them and she tries to fit in the role which they expect her to accept through the engagement with Peter. When she makes the decision to marry Peter, she also makes an adjustment to meet social expectations. Once she does it, her personality dissolves and so does her appetite.

Ainsley, Clara, and the three office virgins are created so as to embody social and gender roles offered to Marian by the twentieth-century reality. Although in Part One of the novel the main protagonist expresses her disapproval of the versions of femininity that her friends represent, in Part Two she decides to adjust to one of them by accepting Peter’s proposal. The consequences of this act are tragic and destructive. Marian describes her feelings after the engagement in these words: “I drew back from him. A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (The Edible Woman, 83). To Kenneth Hermansson, the image of herself that Marian saw reflected in Peter’s eyes resembles an egg. Supposing that this interpretation is right, it may be claimed that the heroine identifies herself with an egg which is going to be consumed. Marian’s problem with eating an egg for breakfast on the following morning is then her body’s expression of the inner refusal to lose her independence and free will by marrying Peter, who in her opinion is trying to consume her.

Peter is viewed by Marian as a predator, hunter, or even her silent enemy. He treats her like a child who needs someone to take decisions for it. As a man and her future husband, Peter feels superior to Marian and, as he dominates in their relationship, he expects her to be submissive. Peter’s domination over Marian is expressed by the narrator in these words: “She meant to indicate by her tone of voice that her stomach was too tiny and helpless to cope with that vast quantity of food. Peter smiled and chewed, pleasantly conscious of his own superior capacity” (The Edible Woman, 152).

The heroine agrees to play the role of a future bride, which involves her lack of appetite and, consequently, an eating disorder resembling anorexia. Lacking any power of initiative and unable to decide for herself, Marian lets Peter rule her life. This change of her behavior surprises and scares her. When Peter asks her to choose the wedding date, she responds impassively, which she describes in the following passage: “[…] I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, ‘I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather

6 Kenneth Hermansson “Are Women Edible?” Margaret Atwood: The Edible Woman; http://hem.passagen.se/pasteur/WomenEdible.htm
leave the big decisions up to you’. I was astounded at myself. I’d never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it” (The Edible Woman, 90).

He imposes on her not only the engagement and marriage, but also the change of her own personality and appearance. Even though she does not like looking extravagant and prefers to be dressed in a way which is more modest than fashionable, she puts on a sequined red dress and gets an elaborate hair-do for his party. This whole masquerade makes Marian wondering whether or not she is still the same person. She feels that she is becoming an artificial woman, designed for and by her fiancé. Moreover, she is not sure if Peter loves her, as is demonstrated in the following quotation:

‘Peter’, she said, ‘do you love me?’ She had asked him that before as a kind of joke, not doubting the answer. But this time she waited, not moving, to hear what he would say. He kissed her lightly on the ear-ring. ‘Of course I love you, don’t be silly,’ he said in a fond tone that indicated he thought he was humoring her. ‘I’m going to marry you, aren’t I? And I love you especially in that red dress. You should wear red more often’. (The Edible Woman, 230-231)

Realizing that she looks ridiculous and terrified by the new version of herself, Marian escapes. The second attack of panic begins Marian’s slow change.

According to Joyce Hart, in Part Two of the novel “[Marian’s] body acts on its own volition, as if Marian’s mind has lost control over it”. 7 This condition of the heroine, who is lost and dependent on others, is expressed by Atwood by the shift from the first-person to third-person narration. As Joyce Hart points out, “with this structural change, Atwood distances the reader from Marian, just as Marian’s body distances itself from her mind, just as Marian distances herself from food” (Hart, 3). Not only does the protagonist refuse to eat meat but she also starts to avoid dairy produce and vegetables. The woman who used to celebrate meals and who enjoyed preparing breakfast becomes an anorexic person, preoccupied with food but unable to consume it.

The third part of the novel brings a sudden and extraordinary solution to the problem and the dissolution of the plot. Through the novel, Peter’s fascination over hunting and his attempts to take a picture of Marian change Marian’s way of thinking and behaving. She starts to regain her identity and power. Knowing that her fiancé is trying to destroy her and feeling like a part of a victim/predator game, Marian becomes self-aware. The woman-shaped cake that she bakes for Peter symbolizes an artificial ideal woman, who he wanted

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7 Joyce Hart, “Themes of the Search for Self and Gender Roles in Atwood’s Novel; Critical Essay on The Edible Woman”, in Novels for Students, The Gale Group, 2001, p.3; hereafter cited in the text as Hart
her to be and whom he wanted to consume. When Marian serves Peter the cake, she
consciously and verbally rejects the roles of a mother oppressed by her reproductive
function, of a wife, of an over-aggressive female, of an underpaid worker, and of an ideal
manipulated woman, so her body does not have to express her inner conflict and rebellion
anymore. As Peter runs off, her appetite returns and she regains independence by eating the
cake. Apart from using food imagery, Atwood underlies Marian’s regaining control over
her own life by the second and last shift of narration from the third to first person.

It is not meaningless that the word “adjust” appears in the novel many times. After
the shock and strong opposition to Ainsley’s idea of having a fatherless baby, Marian
quickly turns to resignation and tells herself that she “will simply have to adjust to the
situation” (*The Edible Woman*, 43). She also assumes that she has “to adjust to [Peter’s]
moods” (*The Edible Woman*, 61). What is more, Marian claims that “life isn’t run by
principles but by adjustments” (*The Edible Woman*, 263). This way of thinking of the
protagonist shows how strong an influence society exerts on the individual. In order to
survive in the male-dominated civilized world, women have to make a lot of adjustments
of themselves to the milieu. It is even repeated a few times in *The Edible Woman* that
Marian “must get organized”.

In the 1960s being organized meant meeting social expectations. Women who, like
Marian, were torn apart and struggling with their dual nature could not find their place in
such a system. They wanted to live among society but on their own conditions. Atwood
indicates Marian’s personality split by the images of the two dolls from her childhood. The
first, which is a blond-rubber doll, represents heroine’s fate as a pretty ideal wife for Peter.
The other, the dark-haired one, embodies the part of Marian which is drawn away from the
society’s ideal of womanhood. The latter doll symbolizes the rebellious Marian who
refuses to play any of the predefined gender roles. To achieve a well-integrated and
balanced personality and self-knowledge, women in the twentieth century had to examine
the roles presented to them by social conventions and to reject those which were
unacceptable for them. That is why Marian experiences constant attraction and repulsion
towards Ainsley, Clara, and the three office virgins, who represent her possible fates. Her
final decision to leave Peter is not a rejection of her femininity, as Ainsley and Peter
suggest in the novel, but a rejection of a dependent female role, coagulations, and
impositions required by patriarchal power relations.

All things considered, many twentieth-century women found themselves trapped in
their bodies and within the social myths of femininity. Marian represents a young person
who rebels against her feminine destiny and seeks liberation from her domestic and reproductive destiny. She is a victim of the civilization, the “edible woman” whom Peter tries to destroy. Atwood uses anorexia as a discursive technique in her novel. The aim of such a narrative strategy is to show women’s inner conflict, their refusal to fulfill social expectations and, finally, their shift from passive to active individuals. The eating disorder represents not only the duality of women but also the limitation of possibilities to express one’s rebellion against social pressure. The narrative demonstrates that when a woman loses the ability to speak in the first person about her feelings and problems, her body starts to speak for her through anorexia.

Non-eating in *The Edible Woman* is also a metaphor of Marian’s rejection of capitalism. In this context the heroine’s eating disorder resembling anorexia serves to express the lack of autonomy and negation of the existing social system. Food then represents power, which is gained by those who consume. The consumption concerns not only food but also women, goods, values, and ideas. Surprisingly, beside the fact that in *The Edible Woman* it is mainly men who play the role of “compulsive eaters”, women also participate in the eating process. They consume the culture that is offered to them through the advertising industry and supermarkets.

In her novel, Atwood constructs the image of a woman living in the 1960s, who is a component of the capitalistic machine. According to Jennifer Hobgood, she “calls into question exploitation of female workers, commercial brainwashing, and phallogocentric models of hierarchy” typical of the twentieth century (Hobgood, 9). As a representative of female workers, involved in business activity and hemmed in a commercial culture, Marian is a person who criticizes the system and who is at the same time entrapped in it. Her instant conflict between fascination and disgust about consumption and food shows how difficult is an autonomous existence in a capitalistic society. Marian works for Seymure Survey and functions as a part of the social machine. The heroine is aware of her own “edible” and “predatory” nature as a woman under capitalism and she criticizes the dependence on the system that she experiences. Unluckily, she cannot find any alternative to the role of an exploited and oppressed female worker. In the capitalistic reality a woman exists mainly as food for men who are higher in the hierarchy. Marian shows how female energy and labor are exploited in the workplace through her description of Seymure Survey. She states:

> The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the
Marian not only feels exploited by the company but, as Jennifer Hobgood claims, she also feels confused and terrified when she discovers her occupational complicity in commercial brainwashing. She is a tool in a mechanism of the productive-consuming capitalistic system. As a person responsible for market research, she may perceive herself as a covert spy for capitalism. It is even said in the novel that one of her interviewees accuses Seymore Surveys of using Marian to achieve their “abominable” objectives.

Considering the fact that the heroine’s job is to raise the sale of a particular product by collecting information about consumers’ expectations, she pays special attention to the market’s tricks how to win over customers. It is not surprising then that one of Marian’s favorite activities while traveling by public transport is looking at advertisements. It underlies her connection and attachment to the commercial culture typical of capitalism. What is really astounding about Marian is her ability to recognize the system’s manipulation and manufacture of social beliefs. When she goes by bus to the laundromat, she sees an ad featuring a young woman skipping about in a girdle. At first, Marian finds this image strange and she does not know how people can sell girdles by using an image that appeals mostly to men. Yet, after a while, she realizes that this picture may suggest a self-image for women. At this moment Marian discovers the dangerous and delusive nature of commercials. She describes this situation in these words:

Then I concentrated on one of the posters above the windows, a colorful one of a young woman with three pairs of legs skipping about in her girdle. […] The female form, I thought, is supposed to appeal to men, not to women, and men don’t usually buy girdles. Though perhaps the lithe young woman was a self-image; perhaps the purchasers thought they were getting their own youth and slenderness back in the package. […] You have to be careful about things like that, I reflected; they have a way of creeping up on you before you know it. (The Edible Woman, 92-93)

Because of this observation, Marian becomes aware of how such ads help people maintain a false and unrealistic sense of what is good and normal. Atwood criticizes an
indoctrination process that forces individuals to accept and believe the system’s values and ideas. The heroine of *The Edible Woman* feels “partially responsible” for the advertisements of Moose Beer on which she works. As she sees that the commercials appear almost everywhere and create an illusion of something that does not actually exist and does not reflect the true reality and she feels bad about participating in the campaign.

What is more, Marian criticizes the idea and functioning of supermarkets. Even though it may be an advantage that they offer a wide range of goods, the fact that people can buy there almost everything seems scary, especially for women who consider themselves products that can be purchased and consumed. The use of persuasive strategies in supermarkets is disapproved by Marian, too. She claims that sellers play special music in their shops in order to make customers buy more products than usual, which is immoral and unfair. The narrative shows it in the following way:

She resented the music because she knew why it was there: it was supposed to lull you into a euphoric trance, lower your sales resistance to the point at which all things are desirable. Every time she walked into the supermarket and heard the lilting sounds coming from the concealed loudspeakers she remembered an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them. (*The Edible Woman*, 172)

As Marian notices that people are treated by companies like cows which are expected to produce higher profits when played music to, she identifies herself with these animals, which are victims of the capitalistic system and which are continuously being consumed. Therefore, it appears to be logical and rational that her body refuses to eat beef.

In order to underline that Marian at some point considers herself as food in the capitalistic reality, Atwood uses the image of symbolic cannibalism. In this way she shows the relationship between the consumer and the consumed. In *The Edible Woman* people not only eat food to gain power but the powerful eat the powerless. The convention of symbolic cannibalism illustrates the behavior which is endorsed by the system. The violence that the weak (women) experience from the strong (men) is a product of capitalism. Marian’s baking and eating the woman-shaped cake is an expression of her coming back to the so-called reality, where she plays the role of the consumer. Since she finds her own place in the system, her appetite comes back and she develops a new awareness of self and others, which helps her to deal with capitalism. According to Coral Ann Howells, it is not a happy ending of Marian’s story. Her acceptance of her consumer nature shows how “difficult if not impossible is to reconstruct one’s identity outside the
social order. The survival of an individual is likely to mean compromise with society and following its rules." It is not clearly acceptance, but more likely an adjustment.

Moreover, Marian finds herself to be a part of the machine that influences people’s lives without any visible action. The behavior of the company may be compared to the image of the young boy who shot nine people, which once comes to Marian’s mind. As she remembers, the boy looked like someone who would never hurt anyone and she thinks that he was capable of doing such a violent thing only because of his detached and safe position on the top of the roof. The advertisement industry and Seymore Survey itself act like “the finger guiding but never touching” (Enotes, 7). It means that strategies and campaigns used in the world of commercials attack countless numbers of people without direct contact with them. Advertisement secretly invades human’s minds and assaults people’s world views. It can be identified with the boy shooting from a rooftop. Through Marian’s irresolution about her job, Atwood shows and criticizes commercialism of capitalism. The heroine’s rejection of the capitalistic reality is mainly unconscious and non-verbal, and her negation of the system is expressed by her proceeding inability to eat.

Instead of criticizing the consumptive nature of capitalism itself, Atwood shows its influence on tradition. Since Seymore Survey has become a big and powerful organization, the parties organized by the company cease to be occasions for the workers to meet and socialize, and become great events where people meet each other in order to exchange goods and compliments and eat different meals. Marian describes the office party in the following words:

The office party seemed to consist largely of the consumption of food and the discussion of ailments and bargains. [...] The food was heaped on the table that stood at one end of the lunchroom – much more food than they needed really, salads and sandwiches and fancy breads and desserts and cookies and cakes. But since everyone had brought something, everyone had to eat at least some of everything, or else the contributor would feel slighted. (The Edible Woman, 162)

Christmas has also changed. Marian notices that family relations used to be warmer and closer when she was younger: she could not wait to see her parents, cousins and friends. Now she feels that they no longer belong to her. Occupied by work and duties, Marian reduces her Christmas arrangements to buying gifts for her relatives. This habit of bestowing family and friends has also lost its personal character, charm and meaning.

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8 Coral Ann Howells, “Feminine, Female, Feminist’: From The Edible Woman to ‘The Female Body,’” in Margaret Atwood, MacMillan, 1996, pp. 38-54
Marian sees it as a race, in which people contend for the best products and the shortest time of waiting in the lines. The narrator explicates Marian’s point of view in the following words:

She had bought all of the presents last weekend, shoving her way through the crowds that clamored and shouted at the store-counters, but she no longer felt like giving anybody anything. She felt even less like receiving, having to thank the all for things she didn’t need and would never use; and it was no use telling herself, as she had been told all her life, that it was the spirit of the giver and not the value of the gift that counted. (*The Edible Woman*, 169)

*The Edible Woman* is a critique of capitalism and the consumptive nature of its reality and society. Food is both a product and ingredient of this system. In capitalism eating means gaining power. Yet, those who are consumers of this culture are also the victims of it because they feel an instant and excessive hunger that cannot be satisfied. As a part of capitalistic society, Marian is also preoccupied with consumption at the beginning of the novel. Although she actively participates in the capitalistic policy of eating, she loses the ability to consume. The reason for her body’s behavior is her inner revolt against principles set by capitalism and her own following them. To Marian, this system propagates an exploitation and cruelty in relationships between people and creates a dominant culture in which women are dependent on men. What is more, it indoctrinates society in a sneaky way, by using advertisement and persuasion, which is immoral and unfair. According to Mervyn Nicholson, anorexia does not mean lack of appetite at all, but it means “lack of desire” (Hobgood, 6). This statement allows to consider Marian’s eating disorder as a resistance to consumerism and her rejection of capitalism, which is based on desiring things.
CHAPTER TWO
OVEREATING IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S LADY ORACLE
AS A REJECTION OF PREDEFINED GENDER ROLES
AND AS A REFUSAL TO ENTER ADULTHOOD

Lady Oracle is Margaret Atwood’s third novel which was written in the 1970s. Like The Edible Woman, it is influenced by the post-war feminist movements’ world view and, consequently, it discusses the woman’s role, position, and condition in a modern world, which is dominated by men and ruled by social conventions. Critics regard Lady Oracle as a “feminist exploration of female ambivalence over the challenges of self-definition within an oppressively gendered society”. From this point of view, the novel discusses the problem of social expectations towards individuals who are forced to play predefined gender roles such as daughter, wife or mother and it shows the result of such repression. The effect is woman’s revolt to beliefs, values and ideas dominating in society. The narrator of the novel shows a woman’s struggle with stress and insufficiencies connected with living in a community which is obsessed with following rigid roles. Similarly to Marian MacAlpin, Joan Foster, the heroine of Lady Oracle, expresses her rebellion against fitting in the gender role expected of her through her attitude toward food. As a result, the rebellion is manifested through her body. Unlike Marian, who suffers from an eating disorder similar to anorexia, Joan is an avid consumer.

Interestingly, Lady Oracle raises not only feminist questions but also the issue of social expectations towards children, who are obliged to grow up and to leave home at the suitable and predefined time. What is more, the novel discusses problems occurring in family relationships and the influence of childhood on adulthood. The traumatic mother-daughter and reserved father-daughter relationships in the heroine’s childhood are one of the most important strands of the novel’s plot, since they strongly affect the protagonist’s adult life. Joan’s difficult coexistence with her peers, who are cruel and unfriendly to her, is also a significant plot of the novel. These two issues determine the heroine’s further decisions and behavior. Devoid of friends and lacking confidence, Joan is afraid to enter

adulthood. The protagonist’s inability to become an adult is visible in her dependency on others, especially on her mother. Even though Joan considers her mother despotic and miserable, she finds it difficult to break free from her influence. It may be even claimed that the heroine unconsciously chooses to stay at home as long as it is possible, because it is safer for her than to live on her own in the outside world. In order not to end up her childhood, Joan tries to stay a child. Her refusal to enter adulthood is expressed primarily through her body by overeating.

Similarly to The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle discusses mainly feminine issues. The novel presents the condition of a modern woman limited by social conventions, who feels entrapped in and endangered by the system of oppression. According to Rosemary Sullivan, “[Atwood] examines how the forces of society interact with the individual”.

The protagonist lives in a society which considers woman’s success dependent on the size of the body and on female beauty and fertility. As Joan does not fit the description of an ideal woman and refuses to become a perfect daughter, she feels reproached and oppressed. Apart from Aunt Lou, who is a rebel living on her own, which is socially condemned, all the other characters such as the heroine’s mother, the psychiatrist, the dance teacher or her peers exert severe pressure on Joan to adjust to the predefined social roles. The narrator describes step by step the process of the protagonist’s inner rebellion against social expectations and repercussions. Both in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle the instrument of the revolt is the female body, which acts in an uncontrolled and unusual way. Though in The Edible Woman the heroine’s rebellion is manifested through anorexia, in Lady Oracle the form of the protagonist’s self-expression is overeating.

The eating disorder in Lady Oracle functions primarily as a sign of Joan’s rejection of the predefined gender roles. The idea of women’s living up to social expectations was developed parallel with the creation of the patriarchal culture. Women have been forced by society to play the roles of a good daughter, wife and mother for centuries. Yet, as they became more self-aware and independent, they started to rebel against the traditional roles and fight for their rights, which they thought should be equal to those which men had. It is not only Joan who represents the type of woman who does not accept her own fate and social position. Aunt Lou is also a female who dares to be different.

Paradoxically, even though most women found social pressure wrong and destructive, the girl’s own mother usually imposed on her the necessity to follow social

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rules and to fulfill society’s expectations. This phenomenon led to conflicts between daughters and mothers. It has been proven by modern psychologists such as Kathryn Zerbe that a girl who considers her mother as a tyrant and frustrated perfectionist will probably not want to fit in the model of femininity which the mother represents. What is more, according to Mary Briody Mahowald, “intense, unconscious hatred of mother leads to the rejection of femininity in general”.\textsuperscript{11}

The conflict between Joan and her mother begins in the former’s early childhood and the role of the demanding perfectionist tyrant that her mother embodies is the first one rejected by Joan. According to Emma Parker, “Joan’s mother attempts to deny her daughter any sense of autonomy and tries to control her life and identity. She makes her diet and tries to assert her authority physically by reducing her daughter in size. Joan challenges her mother and takes control of her own life through eating. She retaliates against diets by eating more and more” (Parker, 2). In this context, similarly to \textit{The Edible Woman}, the acts of eating and images of the mouth in \textit{Lady Oracle} mean gaining power and autonomy. The parts of the novel which are devoted to Joan’s attempts to take control over her own life are concerned with consumption. It is expressed by the narrator in the following passage: “I sat at the table with my hot cup, adding another white ring to the varnish, eating a package of rusks and trying to organize my life” (\textit{Lady Oracle}, 25). To show how the heroine’s mother desires power, Atwood uses an image of her drawing a bigger mouth around her own with a lipstick. According to Emma Parker, the female mouth in both \textit{Lady Oracle} and \textit{The Edible Woman} represents the locus of strength.

Through the novel, Joan describes her mother as “the manager, the creator, the agent” (\textit{Lady Oracle}, 76). According to J. Brooks Bouson, “[the heroine’s mother] conspires to deny Joan’s healthy childhood assertiveness and curtail her development of feelings of self-worth and authenticity”.\textsuperscript{12} It may be claimed that the heroine’s unwillingness to grow up is a result of her mother’s attempt to stay with her daughter. Significantly, images of the mother chase Joan even after her mother’s death in dreams and visions. In addition, Joan never calls her mother in a diminutive way when she talks with her. This kind of addressing the mother shows lack of love and understanding in the mother-daughter

\textsuperscript{11} Mary Briody Mahowald, “To Be or Not Be A Woman: Anorexia Nervosa, Normative Gender Roles, and Feminism”, in \textit{The Tyranny of The Normal An Anthology}, Carol Donley and Sheryl Buckley (ed.), Kent State University Press, 1996, p.132

\textsuperscript{12} J. Brooks Bouson, “Comic Storytelling as Escape and Narcissistic Self-Expression in Atwood’s \textit{Lady Oracle}”, in \textit{The Empathic Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self}, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, pp.154-168
relationship. The feeling of imprisonment and inability to make decisions for herself accompany Joan during her childhood and become the reason for her rebellion against the mother, who is presented as a dictator and assassin.

Furthermore, the heroine’s mother identifies life’s success with good management of clothes and furniture. She is obsessed with commodities. Her elaborate delineation of small details gives her an illusion of power. As Joan feels strong hatred and disgust toward her mother, it is not surprising that she refuses to become a woman similar to her and that she even tries to be an antithesis of her – a fat and spontaneous person. The protagonist definitely rejects the role of the woman who is the head of a family, who behaves like a dictator and who organizes other people’s lives according to her own expectations and needs. It can be even claimed that she refuses to become a woman at all.

Moreover, Joan not only refuses to become the model of femininity which her mother represents, but she also refuses to become the kind of woman that her mother and society consider perfect. It is repeated many times in the novel that Joan does not fit the description of an ideal female which the male-dominated society has created. The heroine is not slim or submissive. She failed to make her mother’s dreams come true. She was not the best ballet dancer in the class, she did not have many friends among her peers and, finally, what is most important, she is not beautiful, charming or filigree. Joan remarks that “[her mother] was tired of having a teenaged daughter who looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something into it” (Lady Oracle, 84).

Since the protagonist lives in the reality where women are seen as commodity and are perceived and valued mostly for their appearance, it is not surprising that her worth is measured by her mother and peers in terms of her body’s size and shape. Joan shows that her weight is a problem for her mother in these words: “I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body” (Lady Oracle, 79). At the same time, she also expresses her rebellion against being treated as an object. According to Sybil Korff Vincent, Joan overeats to “defy her mother and society which pressures her to be beautiful and punishes any deviation”.  

In order to make Joan look acceptable for society, the mother tries to reduce her daughter’s size both by diet and suitable clothes. She does not care about Joan’s opinions, feelings and needs, her only aim is to create a product (woman) that will be an embodiment

of her own success as a mother and which would be perceived by others in a positive way. The mother’s attempts to change the heroine’s appearance to the shape acceptable for society are described by the protagonist in the following passage:

At this time my mother gave me a clothing allowance, as an incentive to reduce. She thought I should buy clothes that would make me less conspicuous, the dark dresses with tiny polka-dots and vertical stripes favored by designers for the fat. Instead I sought out clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped. Some of them I got in maternity shops, others at cut-rate discount stores; I was especially pleased with a red felt skirt, cut in circle, with a black telephone appliquéd onto it. The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn’t going to let myself to be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack. (Lady Oracle, 101)

Joan refuses to be changed because she finds her mother’s actions destructive for her personality and identity. Yet, Joan’s mother uses not only diet to make her daughter become a kind of woman who will fulfill social expectations. She also forces the protagonist to go to a carefully selected private school where pupils wear uniforms, to join Brownies and to enjoy activities which all girls enjoy, such as playing dolls. To Joan being different does not mean being worse. The heroine expresses her refusal to be made similar to other girls through her attitude toward food. She eats more and more, which embarrasses and frustrates her mother. As Bouson remarks, “when Joan becomes an overweight child, she becomes a reproach of her mother, the embodiment of her mother’s failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which her mother could get a prize and with what she would be satisfied” (Bouson, 158). The narrator shows in the novel the real reasons for the protagonist’s inability to control the food intake which lead to her serious obesity. Those who caused Joan’s compulsive eating are her self-absorbed and angry mother, cruel and mean school mates and the dance teacher, who excluded her from an important performance. The protagonist claims in the novel that the most destructive things to her “were the attitudes of society” (Lady Oracle, 102).

The person who has all the characteristics of an ideal woman is Joan Crawford. She embodies all the dreams and demands of society. She is beautiful, thin, successful and tragic at the same time. She is an example of a woman who can control her life, but who is also loved and accepted by others. Joan’s mother gave her daughter a name after the actress because she believed that the heroine would become similar to her namesake – strong,
smart and, most of all, slim. The protagonist presents her mother’s point of view and her own confusion about being called after an actress in the following passage:

My mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played-beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men—or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else’s name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn’t have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille LeSueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat. When I was eight or nine and my mother would look at me and say musingly, ‘To think that I named you after Joan Crawford’, my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome with shame; I knew I was being reproached, but I’m still not sure what for. There’s more than one side to Joan Crawford, though. In fact there was something tragic about Joan Crawford, she had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her. Perhaps that was it. Or, and this is important: Joan Crawford was thin. (*Lady Oracle*, 45)

Joan does not consider herself similar to the actress. Her mother also sees that the daughter is not adequate to the movie-star image. In her thoughts the protagonist identifies herself with Joan of Arc rather than with Joan Crawford. The image of the martyr who had to suffer because of her choice to protect her own beliefs and values and because of her courage to act in a way that was unacceptable for society is a metaphor of the protagonist’s fate. Later, Joan wonders whether it is not true that she was given a name after Joan of Arc. This uncertainty is expressed by the narrator in these words: “Maybe my mother didn’t name me after Joan Crawford after all, I thought; she just told me that to cover up. She named me after Joan of Arc, didn’t she know what happened to women like that?” (*Lady Oracle*, 408).

As Joan refuses to be the daughter of her mother’s dreams and rejects the role of a polite, submissive female who is valued for her appearance instead of intellect, the war between her and her mother, peers and society begins. Devoid of any weapons, Joan uses her body as an object of resistance. She overeats and becomes grossly fat to defy the pressure put on her and not to play the role that she is expected. The same schemata appears in *The Edible Woman*, where Marian rebels against social pressure by using her body, but, unlike Joan, she does it through anorexia.
However, overeating in *Lady Oracle* also expresses the heroine’s refusal to enter adulthood. Although Joan has a difficult relationship with her mother and no relationship with her absent father, she unconsciously wants to stay a child and not to leave home. Dominated by feelings of helplessness and dependency on the parents, the girl eats too much in order to make her mother worried and angry. What is more, she lets her mother take all the decisions for her – like a little baby. All protagonist’s life is subordinated to getting the mother’s attention and saving her childhood. The attempt not to grow up is based on a strong and intensive emotional tie between Joan and her mother, who influences her significantly and who determines all her life’s decisions such as interests or school choice.

In *Lady Oracle* the protagonist constantly returns to the memories of her childhood, which suggests that her identity problems in adulthood have their origin at that period of her life. This, in turn, calls for a psychoanalytic reading of the narrative as a patient’s discourse. Sigmund Freud claimed that most problems connected with growing up have their source in early childhood. In order to help adult patients to understand and dissolve their problems, he used psychoanalysis. During the session the patient was going back to his childhood trying to activate the unconscious or hidden memories connected with his family. The role of the doctor was to support the patient in his process of facing his own recollections. Significantly for the novel, according to Freud, there are five stages of a child’s development: oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital. During these phases the natural intense relation of the baby with its mother should be loosened by the father. It means that all the moments when the mother does not have to feed or lull the child should be devoted to father-based activities such as playing games or discovering the world. If Joan is viewed as a patient and the reader as a psychoanalyst, the novel might be considered the protagonist’s session of psychotherapy. Thus, it is important for the understanding of the heroine’s overeating to note that Joan’s father was absent in his daughter’s early life because he went off to war leaving his pregnant wife and came back when Joan was a child of five. As the result of spending all her time with the mother, the protagonist did not overcome the oral stage which should have lasted approximately one year. The narrator emphasizes this in the following words:

> At first I was merely plump; in the earliest snapshots in my mother’s album I was a healthy baby, not much heftier than most, and the only peculiar thing is that I was never looking at the camera; instead I was trying to get something into my mouth: a toy, a hand, a bottle. The photos went on in an orderly series; though I
didn’t exactly become rounder, I failed to lose what is usually referred to as baby fat. (*Lady Oracle*, 45)

As Freud remarked, during the oral phase the baby enjoys not only oral activities such as sucking, biting, swallowing or nuking but also eating. What is important, if the child feels frustrated because of feeding restriction or delay, it can develop pessimism, envy, suspicion and sarcasm. If food is given to the baby too readily and overindulgence occurs, the child can develop optimism, gullibility, and admiration for others in later life. In both cases the person often continues to eat or drink excessively.\(^\text{14}\) In this context, Joan’s overeating can be viewed as an instrument of preventing her from growing up.

Joan’s unwillingness to enter adulthood is also connected with her fear of becoming a woman. Her attitude toward being an adult female is strongly affected by society and her mother who claims that it is unsafe for a girl to grow up. The male characters, such as the daffodil man, are presented in the novel as both persecutors and rescuers. Similarly to *The Edible Woman*, in *Lady Oracle* men are dangerous to women. They embody power, strength, even cruelty, whereas women are presented as vulnerable victims. The protagonist describes how her mother was trying to build up hostility toward men in her daughter’s mind in the following words:

‘Don’t talk to any bad men,’ she would say. ‘If one comes up to you in that ravine, run away as fast as you can.’ She would deliver this warning during breakfast, in a voice that suggested that no matter how fast I ran I would never be able to get away. I was doomed, and my oatmeal porridge would twist itself into a lump and sink to the bottom of my stomach. She never suggested what these men would look like or what they would do if they caught me, which left the field wide open to my imagination. And the way she put it made me somehow responsible, as if I myself had planted the bushes in the ravine and concealed the bad men behind them, as if, should I be caught, it would be my own doing. (*Lady Oracle*, 58)

For society, which is here represented by Joan’s mother, a girl becomes a woman through sexual intercourse, which is strongly collocated with anxiety, shame, guilt and the dark side of nature. Significantly, male characters are often presented in the novel as those who kill or hurt. The daffodil man is a villain. He embodies all the girl’s fears and bad dreams. He represents masculinity against which mothers warn their daughters. Joan’s father is presented as both a doctor and murderer. The way in which Joan’s mother talks

\(^{14}\) Based on the information found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychosexual_development.
about her husband’s occupation during the war made the girl feel confused and bemused. The narrator states it in the following passage:

‘His job was to kill the people they thought were fakes,’ my mother continued. ‘He had to just take them out and shoot them. In cold blood. Sometimes he wouldn’t even know if he’d shot the right one. Isn’t that something?’ Her voice thrilled and admiring. ‘The funny thing is, he doesn’t like me to mention it… the funny thing is, he told me once that the frightening thing about it was, he started to enjoy it.’ (Lady Oracle, 86)

After the mother’s death Joan suspected that her father might have killed her. The thought emphasizes the protagonist’s uncertainty and confusion about men which relate to her own father as well and regress the process of her becoming a woman. Although the heroine is somehow curious about sex, she chooses to stay a child and her initiation occurs quite late. It can be claimed that Joan rejects the possibility to grow up because it is her mother’s will to keep the daughter close. In order to achieve her aim of not entering adulthood, Joan eats too much. She notices that as long as she remains chubby and childish, she is not attractive to men and, therefore, not endangered by them. That is the reason why Joan is not afraid of her father or the daffodil man, even though they are presented in the novel as dangerous.

Aunt Lou pushes Joan to grow up. Through adult movies and newspapers she slowly leads the heroine into adulthood. She also makes the protagonist lose weight and break free from her mother’s influence. She does it by giving Joan money. Aunt Lou is the first person who notices the heroine’s refusal to become a woman and rightly interprets Joan’s eating disorder. In the light of Freudian psychology, overeating in Lady Oracle is definitely the protagonist’s refusal to enter adulthood, which she is expected to do by society, peers and family.
CONCLUSION

No reader should miss the significance and meaning of the role of female bodies in Margaret Atwood’s fiction. They are definitely used by the writer as a timeless and universal metaphor for an instrument of women’s resistance to social repercussions and constraints. In her works, the writer enmeshes food and eating with sex and power. The protest to communal pressure is expressed by her female protagonists through their attitude toward food and, consequently, through eating disorders that they suffer from. It has been claimed that through the protagonists’ unease toward their bodies, which are often anorexic or obese, Atwood speaks about political, social and cultural problems that women encounter during their lives. Moreover, the narrator shows how individuals are put under the pressure of the community to play pre-designated gender roles and to adjust themselves to the values, beliefs and ideas that society owns. She also presents women’s bodies as both the subject that consumes and the object that is consumed in the capitalist reality. What is more, Atwood uncovers in her novels most women’s anxieties and fears connected with men, growing up and entering the adulthood.

*The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* are Atwood’s two novels, which are devoted primarily to typical and important feminine issues, such as becoming a woman or being forced to play the predefined gender roles of the daughter, lover, wife or mother. Furthermore, these novels uncover the source and meaning of two serious eating disorders, namely anorexia nervosa and compulsive eating, which can be viewed as the protagonists’ forms of self expression and their ways of rebellion against social pressure. What is surprising and new for contemporary the reader, in order to show the protagonists’ refusal to be treated as objects instead of subjects in patriarchal culture, the narrator uses the image of women’s negative attitude toward their bodies, which is strongly influenced by society that demands from people adjustment to its norms and stereotypes.

According to Marilyn Patton, “Margaret Atwood takes on the issue of cultural control of women (and women’s bodies) as represented in literature and in prescribed images or roles for women”.¹⁵ In her works, she provides examples of friends, partners and mothers who embody typical gender roles and who exert pressure on the heroines to follow them.

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Women who are under social pressure to fit gender roles that they are expected are the heroines of both *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*. Madeleine Davies remarks that in Atwood’s novels “[the body] is the site on which political power is exercised and the site on which abuse is practiced and in turn rehearsed”. As women rebel against their position within power structures that seek to contain them, they develop eating disorders which are their only weapon to fight against social pressure.

Both *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* raise the issue of social expectations toward women, which are viewed as destructive to female identity and self-confidence. As Marian unconsciously rejects the role of the wife and mother and tries to avoid marrying Peter, she suddenly and gradually loses her appetite. Also, the capitalist reality and preoccupation with consumption influence the heroine’s condition and her negative and strange attitude toward food. It has been noted by critics that Marian’s anorexia is the protagonist’s way of giving voice to her own rejection of conventional gender roles, patriarchal culture and capitalism. Joan, who refuses to become an ideal daughter and perfect woman, uses her overweight as an arm in a vicious silent war between her and her mother in which the disputed territory is the heroine’s own body. She also refuses to lose weight in order not to grow up and stay with her mother. In her essay, Molly Hite remarks that *Lady Oracle* “is a book in which fat is a feminist issue, and in which excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions it deems appropriate” (Patton, 6). In this context it is a hard fact that Joan’s overeating is employed by the narrator in order to express the heroine’s inner rebellion against and negation of social rules and expectations.

Margaret Atwood’s novels *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* are strongly influenced by the feminist worldview. They are also preoccupied with food imagery and metaphors. The aim of using such motifs in her writing is to show women’s condition and point of view in the 1960s and the 1970s. The purpose of these novels is to present female resistance to social expectations and demands, which is inseparably connected with the female body. Eating disorders in Atwood’s works are therefore employed as symbols of women’s bodies’ responses to social pressure.

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