

**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES:
A READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S SELECTED WORKS**

*Project submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University in partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
English Language and Literature*

By

SUNAINA K.M.

Register No. 120011004407

II M.A. English Literature

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Cochin – 682 011

Kerala

Supervisor

Smt. MARIA THERESA CHAKKUNNY

Department of English

St. Teresa's College

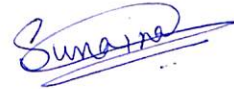
Ernakulam

Kerala

March 2014

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled "*Feminist Perspectives: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's Selected Works*" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of **Smt. Maria Theresa Chakkunny** Lecturer-in-charge, Department of English.



Sunaina. K.M.

Register No. 120011004407

II M.A. English Literature

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Ernakulam

28 March 2014

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "*Feminist Perspectives: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's Selected Works*" by Sunaina. K.M. is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



Smt. Maria Theresa Chakkunny

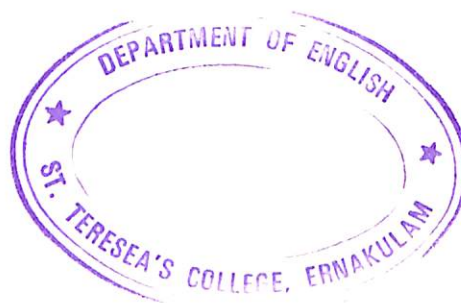
Department of English

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Ernakulam

28 March 2014



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First, I thank God almighty whose inspiration and grace helped me throughout my work.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Celine. E (Rev. Sr. Vinita) Principal, St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam for her help and support.

I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Tessy Anthony C, Head of the Department of English and all other teachers of the department for their valuable guidance, suggestions, advice and encouragement

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my Supervisor Smt. Maria Theresa Chakkunny, Department of English, St. Teresa's College, without whose guidance and encouragement this project would never have been completed.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to my family and friends for their encouragement and support.

Sunaina. K.M.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	The rewriting of myth in <i>The Penelopiad</i>	10
Chapter 3	<i>Red Cap</i> Fairytale and <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : A revision	17
Chapter 4	Metaphor of body as an edible object in <i>The Edible Women</i>	23
Chapter 5	Conclusion	29
	Works Cited	33

Introduction

The story of Prometheus and his sacrifice for human kind has fascinated people all around the world from the very origin of this myth. Prometheus was the Titan God, entrusted with the task of moulding humankind out of clay. His attempts to better the lives of his creation brought him into direct conflict with Zeus. Firstly, he tricked the gods out of the best portion of the sacrificial feast, acquiring meat for the feasting of man. Then, he stole fire from heaven and delivered it to mortal kind. As punishment for these rebellious acts, Zeus ordered the creation of Pandora (the first woman) as a means to deliver misfortune into the house of man, or as a way to cheat mankind of the company of the good spirits. Prometheus meanwhile, was arrested and bound to a stake on Mount Caucasos where an eagle was set to feed upon his ever-regenerating liver (or, some say, heart). Generations later the great hero Heracles came along and released the old Titan from his torture.

Writers have always been attracted towards the elements of remoteness, mystery and the heroism of myth. The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos', which means a traditional tale common to the members of a tribe, race or nation. It usually involves supernatural elements and explains some natural phenomenon in boldly imaginative terms. Today myth has become one of the most prominent terms in contemporary literature.

Every single world culture and civilization has its own traditional literature. This literature has passed orally from one generation to another until the development of written language. There is still some debate as to the primary purposes of these stories, but since they are still captivating to modern man, considerable study has been done on traditional cultural stories, often known as myths and legends.

There are many known critics, who have studied the nature and reality of literature. Northrop Frye is one of the most influential critics among them. Famous mythic critics include Robert Graves, Francis Fergusson, Richard Chase etc. It was Northrop Frye, who discovered certain formulas in the word order. He identified these formulas as the "conventional myths and metaphors" which he calls "archetypes". C.G. Jung was of the view that the materials of a myth lie in the collective unconscious of the race. The application of the term 'myth' is very wide as there is a large variety of applications in contemporary criticism. According to M.H. Abraham, myths are different from legends and folktales. He says that they are based on the character in myth or folktale. According to him if the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend; if the story concerns supernatural beings, but is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale.

However, myth and folklore are considered different branches of the same tree. Myth often features gods, goddesses and humans endowed with supernatural elements. Later people began to associate the legendary stories of demigods (for eg, Hercules, mortal son of Zeus) and the quest seeking legend stories of human heroes (for eg, voyage of Odysseus) with myths. These myths later derived as folktales. Thus, Folklore is a degenerate version of myth. It retains the archetypes, adventures, and quality of entertainment but disregards the symbolic meaning of the characters and their actions. True myths transmit not just a good story but inform every generations about the values and historical events of a people.

The relation between culture and folklore is inseparable. Folklores include myths, legends, stories, ballads and riddles. Proverbs are connected with the daily life and culture of the people and with their rituals such as birth, death, marriage etc. Even

though they are deeply connected with each other, the relation between folklore and literature is always difficult to trace. Folk customs are associated with the development of dramatic activity because of the custom of performing plays at folk festivals.

There is a clear distinction between mythology and folklore but folktales are derived from different versions and variations of myths, i.e., many of the folktales are a part or fragments of deformed mythological stories. These folktales are considered as the earliest versions of fairy tales. Every prince seeking the princess, every child seeking her mother can be compared to the questing hero seeking the grail and the golden apples. Thus, these folktales are considered to be the earliest versions of fairytale. Myth is often attributed to educated aristocratic people. They were the stories of gods, goddesses, kings and queens told by great poets (for eg; homers odyssey), while fairytales and folktales are usually connected with the dreams and fantasies of common people.

The fairy tales was a representation of primitive man's experience with nature and his personal life. Thus it is believed that it has its own origin and identity. However, like myth and folklore it is a reflection of human life and culture of people in its time. Fairytales, which are stories of magic and transformations are one of the oldest forms of literatures. Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty have fascinated children and adults alike, because, these are characters that we recognize as one among us or as reflections of our self. The term "fairy tale", derived from the French term *conte de fées*, which was coined to describe a collection of 17th-century tales written for adults. But even before the stories were collected and published, many of them had already become well known throughout the world as oral stories, which are now considered folk tales. These tales having originated may have been

transmitted in many ways by women compelled to marry into alien tribes or by slaves from Africa to America; by soldiers returning from crusades or through tales restricted at social gathering, festivals etc.

Oral folktales were present and widely known before the arrival of fairytales. The French high classes made up tales during group games, played during their leisure times. During the reign of Louis XIV, the tradition of oral fairytales became prominent. At first romantic stories was favorite theme but later it changed to different themes. According to Anne Thackeray, by narrating these fantasy stories people forgot the cruel rule of Louis XIV. It was during this period, that a society of women arranged meetings and began collecting, a history of tales. Madame D'Aulnoy was amongst them. What is regarded as the fairy tale today was then in fact just one type of folk-tale tradition, called the 'Zaubermarchen' (The magical tale), which in itself had many sub-genres. The French writers of the late seventeenth century including Perrault categorized these tales as 'Contes de fees' (Fairy tales) so that they could distinguish them from other kinds of popular tales at the time.

During this period, the majority of writers and storytellers were women. There was a difference between the stories told by men and women. The differences noted between the two sexes and their approaches to the tales, are their different social attitudes, especially in terms of gender and class differences. Most of the male writers wrote happy, lighthearted tales about bravery and discovery, where as the female writers saw their opportunity to re-address the fictional assumptions placed upon women in literature by men. By trying to invent a truthful portrayal of class and gender differences, they changed their tales to reflect their own lives and their opinions on their society.

It was a time when women had few choices in their own lives. Women were pushed into forced marriages and childbearing, when death by childbirth was common, they had no rights. They were forced to remain uneducated. Telling fairy tales was one way they could make their voices heard, a way for them to escape the oppression that society placed upon them. They used fairy tales as a medium to express their selves. These stories shared common ideas, and specific themes. The tales frequently had female protagonists whose lives were controlled by those around them: fathers, kings, wicked fairies. Moreover, they were faced with circumstances beyond their control, which they had to overcome in order to get what they wanted.

Here begins the relation between feminism and fairytales. Many writers from the 17th century onwards use fairytales as the medium for expressing feminist ideas. In early times fairytales were embedded in a collective text for they contained universal behavioral and sexual truths needed for the cautioning and socializing of children. In addition, they gave racy details and stereotypes of female beauty such as Snow Whites pale color and Rapunzel's golden hair. The stories contain the collective wisdom of a community. Anne Sexton captured the coded messages to woman in *transformation* (1971) in which Snow White is depicted as a china doll and this reminds the reader that the fragile maid is programmed to express with her eyes, whether acknowledging mama or shutting out a sexual aggression. According to Catherine Orenstein woman have traditionally valued the moral underpinning of folklore. Feminist critic Mariana Warner says that of the stories forced marriages of young girls related metaphorically to the fairytale of a young girl forced to marry a beastly man. During the 1600s, arguments against the silencing of woman took prominent place in folklore. Many of the writers tried to overcome this silencing through their writings. Feminist writer Charlotte Bronte incorporated the perils of

womanhood in *Jane Eyre* in which the youthful heroine's triumphs over disappointment, temptation and threatens to wander the wild moor in search of a professional and domestic niche suited to her needs.

From an early time, many women wrote about suppression and sufferings in their works. However, until the 19th century there was no significant political activism around women's subordination. The first wave of feminism took place in the later 18th century and early 19th century. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women with a focus on suffrage. The second wave began in 1960s and continued into the nineties. The women who participated in this movement protest against the objectification of women's body in a society which was dominated by patriarchy that sought to keep them at home or in dull low paying jobs. The third wave of feminism occurred next. Compared to the other two feminist movements this was the most radical one. Many writers were attracted to the movements and wrote fiction, non-fiction and poetry about ideas of the 1960's and 1970's women's liberation movement. Simon de Beauvoir, Kate Millet etc were the most important literary figure during the time. Along with these writers Margaret Atwood occupies a prominent place in feminist literature.

Margaret Atwood is a well-known feminist author who often writes about the oppression of women in society. She is recognized as one of Canada's most prominent contemporary writers. Internationally acclaimed as a novelist, poet, and short story writer, Atwood has emerged as a major figure in contemporary feminist writing. Through female protagonists and narrators who often journey from victimization to self-actualization, Atwood explores women's issues using elements of science fiction, historical fact, fairy tale, myth and dystopian vision.

Atwood was born on November 18, 1943 in Ottawa, Ontario. Her father was an entomologist, thus she lived her early childhood in the Canadian wilderness. She expresses these impressions of wildness through the images of animals, birds and nature in her works. She began to write poetry from her childhood and after her graduation from high school, in 1961, Atwood published her first book of poetry entitled *Double Persephone*. In her formative years at Radcliffe, she realized her career and began to show interests in feminism. Some incidents such as denial of access at the university library for being a women plight of women in America were really touched her. Biographies of female writers also influenced Atwood's mind. Atwood wrote many poems, novels and stories from the perspective of feminism.

Her works have been translated in to more than thirty languages. Her first publication was a book of poetry, *The Circle Game* (1964), which received the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. However, she is best known for her novels and strong themes in it. Her novels includes *The Edible Woman* (1970), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin*, which won the prestigious Booker Prize in the year 2000. Throughout her career, Atwood received numerous awards and honoring degrees including Medal of Honour for Literature, US (1997) Prince of Asturias Award for Letters, Spain (2008) The Welsh Arts Council International Writer's Prize (1982) Toronto Arts Award (1986) Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Canadian Confederation (1992) etc.

The protagonists of most of her books are the representatives of every woman who, oppressed by gender and politics. *The Edible women*, *Lady Oracle*, *The*

Handmaid's Tale, *Cat's Eye* etc. in every works Atwood illustrate her strong feminist views through the protagonist.

It is often acknowledge that Margaret Atwood's novels and poems are rich with allusions from the oral tradition of myth, legends, fables and fairytales. From the figure of Little Red Riding Hood in *The Handmaid's Tale* to the retelling of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood's novels rescrutinize the common assumptions behind the tales and re-conceptualize the feminine and masculine archetypes derived from these narratives. Along with myth and fairytales, Atwood gives importance to Feminism in her writings. From ancient myth to postmodernism Atwood explores the same issues of women using different tools. According to Sharon Wilson:

Atwood has use mythology in much the same way she has used other intertexts like folktales, fairytales, and legends, replaying the old stories in new contexts and form different perspectives- frequently from a women's point of view so that the stories shimmer with new meanings.

(215)

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood deconstruct the ideas of traditional suppressed women and portrays them as women who find individuality and identity in themselves. *The Edible Woman* directly addresses certain issues of Feminism. It protests against the female sex roles and predatory and aggressive attitude and behavior of men towards women as well as the objectification of the human body. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood represents the same issue of suppression and misuse of woman by deconstructing the well known fairy tale Red Riding Hood. Atwood used the theme and concept of myth to represent issues of women in past times.

Even though her writings explore the same issues of feminism and victimization, by using different genres and literary tools, she provides very different angles to these issues through her work.

The rewriting of myth in *The Penelopiad*

Myths and mythology have always been among the elements that shape the lives of individuals and the working mechanisms of societies. They are not simple, innocent stories about old gods and goddesses, but symbols and images, which bear political, social, historical and cultural meanings and codes. Myth is, typically thought off as a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship with universal significance. Certain myths are popular and important to certain communities and often linked to ritual. They tell of superhuman beings, such as Gods, heroes, spirits and ghosts and are typically set outside historical time, in a supernatural world as part of our communal history. Many critics and scholars, have tried to analyze and deconstruct the meaning and purpose of myths. Likewise, many writers have attempted to rewrite these myths from different points of view to emphasize the missing elements in them.

There were many civilizations as well as myths in the ancient times, but nothing become so important as the Greek culture and Greek myth. The female characters of Greek mythology have fascinated the common man scholars alike and have been adapted by literatures all around the world. It is thought that myths are invention and that they involve fantasy, but the concept of mythology does not necessarily imply that there is no truth of history in them. Some of the humans may have lived and some of the events may have taken place. Most importantly, the social customs and the way of life depicted in the myths are a valuable representation of Greek society. Myths reveal to us the experiences of women living in a patriarchal society and from them we gain the symbolic value accorded to women and come to realize what the term "Woman" meant to the ancient Greek man. There were three major levels of women in Greek Mythology. The first level is composed of the divine beings known as the goddesses. The goddesses played a vital role in Greek society for they were

responsible for many aspects of Greek life, such as birth, harvest, death etc. (Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, Hestia). There was also the lesser divinities known as the Muses, the Graces, the Fates, etc. The second level of women used in Greek mythology is that of the human. Myths feature women from many different social classes depicting the different roles women play in society. Surprisingly, the only women with starring roles are queens and princesses, i.e. (Helen, Medea, Penelope) The third and final level of women in Greek mythology is that of the monster. These monsters are part woman and part animal, i.e. The Gorgons, Sphinx, Medusa etc

From an ancient time, women were suppressed in hierarchical societies and considered as inferior to men. Along with others, feminist thinkers and writers also used myths to understand the reasons and consequences of the oppression, women have been suffering for ages. They have tried to rewrite these myths to enable women to speak their genuine experience through female characters in these myths. . Margaret Atwood is one among those writers who have used and reconstructed myths and archetypes in their novels. By doing this, she has found new stories in the previous archetypes and myths.

Atwood makes use of myths, archetypes and fairy tales extensively both in her prose and poetry. According to Atwood, myths are "stories, and traditional myths mean stories that have been repeated frequently. The term does not pertain to Greek myths alone. Grimm's fairy tales are just as much myth as anything else"(Ingersoll 114).

Through her mythologically inspired works, especially *The Penelopiad* Atwood try to rewrite women's genuine experience and attempts to redefine their identities, which have been misdefined by male mythmakers. In earlier myths, they portrayed women as virtuous, domestic beings who do not know how to assert themselves.

The Penelopiad is a retelling of the Odyssey myth from the perspective of Penelope, Odysseus's wife and Helen's cousin. It retells the story of Penelope, who is left alone to raise her son Telemachus in Odysseus's twenty years of absence: ten years in Troy fighting to get Helen back, and ten years on his way home, full of adventures, dangers and pleasures. The novel voices the real experiences of Penelope behind the official myth: how she managed to rule the palace, how she survived without getting married to one of the one hundred and twenty suitors and how she suffered as a woman and a mother.

The Penelopiad, written from Penelope's point of view, completely focuses on her life and consciousness. She tells us about the struggle she underwent through her lifetime. In her childhood, her father tried to drown her, to get rid of her and his obligation to provide a princess's dowry for her. Both her parents never cared about her. She was alienated all the time. The situation was not different even after her marriage. After moving to Ithaca with her husband Odysseus, the entire kingdom viewed her as a toy that produces a son for Odysseus. In ancient time women were viewed as object for sexual pleasure and child bearing, Penelope is also viewed as Odysseus tool to produce for him a son. She has no other purpose besides procreation. When Penelope wished to take care of household duties as well as wifely duties, Euryclea, who is an old maid and motherly figure for Odysseus, discouraged her and continues to care for him. Even after Odysseus goes off to war, she is just expected to pick a new husband and raise the new husband's child while he rules the kingdom. When Odysseus was away, she struggles to raise her son in between the problems of country and home, invasions and insinuations to select a suitable husband.

In Homer's *Odyssey* Penelope is presented as a woman who is always suppressed by her father, king Icarus and her husband Odysseus. Through the epic,

Penelope becomes the archetype of the perfect devoted wife. However, Atwood's Penelope has a voice and she is well aware of her identity and selfhood. In *The Penelopiad* Atwood presents a different Penelope who resists this patriarchal oppression.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood tries to create a parody like version of the various episodes of *The Odyssey*. Odysseus's defeat of Cyclopes become a mere fight with a one eyed tavern keeper, the lotus eater's episode becomes a tale of a drunken soldier who attempts to mutiny etc. Through the story of Penelope, Atwood creates another side for every event in Penelope's life. By narrating her marriage with Odysseus Penelope calls Odysseus a cheat and a thief. However, Penelope portrays herself as an equal match to a trickster hero, by mentioning her Cousin Helen's cruel remark that Penelope and Odysseus are two of a kind.

Penelope's version of the epic is parallel to Homer's epic. Homer's version is enriched with the accounts of Odysseus's adventure story. Through *The Penelopiad*, Atwood tries to recreate the female version of an archetypal epic. In it, Penelope explains her own legendary story, as a daughter of king Icarus, her marriage with Odysseus and her hard life after marriage and the departure of Odysseus for the Trojan War etc. Penelope is eager to tell her own version of events.

The main purpose of Atwood's epic is to create a female counter part to the archetypal pattern in its "threefold structure" (Frye). The mythical hero's birth (with the possible announcement of an exceptional destiny), the hero's deeds (preparation, quest, test of proves) and reward (Durand 174).

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope shares a noble birth with Odysseus. However, her heroic quest and tests of prowess are different from that those witnessed in *The odyssey*. Her first quest was to keep Odysseu's kingdom prosperous and away from

trouble. Penelope wins her first test by acquiring male qualities of administration, making inventories etc. Her second test was to keep away the greedy suitor's from the throne of Ithaca and keep them away from her. She wins this test through her trickster ability. i.e. she uses her maids to win this test. Thus, she complete her quest. In a myth, when a hero wins his test of prowess and fulfills the quest, the next step is his reward. For Penelope her reward was the return of her husband. Soon after his return, he again sets out on a new voyage, to purify himself from the sin of murdering the suitors and twelve maids, as well as avoiding their ghosts and vengeful relatives.

Atwood presents her novella, not only as a deconstruction of myth, but to provide a picture about the subjugation and victimization, woman faced during that time. It problematizes the victim hood, patriarchal violence, and double standards of society etc. In *The Odyssey*, Homer presents Odysseus as a hero, but Penelope is a suppressed secondary character. In the epic, odyssey commits adultery with Circe and it is only because of she is a women that Penelope is expected to be loyal to her husband. It is for of a similar reason that Odysseus kills the twelve maids along with the suitors. In *The Penelopiad*, the maids are the symbol of double oppression, i.e. gender oppression in patriarchal society as well as social oppression as slaves and they give a clear picture of social injustice during that period. In Odysseus's court, they are treated as tools of labour as well as sexual objects for the carnal gratification of men. Through *The Penelopiad*, Atwood gives voice to these maids, who are murdered by Odysseus and now acquire a narrative voice to seek justice in a courtroom after 3000 years.

Differing from the older tradition of society, in which women accept every subjugation and allegations, Penelope defends herself from the gossips and charges against her. Penelope states that these rumors about her are false and explains each

gossip. One of the main gossips that have been doing the rounds for the past two or three thousand years is about her sexual conduct with Amphinomous, one of her suitors. Penelope accepts her affinity with him and states that she accepted expensive gifts from the Suitors because they were eating up Odysseus' estate. Another rumour has it that she had sex with all the Suitors, ending up giving birth to the Great God Pan. Others claimed that the reason why Odysseus is in disguise is because of his distrust of his wife, and that was the reason why he preferred to get help from Euryclea instead of Penelope when he slaughtered the Suitors and the Maids. Penelope says that she was locked up because Odysseus knew how emotional and tender hearted she was and he did not want to expose her to dangers

Atwood deconstructed the novella from the perspective of Penelope who is a trustworthy representative of the ancient woman in Homer's *Odyssey*. However, in her novella Penelope boldly questions everything and expresses her mind to the world. The account of Homer regarding Penelope in *The Odyssey* as a faithful, constant, intelligent wife and mother is different from Atwood's account of her in *The Penelopiad* as a self conscious, self-sufficient, manipulative and productive woman. In contrast, Odysseus, the great warrior and the witty, talented hero became a cheat and liar.

In *The Penelopiad*, the epic characters are degraded. Penelope's anger with Helen leads to the creation of a different portrait of a character known as most beautiful woman in the world. She is still beautiful, but Penelope presents her to us with an evil side, the destroyer of her life and a bloodthirsty woman.

In *The Penelopiad* Atwood, uses a mix of genres, akin to the postmodernist tradition. Atwood presents Penelope as more tricky and heroic than Homer's hero

Odysseus. Through her novella *The Penelopiad*, Atwood shows an anti-mirror image of Homer's truthful wife Penelope. By deconstructing Penelope archetype of the devoted wife in myth, she not only creates a female version for Homer's epic but also gives justice and voice to the female character who is suppressed by the older male of a dominant patriarchal tradition.

Red Cap Fairytale and The Handmaid's Tale: A revision

Fairy tales are considered as one of the most popular and oldest forms of literature. When we mention the term fairy tales, the image of childrens' stories with magic and fantasy begin to arise in everyone's mind. There is no other tale in the world, which made such a deep impression on the human mind as the fairy tale. It is believed that fairy tales are derived from myth and folklore of ancient people. Even before the developments of language, primitive people began to tell stories through their cave paintings. These paintings later changed to oral stories and began to transform from one generation to another. Later they were written in various languages developed and this transformation occurred in the genre of folk tale and fairy tales.

In history, fairy tales are considered as women stories, which were passed down orally from mother's and grand mothers. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century male members of society like the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault collected those stories and produced them in printed form. However, the contribution of women to this genre is unforgettable.

Writers all around the world are fascinated by these fairy tales and many of them rewrite them in their own version. During the feminist movement writers like Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Toni Morrison deconstructed the fairytale using a woman's perspective. Carter's *Bloody Chamber*, Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Atwood's *Blue Beard's Egg* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are example for these deconstructed fairy tales.

Atwood considered fairy tales more favorably in comparison to other feminist literary critics of her day. As with myth, Atwood deconstructed the idea of fairy tales and explained it through the perspective of feminism. She is heavily inspired by the

fairy tales of the Brother Grimm and began to write poetry with this theme from childhood onwards. Her first poem "*Double Persephone*" is slightly critical of the trusted ideas of Grimm's stories that she loved so dearly. She questions the once perfectly molded idea's of bliss found in spring times. Most of her novels presents the Rapunzal syndrome in which women experience internalized isolation.

A fairytale cannot be interpreted one dimensionally, Atwood unearths the underlying disturbing elements within classical fairytales, which constitute the space for recreation and subversion. Through the technique of metafictional writing Atwood not only explores the sexual politics in fairytales but also highlights the subversive elements, exaggerates them and revises the tales. In Margret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author presents her own version of the Red Cap's fairy tale through the protagonist Offred. Red Riding Hood or Red Cap fairy tale revolves around a girl called Little Red Riding Hood.

Atwood elaborates the story of Red Riding Hood with an application of modern issues in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This novel can be counted as a dystopian novel. It is considered one of the most powerful portraits of a totalitarian society. The book was written during the anti-feminist background of the 1980's and Atwood points out the violent nasty picture of patriarchy where a woman is denied all the rights of her life and exists to serve every need of her master and look after the household.

The novel is set in the future where a Christian group has taken over the United States and established a totalitarian country called Republic of Gilead. The book is told from the perspective of a woman, the handmaid, only known, as Offred (of-Fred) is a concubine whose only purpose is to offer surrogate pregnancy to the sterilized couple of Gilead high society. Through Offred's perspective, this life structure as well as violence and suppression is explained. Offred is working for the General of Gilead

and his wife who often sexually uses her but fails to impregnate her. Later she develops an unexpected relation with the general and also develops a secret affair with Nick, who is working under the general. In a country where handmaid's cannot be seen by anyone, can have sex only for reproduction, these actions constituted the breaking of laws. Later Offred tries to renounce the norms of the society and begins to attain her identity and freedom. At last the authorities, send her away to death. When she waits for the black van, which is coming to arrest her, the rebel members of the May Day society along with Nick rescue her from punishment and death.

Many of the events and situations in the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, are parallel to the fairy tale. At the very beginning of both stories the protagonists are identified by their red clothing.

"If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pair of glass like the eye of a fish and myself in it like a distorted shadow. A parody of something, some fairy tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger"

(The Handmaid's Tale)

This fairy tale figure in a red cloak is obviously Little Red Cap or Little Red Riding Hood. The moral of her story is a warning not to stray off the path. Which is what Offred does in the novel. In an earlier time little Red Cap or little Red Riding Hood was created by women as a moral story, through which the society was warning young girls against sexual predators of that time

Little Red Cap is a story of young girl who wears a red cloak. She meets a wolf on the way, while going to her grandmother's house through the wood. She tells him that where she is going and the wolf who wanted to eat the girl suggests that she pick

some flowers for her grandmother. Despite the mother's warning to stay on the path, Little Red Cap decides to pick flowers. When she arrives at grandmother's house, the wolf pretends to be her grandmother and swallows her. A huntsman comes and rescues Little Red Cap by cutting her out of the wolf's stomach.

Sharon Wilson in her book *Fairytales Sexual Politics* explains that unlike Red Cap, Offred has already been swallowed by the wolf, who is physically using her. Due to the rule of Gilead she is under him and forced to remain in this way. In the novel Serena Joy, wife of the commander, represents the motherly figure of Red cap. She always warns Offred and teach her the norms and laws of the society; it is her job to enforce rules and keep Offred on the right path i.e. Inside wolf's or commander's control. She also keeps Offred away from the flowers, which distracted Red Cap in the fairytale. Here in *The Handmaid's Tale* these flowers are the path to the freedom, a temptation to stray away from the wolf. As a mother and a wife, Serena prevents every unnecessary encounters of wolf or general. Though she fails later on with the girl she keeps Offred away from every possible temptation to deviate from the path.

In little Red Cap it is the beautiful flower which tempts and awakes her senses. However, in Offred's case it is Nick, who represents the flower and also the huntsman, who awakens Offred's senses and allows her to feel again. He gives her new hope to live again. In Little Red Cap, she is eaten after she comments on the wolves large senses Such as large eyes, large ears etc. However, in Offred's case, it is her sense of identity which awakens her i.e., brings her consciousness, freedom to feel etc. allows her to save herself from the wolf and to seek freedom. Nick who represents the huntsman helps Offred to regain her identity through their relationship. However, it is Offred herself in her rebirth from the wolf's belly who finds herself and consciously and wishes to establish her identity.

For Offred, it was difficult to find a way to step away from the wolf's belly because disguised as her grandmother, the commander attempts to make Offred more comfortable around him, and establish a relation with him. According to Wilson, he and his government have already swallowed Red cap, this wolf not only hopes to make her stay more comfortable but also wants to kiss her with meaning (74).

Nevertheless, in the end Offred manages to find a way to escape from the wolf, just like Red Cap. She takes rebirth from the wolf's belly, which is symbolized through her pursuit of knowledge and leaves the darkness within the wolf when an opening for her escape (rebirth) appears. We know from the existence of Offred's taped narrative that the dark van does finally take her off Gilead's theocratic path to a new life where she has a voice.

The reflections of the Grimm's fairy tale Red Cap is clearly visible in the anti-fairy tale (reverse fairy tale) plot of Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's tale*. Using the fairytale Atwood satirically shows the oppression of women in her novel. Gilead is a country where women cannot be educated or use birth control etc. and is thus directly connected with first and second wave of feminism. Through the novel Atwood directly relates to the real world by situating the events in a feminist time frame. She also points out what men thought about women and women's movements during the 1980.

Beside Red Riding Hood or Redcap Offred also resembles another fairytale character, Rapunzel. In Gilead handmaids should have longhair. Like Rapunzel She spends most of her time waiting in her room for summons from the commander and hopes for a better future. Offred's long hair and her long waiting posture in the attic make her a Rapunzel. In other words, for Offred, Gilead becomes a forest where all the gestures and languages become dangerous for Little Red Riding Hood, as well as

for rebellion; Offred is, like Rapunzel, given a mere window to look at the world. Only when she is alone in the room does she use her keen sensation to search for clues of the room in the past, to reflect on her identity and memory in the past. the search for her past, herself, her identity gives her the power to build a sense of subjectivity. She rediscovers her strength and manages to move beyond the limited space where she is trapped.

Fairytale motifs in Atwood's works are a liberating force. Atwood uses fairytales as a means of transforming the constricting image that tradition has placed upon sexual identity. By reconciling and revisioning the archetypal motifs, characters and narratives, Atwood presents a familiar, yet unique reading experience

Metaphor of body as an edible object in *The Edible Women*

The word metaphor is defined as a novel or poetic linguistic expression, where one or more words and concepts are used outside of its normal conventional meaning to express similar concepts. Metaphors are one of the most extensively used literary devices. In the early times the primitive people projected their own body parts to the outside world to understand and highlight the relation and difference from each other. Thus, it is believed that the comparison of or relationship of objects is originally derived from the human body itself. Human body metaphORIZATION plays a vital role in human life to understand the outside world. It can also be viewed as an important tool for people to construct new concepts and recognize the new outside world. Through the body metaphor, one can clearly understand the complicated and abstract concepts.

In many traditions from ancient times, women were considered inferior to men and these women did not have any rights. The only purpose of their life was getting married and giving birth to a man's child. Their bodies were considered as commodities which enabled them to enter into the contract of matrimony so that they would have material means to live. Thus, women's attention to their bodies took the form of preserving them as an object for others appraisal. The danger behind this tradition is echoed in feminist works even today.

Margaret Senger wrote in 1922 "no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body... it is for woman, the key to liberty" (533). Some critics argued that femininity is a social mechanism, which is based on male desire to control the women. Margaret Atwood is one among them who provides a clear accurate analysis of the female body as it exists within our culture. Mind-body dualism is an important theme in the most of the novels of Margaret Atwood. Two

opposite yet mutually dependent constructions of the female body exist in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*.

...the only marriage you'll celebrate will be with death...when they only have you in their power they'll chop you in pieces .. Then they'll cook you and eat you, because they are cannibals...

--Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Robber Bridegroom* (A fairy tale)

The old maid is warning the princess, who is getting married, that her future husband is a man from a cannibal tribe. The old maid attributes marriage with violence or cannibalism in which she will be brutally killed and her body will be eaten by him. In some early fairytales marriage was connected with cannibalism in which female characters were symbolized as victims. Margaret Atwood explains the same theme in her novel *The Edible Woman* in a different way.

Marian Macalpin, the protagonist of *The Edible Women*, is a member of a phallogocentric society. The grotesque element in *The Edible Women* conveys Marian's threatened sense of self. Marian aims to protect and have control over herself and that her refusal of food is an unconscious articulation of the desire to avoid losing her sense of self. The novel crosses the boundaries between realism and fantasy by reflecting the middle class woman's culture in the 1960. The novel explores the issues of gender construction and its commercialization. The novel also focuses on the problems at the work place, gender inequality and the patriarchal system.

The female protagonist Marian MacAlpin struggles between her own identity and the roles and norms that are told from the perspective of Marian, as an employee who is working for a marketing research company, Seymer Surveys and is engaged to Peter Wollander. Her life was simple and perfect until she realized her boy-friend's consumer nature during a talk in the restaurant. From that moment onwards, she

begins to suffocate from an eating disorder, Anorexia Nervosa, which is her body's response to society's effort to impose patriarchal norms upon her.

Marian's inability to eat certain foods mimics a trope in Victorian writing related to both women's body and their marketable marriage value. In *The Flesh Made Word*, Helena Michie notice two absences in Victorian realist novels mention of the heroine eating and of hunger (12-13). The ideal heroine ate little and when she did, she consumed delicately, contrary to the fallen woman, who was plum and ate more. During the talk with Peter in restaurant Marian's lose of appetite implies that she is a perfect traditional woman. However, towards the end, Atwood relates Marian to the fallen women who commit infidelity.

Peter and Marian's friends believe in traditional values and patriarchal norms and try to impose it on Marian's life. Marian is an educated working women who lives on her own but feels trapped and unable to take decisions for herself. In a society of male dominance Marian feels like a puppet whose strings are controlled by Peter.

When Marian gets engaged to Peter, her family responds by echoing patriarchal concern about women and education. Her family clearly approves the dominant dualistic ideology that oppresses women. Marian, nevertheless, is trying to emancipate herself from such victimization by disregarding her essential body and thus empowering her mind.

Marina's alienation from her body is clearly visible through the narration, which shifts from first-to-third person narration and again returns to first person narration at end. Atwood shows Marian's increasing distance from herself through this narration

During the proposal, Marian looks at Peter as a rescuer from chaos. but when he explains why he wants to marry her, she begins to feel that her identity as a woman is being robbed. Through his speech Peter was giving an identity to her which

conformed to his norms. Peter wanted a girl who always praised his collection of guns, cameras and knives.

When Marian finds out that Peter is a hunter, she begins to hate the hunter in him. She compares herself with the rabbit and feels that she is being hunted by him. Marian's nausea before meat is her instinctive identification with the hunted animal. The hunter/hunted dichotomy is one of the most persistent metaphors for a relationship between men and women, in our culture. She loses respect for him, which is symbolic of her conscious awareness of victimization. She imagines that her body is being sold in the commercial market of consumerism. Marian refuses to submit herself and her identity under the male superiority and ego but she feels trapped under her power. Thus she loses her freedom.

Marian is extremely conscious about the burden patriarchy forces upon her body. She is also aware of how men consider women as a tool for carnal gratification. Atwood's description about the beauty salon episode is a reflection of the scrutiny patriarchy inflicts on the female body. During this episode Marian compares Peter to a physician who examines the body of Marian on a clinical table. After making love Peter passionlessly probe over her skin with a hand that seeks what had escaped from his eyes before. The portrayal of Marian as a patient on a doctor's table clearly shows the sexual politics between Marian and Peter. For Marian, Peter's examination with eyes and hands is violent intrusion into Marian's inner self. With this act, Atwood says that, Marian turns to a ideal wife or women who desires to meet her husbands Expectation; to embody the patriarchal idea of feminism, i.e. women is an object for men's pleasure.

As the feminine ideal become increasingly confining she imagines her body and identity disappearing. Marian's behaviour and hallucination breaks her sense of

security. Her identity crisis first appears to her in a dream of a bath in which Marian relates " I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve , like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the end of my fingers turning transparent". The sensation of her body as a soft and diffuse mass becomes a motif throughout the novel.

Marian's binary view is not only restricted to her body, she frequently considers friends and colleagues in these terms, particularly the heavily pregnant Clara, whom she saw as a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead. The image of tiny pinhead is symbolic of a shrunken intellect. In Marian's view, Clara's mind is overcome by her bulbous body and Marian finds it increasingly difficult to communicate with her. Once she has given birth Marian welcomes back the real Clara who is mentally aware. Through her pregnancy, Clara allegedly fulfills her deepest femininity, 'Being a mother'. By describing Clara's condition as vegetative and sponge like, Marian not only conveys her own divisionary response to the mind/body dichotomy but also determines and resists the patriarchal concept of femininity.

The disciplinary practice that women inflict on their bodies reflects a social sickness. Marian's identification and rejection of the women's diseased bodies at the office party suggest that she is seeking out a new identification. The comparison of female body and meat suggests that the consumption of both is a sign of male success.

In the opening scene, Marian chose to eat an egg, white bread and tomato juice for breakfast, which is a symbolic representation of the feminine body, ovum, flesh and blood. Later she loses this femininity, begins to connect with foods, and rejects eating them.

Seeing Peter in her dream sequence, where he is the very image of normality she realizes that he is a threat to her. At the end of the novel, she realizes that she

comes to exist only through what she represents. After discovering that more than mere prevention was essential, Marian takes a fundamental step to win back her identity. Refusing the fate marked for her she bakes a cake in the form of a woman. A representation of herself, an object of consumption and liberation at the same time. Atwood purposefully sets up the scene like an operation, only to suggest that Marian is the sole authority who has constructed the women's shape and identity, not society. When Peter refuses to eat the cake Marian feeling very hungry begins to eat the cake. Instead of being consumed Marian chose to consume herself, once again she is in control of herself. By eating the cake, Marian was rejecting the rules of patriarchal system with regard to women as a traditional woman and wife. Marian's inability to eat is indicative of her resistance toward identity-fixing. It is directly related to her rejection of masculinity, womanliness, and then all norms of Patriarchal society. Atwood's consideration of the female body as a site of power and resistance is one of the most important elements in her work.

Through *The Edible Women*, Atwood recreated the patriarchal concept of femininity, and offers a new account of the female body. Through the novel Atwood is able to articulate women's anxieties over her oppressive cultural experience as well as woman's confrontation with that oppression.

Conclusion

Stories are reflections of human life; from the beginning of life people liked to create, narrate and hear these stories. They always asked questions about nature, life, death and satisfied themselves by creating their own stories as answers to these questions. By adding Gods and supernatural elements in these narratives, they created myths. Later these myths changed to folklore and fairytales. Fairytales are not just fantasy stories of a prince or princess with a happy ending; they are hopes and expectations of women who lived miserable and suppressed lives. Later some women used their writing as a weapon against the injustice of society and these were termed feminist writings.

Globally the idea of feminism refers to a concept which believes that men and women deserve equality in all opportunities, treatment, respect and social rights. This belief is highlighted in Margaret Atwood's writing. Atwood believed that, women are not treated fairly in the society, that they deserve more. However, she consistently refused to be labelled as a feminist for she said that feminist politics is only one element in her fiction. But, gender, feminity and sexuality are dominant factors in Atwood's work.

Atwood explores the oppression of women and presents it through her characters. The protagonists of Atwood's novels are not satisfied with their lives. When exploring the reasons for their discontent, they come to realize that they are victims of social, economic and political discrimination. Even though Atwood writes about the same theme in feminism, she explains it through different angles, adding different literary genres and tools, thus creating different kaleidoscopic pictures.

In her novella '*The Penelopiad*', she adds elements of myth in a postmodern context. In the novella, she focuses on the conscience of Penelope and her maids, who

are suppressed by the male myth makers. In *The Penelopiad* Atwood manipulates the myth of Odysseus, subverts Penelope's role as a devoted wife by replacing her with a strong woman who is self-conscious, manipulative, and has already found her identity. Through *The Penelopiad*, Atwood created a female version of the myth of Odysseus. As in Homer's epic, here too, Atwood followed the three-fold structure of myth by adding different tests, quests and stories of Penelope. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood represents a protagonist, not a hero of superior physical and mental strength but a woman who possesses a high mental strength to manipulate not just suitors and Odysseus but also the readers. In the novella, Atwood's shows that there is another side to every event. The twelve murdered maids are representations of injustice done by society in early times. In *The Penelopiad* Atwood questions gender inequality as well as the social inequality of society.

Atwood's feminist beliefs are also connected with second wave feminist ideas. The second wave feminism protests against the objectification of the women's body in a society, which is dominated by Patriarchy that which strove to keep women at home. Betty Freidman in her book, *The Feminine Mystique* explained the dissatisfaction that many upper and middle class women felt at their limited options in life. Many of them felt restless and unhappy, although they could not exactly identify the source of these feelings.

Margaret Atwood uses the same theme in her novel *The Edible Women*. Atwood shows how the issues of women's body and social roles gets embodied in the life of the protagonist of novel. Patriarchal society created norms and laws for women. Through the novel Atwood says that it is culture, which is the significant and transformative force that shapes social role, more particularly, gender and identity. In this novel Atwood's heroine finds her own voice and asserts it in society. It is through

the body that men impose their rule over women. She used the metaphor of the body as food to show how woman is consumed by a Patriarchal society. Atwood's use of Anorexia is a metaphor of revolt in her novel. Through the same body, Marian rejects all the norms of society and successfully establishes her identity at the end of the novel.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood deconstructs a fairytale of Red Riding Hood, whose body functions to meet others demands. As in Red Cap or Red Riding Hood, Offred is also forced to obey 'mother' and 'society'. But later she denounces them and finds her own instinct and her own identity. Thus, she takes a rebirth from the wolf's belly and enslavement. Atwood elaborates the story of Red Riding Hood with a modern day application in the novel. Atwood directly relates this novel to the real world by keeping a records of events which have occurred under the movement of Feminism. Atwood points out that world of Gilead is not made up but rather an extension of the real world and its problems. Offred is a representative of women in society. They are forced to a life of housework, having babies and taking care of their families while men go out and work and enjoy their freedom. In the novel, Atwood reveals the theme of freedom and the strength of women, despite a society which views them as less than second-class citizens. At first the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* does not have any freedom. Slowly she frees herself from the oppression of society which denied her any form of personality and individuality, till at last she regains her own identity.

The protagonists of Atwood's novels are the shades of every woman, who is oppressed by gender and sexual politics. In her works, women have fewer privileges because of their sex. In *The Edible Women*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Penelopiad*, characters use their strength and independence to deal with the inequality

of sexes. Atwood challenges social myths and assumptions in her work. The women in her works who live in myths or the past, present or future, novel or fairytale, all face the same problem-victimization. It includes physical, psychological and economical oppression. However, women in Atwood's stories overcome this victimization and discover selfhood by rejecting and questioning patriarchal society and its injustice. Through her novel Atwood attempts to raise the position of women in society. Thus, they live inside everyone's heart as inspirations.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005. print.
- ... *The Edible Woman*. New York: Anchor Books, 1969. Print.
- ... *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998. Print.
- Abrams, M. H, and Geoffrey G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary terms*. 8th ed.
Boston: Thomson Wardsworth, 2005. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam, 1961. Print.
- Durand, Gilbert. *Figuri mitice și chipuri ale operei. De la mitocritică la mitanaliză*.
București : Nemira, 1998. Print.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,
1957. Print.
- Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert fagles. London: Penguin Classics, 1997.
- Ingersoll, Earl G., ed. *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Princeton, New Jersey:
Ontario Review, 1990. Print.
- Michie, Helena. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*.
New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.
- Sanger, Margaret. 1988. 'Birth Control – A Parents' Problem or a Woman's?' (1922).
The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir. Ed. Alice de Rossi. New
York: Columbia University Press: 533. Print.
- Wilson, Sharon R. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. Jackson: UP of
Mississippi, 1993. Print.
- ...Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's Works. *Margaret Atwood's Works*

and Impact. Ed. Nischik, Reingard. New York: Camden House, 2000. Print

Zipes, Jack. *Fairytales as Myth, Myth as Fairytales*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1994. Print.