

REPRESENTATION OF POPULAR CULTURE AND WOMEN IN SELECTED TEXTS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Ashik Ikbal

M.A, NET Assam University Silchar

ABSTRACT: Popular culture is a comprehensive and highly mediated phenomenon that consists of an extensive range of cultural texts and practices from films to newspaper and television, from designing computer games to creating cartoon series. Gender and popular culture are connected in multiple ways and women, as a social and political construct is continually produced, consumed and represented in popular culture. The paper, through the writings of Margaret Atwood, discusses the representational issues of women, the patriarchal biasness, the political influence, masculine domination and the societal oppression in modern texts.

KEYWORDS: Popular culture, cultural texts, gender, women, represented, patriarchal, masculine, oppression.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Popular Culture” is a term which, in both everyday and academic usage, quickly slips free from its ties to any firm theoretical account of either culture or the popular. It is obviously a concept that only makes sense as merely comparative, and the more usual comparisons are, in fact High Culture, Folk culture and Mass Culture. Furthermore, “popular culture” is often used interchangeably to refer to both specific culture and symbolic objects. In analytical practice there seems to have been three overlapping ways in which the term “popular culture” has been used. First, popular culture is defined as that culture which is produced for the people. The “people” in this approach are thus taken to be a sector of the market, a body of consumers and “popular culture” describes certain commodities. This is the context in which popular culture is distinguished from folk culture by reference to its industrial means of production. However, the term is also used in distinction from mass culture by reference to an argument about consumption. “Popular Culture” implies a culture rooted in particular (usually class-based) social processes, relations and values; “the people” are not the anonymous “masses”. In short, in this commercial context, “popular culture” is both a quantitative and qualitative concept; it refers to audience size – to be “popular”, a record or a film or a fiction must get sold or be viewed in relatively larger numbers; it also refers to the quality of these consumers and viewers, to their attitudes and their uses of cultural goods. In fact, the qualitative measure is more important than the quantitative measure in this context. Although many “popular” songs, films and TV shows have smaller sales and viewing figures than successful classical records, art movies and high quality TV programs; the distinguishing label “popular” still seems appropriate.

Historically, popular culture has been closely associated with mass media that introduce and encourage the adoption of certain trends. Theoretically, such operations of the media is called ‘tastemaking’, and the foundational trends are called ‘tastemakers’--- people or institutions that shape the way others think, eat, listen, drink, dress and such. For example, *The New York Times*’ restaurant and theater reviews used to be able to make or break a restaurant or show with their opinions. Along with encouraging a mass audience to keep an eye out for (or skip) certain movies, TV shows, video games, books or fashion trends, ‘tastemaking’ is also used to create demand for new products. Companies often turn to advertising films to help create a public hunger for an object that may have not even existed six months earlier. Mass Media is, thus, an integral part of Popular Culture as it exploits its two basic components; the perspective of the culture creators (for profit mass media companies, individual auteurs, filmmakers and artists) and the perspective of the consumers (you and me and other audiences). Critical theorists (who take their cue from and conflict theory) say that the mass media is an industry and designed to indoctrinate and subordinate the masses (audiences) into passivity and acceptance of the capitalist mode of consumption through popular culture consumption. One of the most important ways interpretive communities play out in everyday life is in determining taste and consumption. ‘Taste’ can be defined as a preference for particular fashion, movies, music etc. There are varied beliefs about what ‘good music’ is or isn’t, what is fashionable and what is not depending on which interpretive community we come from. What we prefer then determines at least in part, our ‘consumption’, how we receive and make sense of popular culture.

Popular culture, thus, in vogue with Mass media require particular forces of consumption, and this base of consumption is produced through the device known as 'representation'. The common sense meaning of the concept of representation is that of a set of processes by which signifying practices appear to stand for or depict another object or practice in the 'real' world. Representation is thus an act of symbolism that mirrors an independent object world. However, for cultural studies representation does not simply reflect in symbolic form 'things' that exist in an independent object world, rather, representations are constitutive of the meaning of that which they purport to stand in for. That is, representation does not involve correspondence between signs and objects but creates the 'representational effect' of realism. Since representations are not innocent reflections of the real but are cultural constructions, they could be otherwise than they appear to us. Here representation is intrinsically bound up with questions of power through the process of selection and organization that must inevitably be a part of the formation of representations. The power of representation lies in its enabling some kinds of knowledge to exist while excluding other ways of seeing. Consequently, cultural studies writers often talk about a 'politics of representation'. When we ask the question what does it mean to be a certain kind of a person – male, female, young, old, black, white, gay, straight and so forth – we are engaged in a politics of representation. Stuart Hall argues that a 'politics of representation' must register the arbitrariness of signification and generate a willingness to live with difference. That is, a politics of representation enquires into the power relations inherent in the representation of race and gender while simultaneously deconstructing the very terms related to their various binary constructions.

In 1990, sociologist Arthur Frank declared: "Bodies are in academia as well as in popular culture". Three years later, David Morgan and Sue Scott in their study *Body Matters: Essays on the Sociology of the Body* reaffirm his statement: "since we first began the process of editing this book, there has been a veritable explosion of feminist work on 'the body'". Relegated to the realms of biology, the body has, until recently, been a site of cultural debate. Lurking in the background of social science, this 'absent presence' was, and occasionally is, disparaged in favor of 'the mind'. This mind-body dichotomy has pervaded western thought for centuries. Descartes' famous dictum, 'Cogito ergo sum', established dualism as a distinct philosophy; however, the tradition dates back much further and is deeply rooted in early Christian theology. Cartesian dualism partitions human experience into two separate categories; the spiritual and the bodily. This self/other dualism is likewise reflected in the constructed oppositions of culture and nature, and reason and emotion. If the mind is allied with culture and reason, then it follows that the body is associated with all that is 'other'. Historically, women have been defined by their 'biological potentiality', and the female reproductive system has worked to reduce women to the sum of their child bearing parts. If woman is inextricably associated with the body, and the body is regarded as being somehow inferior to the mind – the carnal flesh to which the elevated mind is shackled – then women surely is inferior. The bodies matter is axiomatic in feminist debate – a debate that is as prevalent in academia as it is in popular culture. The manner in which female bodies are unequally and negatively imbued with meaning has incited a number of feminist authors to attempt to decode the female body, both critiquing it and liberating it from traditional, patriarchal formulations.

One author who provides an astute and tangible analysis of the female body as it exists within the prevalent culture is Margaret Atwood. Her *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) are clear examples of demystifying the female form. Atwood's *The Edible Woman* typifies the dualistic logic that insists our bodies are entirely separate from our true inner selves. It is worth noting that the statement is delivered by a male character, Leonard Slank. It incites a response which suggests that his mortification stems not from the fact that desire has been based solely on the body, but rather that it has been based on his body. The mind body dualism is central to the lives of Atwood's female protagonists, heavily influencing their embodied experiences. Joan Foster in the *Lady Oracle* and Marian MacAlpin in *The Edible Woman* live within a phallogocentric society and are, as Maggie Humm suggests, "torn between unconscious feminist questions and the stereotypical answers which society provides." They are repeatedly confronted with culturally gendered distinctions that limit their existence to the corporeal. The Protagonists of *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* each struggle with food; they both present symptoms of eating disorders; Marian cannot eat and Joan cannot stop. Chernin suggests that "[t]aken together, the slender self-effacing Marian and the fat, rebellious Lady Oracle form the poles that define our position as women in contemporary culture today, so far as the use of our body to express meaning is concerned". No longer is the western phenomenon of eating disorders interpreted as a reaction to the barrage of images of extreme slenderness promoted by the fashion industry and media. Rather, feminists have come to understand the eating disorder, overwhelmingly a female problem, as a rebellion against culturally-defined experiences of womanhood. Anorexia and compulsive eating can thus be seen as purposeful acts, demonstrations either conscious or unconscious, against patriarchal constructions of femininity and women's lack of corporeal power. The distinction between edible and non-edible, in relation to consumerism gets analyzed, in *The Edible Woman*, through Marian's predicament in a male-dominated and cannibalistic society. Marian's ability to reclaim her identity by devouring her "woman made out of cake" ravenously, helps her

womanly strength to get freed from the conformist path of marriage and victimization to Peter. Her incapability to consume food shows her refusal to submit to the traditional culture of female consumerism, allowing her the lack of restrictions. Finally, Marian's protest over the gender politics challenges her to survive by creating a substitute for the consumption of women in society. The novel reflects the constant theme of lack of distinct identity. In this case the character demonstrates the large quantities of strength necessary to protect her individuality, which was slowly degenerating all because of the communities in which she lived. Margaret Atwood employs an eating disorder in her novel *The Edible Woman* as a metaphor of revolt and protest. Marian MacAlpin interprets the world in terms of food and negotiates her way using it. Her initial lack of appetite finally leads to 'Anorexia Nervosa', which is her body's response to the society's attempt of imposing its rules on her. The novel 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 capitalist society, 'eating' means gaining power to those who are consumers of this culture and the victims of it. As a part of the capitalist society, Marian is also preoccupied with consumerism at the beginning of the novel. According to Mervyn Nicholson, 'Anorexia Nervosa' does not mean lack of appetite at all, but it means "lack of desire". This statement allows considering Marian's eating disorder as a resistance to consumerism and her rejection of capitalism which is based on 'desiring things'.

Recent feminist media criticism that has drawn from cultural studies shifts our attention from the text to the context of reception in which the audience plays an active role in producing and negotiating textual meanings. Construction of textual meanings is an integral part of social and power relations in society, which are constantly contested and negotiated by the audience. Gallagher argues that in the recent years feminist media criticism, heavily influenced by post-structural and post-modern theory, places far more emphasis on autonomy of audience reading of the text and validating audience "pleasures" and ignores the fact that women as audience are positioned within a cultural system which reproduces particular representations of "femininity" and "masculinity". The focus of this approach is on understanding "representation" of women through the study of text and textual mechanisms. Criticism of this approach is directed towards the neglect of a dialectical relationship between media and culture which construct the notion of "women". The question is not merely to examine whether the media reflect or distort images of women, but to explore how images and meaning of femininity and masculinity in media are socially constructed within the context of patriarchal social relations.

II. REFERENCES:

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