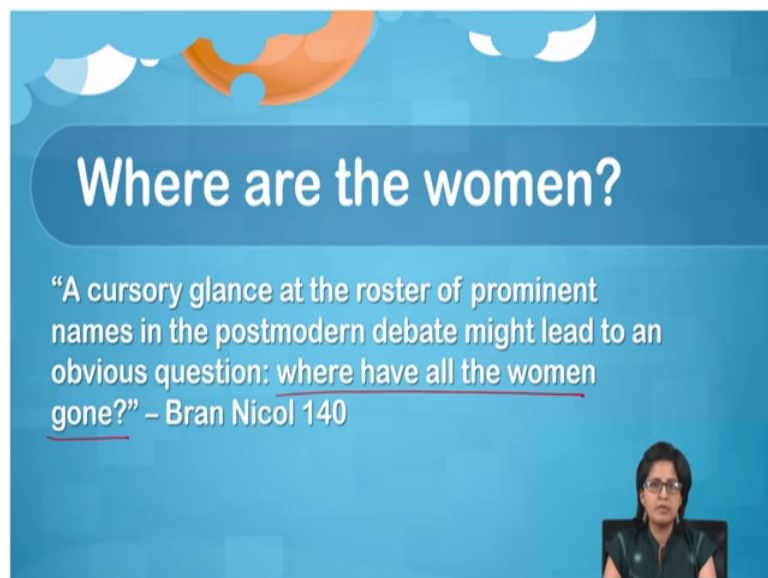


Postmodernism in Literature
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Lecture-22
Postmodern Fiction by Women: Reading Atwood's The Edible Woman

Hello and good morning. I am happy to welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course Postmodernism in Literature. Today's lecture is titled Postmodern Fiction by Women Reading Atwood's The Edible Woman. I begin today's session by drawing your attention to one of the pertinent questions asked by Bran Nicol in his Cambridge introduction to postmodern of fiction.

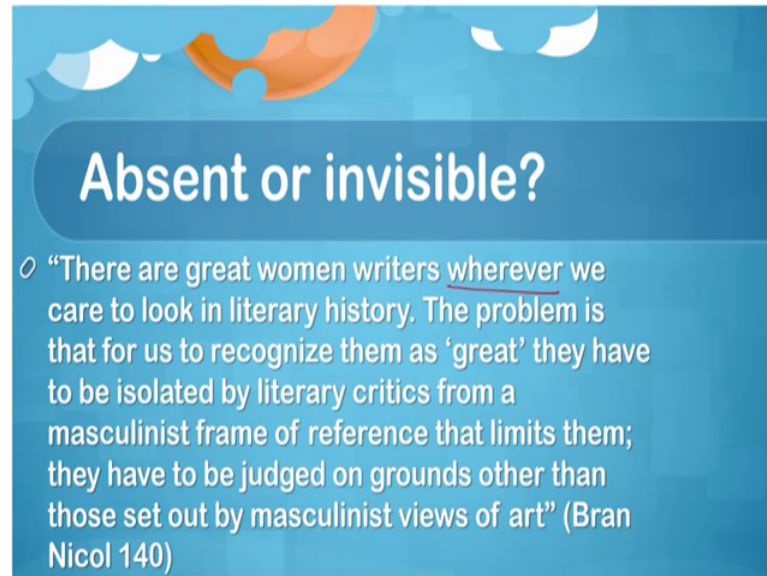
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A cursory glance at the roster of prominent names in the postmodern debate might lead to an obvious question, where have all the women gone?

So we begin asking this question in order to enter the postmodern writings by women fiction authors. If you also take a cursory glance at the discussions that we have had till date we also notice that postmodernism has been predominantly a male forte which with only a few discussions on women particularly when we talk about very pressing aspects related to gender or about feminism. Otherwise we too have been mostly focusing on the male writers, on the male theorist feminism and the discussions on gender come in only as a corollary to the primary discussions on postmodernism.

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Bran Nicol as he pursues this question he also makes his argument that women have not been absent, but they have been rendered admissible due to the particular ways in which canon has been shaped. To read his own words there are there are great women writers wherever we care to look in literary history. The problem is that for us to recognize them as great; they have to be isolated by literary critics from a masculinist frame of reference that limits them. They have to be judged on grounds other than those set out by masculinist views of art.

So in this course it is important to reiterate that women have not really been absent even within the postmodernist frame of reference, but they have mostly been rendered invisible due to the particular ways in which the postmodern strategies and the post modernist discussions have been framed.

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Even in this course we have taken a look at some of the women who have redefined and shaped the discussions related to postmodernism. We have taken a look at a very brief look at Helene Cixous, Lucy Irigary and Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak and we have also taken a look at how Donna Haraway addresses the issue of the sybok.

There are also certain other women theorists who have helped redefine the question of postmodernism such as Jacqueline Rose, Teresa de Lauretis, Angela McRobbie and Judith Williamson. It is within such a context that we also begin looking at the postmodern fiction written by women.

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And we also use Molly Hite's observation as an entry point to this discussion that postmodern fiction by women looks different from postmodern fiction by men.

In the last couple of sessions, we have also taken look at some of the important postmodern fiction written by men. So today we look at the postmodern fiction written by women particularly focusing on Margaret Atwood's fictional writings. Before we begin talking about Margaret Atwood and her array of a postmodernist fiction; it is important to notice that the women writings specially within the framework of postmodernism has been seen in very different ways.

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Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

- The narrator's gender is not specified – he/she reminisces about affairs with people of either sex
- Winterson's Postmodernism is coupled with a lesbian feminist agenda

For example, if you take a look at Jeanette Winterson written on the body we realize that the narrators gender is not specified which makes it a very postmodernist in the sense that there is no finality and a total rejection of all kinds of categories including the gender.

Even a closer reading of the text does not give us a sense of the narrators gender and this particular narrator he or she often reminisces about affairs with people of either sex leaving us confused about the sexuality of the narrator itself, it could be either a heterosexual or homosexual or even both. And Winterson's postmodernism in most of her novels has been seen as being coupled with the lesbian feminist agenda this has also been seen as a serious limitation of her post modernist agenda by some of the critics.

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Jeanette Winterson

- Increased commitment to experiment and an irreverent attitude towards moral and literary issues
- Exaggerated and pointless experiment, gender spite, and seeing language as a world and an end in itself

A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a black top, speaking.

Jeanette Winterson also is known for her increased commitment to experiment and an irreverent attitude towards moral and literary issues. And she also dabbles endlessly with exaggerated and pointless experiment genders fight and she also sees language as a world and an end in itself these are definitely very pertinent postmodernist elements.

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Winterson's PoMo

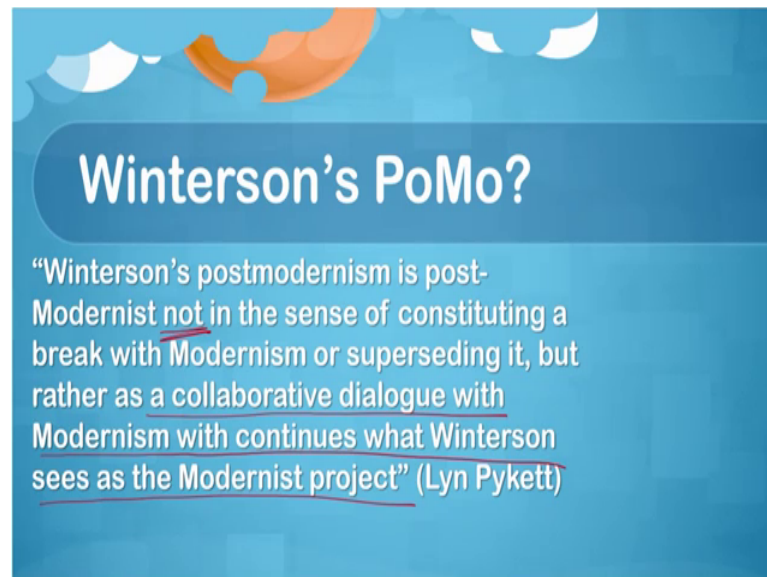
- Compromised by her political agenda
- Disregarding the importance of gender - downplays sexism and homophobia
- Focus on protagonists' need for love, weakens her PoMo stance

A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows the same woman as in the previous slide, speaking.

But however Winterson's postmodernism has been seen as slightly problematic by many critics for example, her postmodernism is a compromise by her political agenda.

She of course, disregards the importance of gender and downplays sexism and homophobia, but however, the focus of the protagonists need for love we can suppose modernist stance and many also feel that her commitment has been seen as predominantly modernist rather than post modernist.

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Commenting on Jeanette Winterson's novels and the post modernist approach adopted in that Lyn Pykett notes. Winterson's postmodernism is a post modernist not in the sense of constituting a break with modernism or superseding it, but rather as a collaborative dialogue with modernism which continues what Winterson sees as a modernist project.

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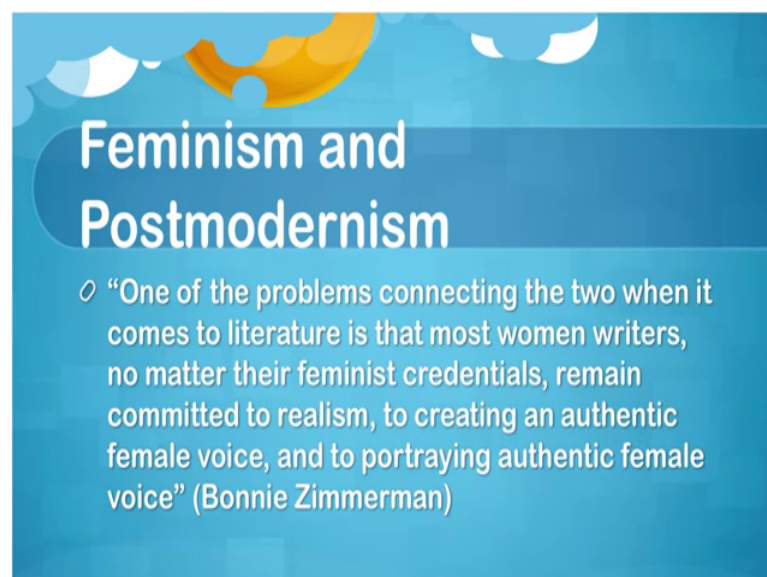
Winterson's Pomo

“Readers of cyberpunk and David Lodge, for example, will find in Winterson’s novels a perhaps disturbing faith in the transforming powers of romantic love, a Romantic investment in self-knowledge and sexual obsession, that accords ill with postmodern conventions of irony and isolation” (Lisa Moore)

Video inset of a woman speaking.

So Winterson’s postmodernism has been seen as more as an extension of the modernist project than as an exemplary of post modernist project itself. And Lisa Moore also is an agreement when he talks she talks about the problematic which is inherent in Winterson’s articulations. Lisa Moore writes Readers of cyberpunk and David Lodge, for example, will find in Winterson’s novels a perhaps disturbing faith in the transforming powers of romantic love, a romantic investment in self knowledge and sexual obsession, that accords ill with postmodern conventions of irony and isolation.

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Feminism and Postmodernism

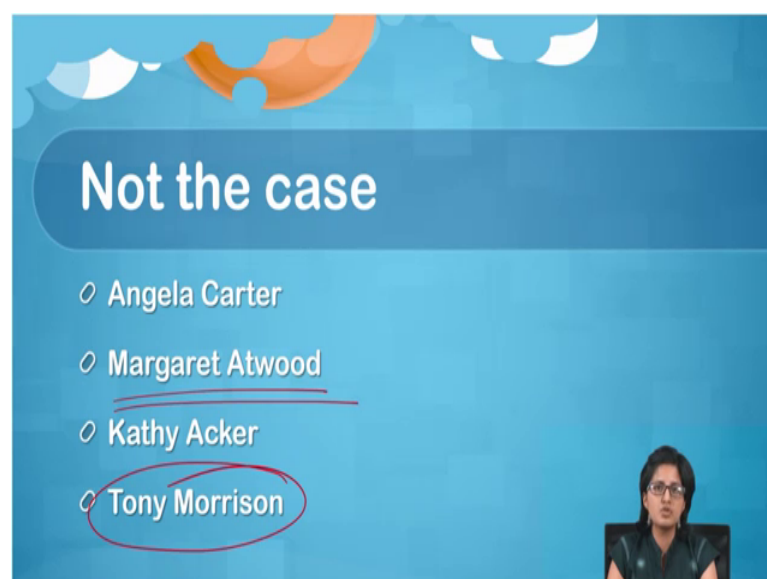
o “One of the problems connecting the two when it comes to literature is that most women writers, no matter their feminist credentials, remain committed to realism, to creating an authentic female voice, and to portraying authentic female voice” (Bonnie Zimmerman)

While we have observed in a couple of earlier sessions that postmodernism and feminism do inform each other and do shape each other when it comes to the theoretical concepts. A number of critics of pointed out the incompatibility when both are made to sit together particularly within the field of literature.

As Bonnie Zimmerman points out one of the problems connecting the two when it comes to literature is that most women writers, no matter their feminist credentials remain committed to realism, for creating an authentic female voice and portraying authentic female voice. The reason why is Zimmerman finds the coming together of feminism in postmodernism is as being problematic is that the feminist writers seem to be very committed to the ideas of realism and also to the ideas of representing an authentic female voice and portraying an authentic female voice.

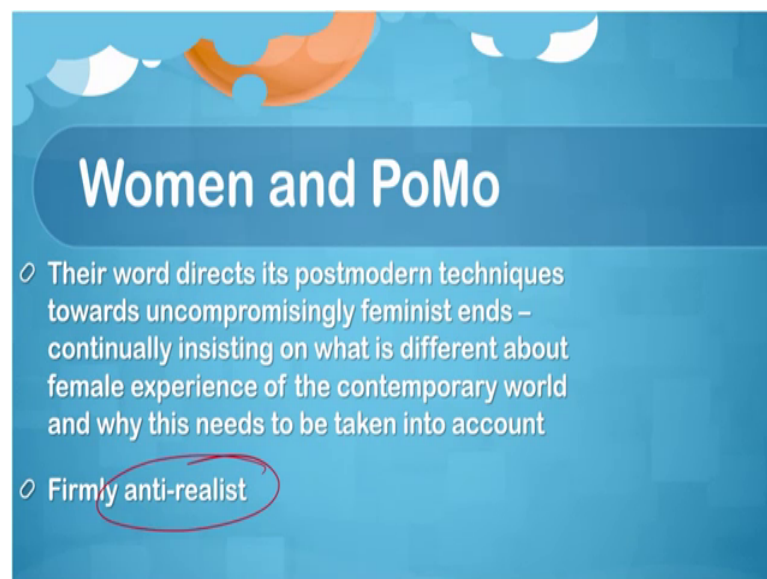
So this needs to be addressed in a very different manner when we come to talk about postmodern fiction written by women. And which is where Bran Nicol the author of the Cambridge introduction to postmodernist fiction, he makes a very pertinent intervention by arguing that not all post modernist women writers are the same. We can find certain feminist postmodernist writers who are able to move away from the ideas of realism and also who are not tied to the commitment of portraying authentic female voices. And as an example he gives the case of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Kathy Acker and Tony Morrison.

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We have already taken a look at the works of Tony Morrison and we have seen how even while talking about an authentic black experience; she is able to move away from the realist tradition and she is also able to move away from the accurate historical narrations. And in this session in today's lecture we shall be focusing on Margaret Atwood's works and since she is also been seen as one of the foremost storytellers of the feminist post modernist tradition.

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Bran Nicol shows how women and postmodernism can be read together within the aura of post modernist fiction. According to him their word directs its post modern techniques towards uncompromisingly feminist ends and they also continually insist on what is different about female experience of the contemporary world.

And this is why he feels these needs to be taken into account because their works are also firmly anti realist. And Margaret Atwood even when she is portraying certain kind of a female experience we find that she is also employing methods of anti-realism and also successfully maneuvering through the challenges of portraying authentic female experience within postmodern strategies.

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A presentation slide with a blue background and white text. At the top, there are decorative white and orange shapes. The main title is 'Margaret Atwood (b.1939)'. Below it, there are two bullet points: 'Canadian writer' and 'Historical fiction, Science fiction and speculative fiction'. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with glasses speaking.

Margaret Atwood (b.1939)

- Canadian writer
- Historical fiction, Science fiction and speculative fiction

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 she is considered as one of the most successful and the most the best known Canadian writer of international repute her work could be described as part of Historical fiction, Science fiction and speculative fiction.

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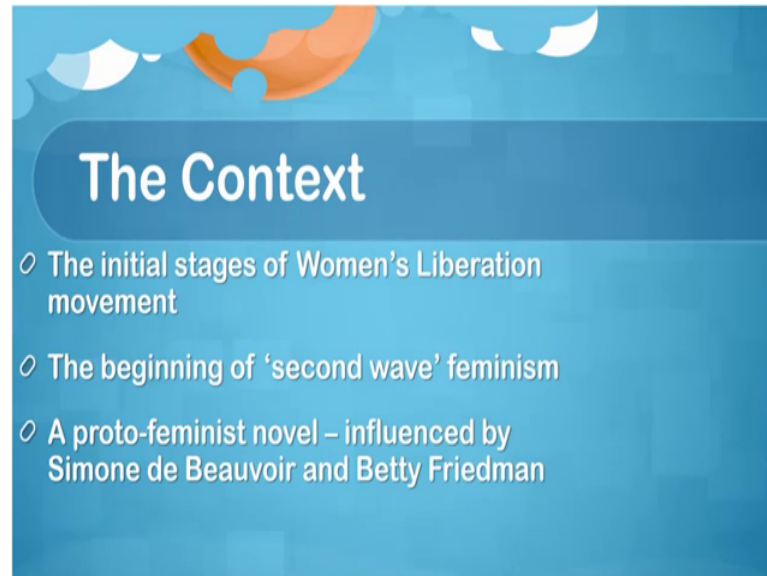
A presentation slide with a blue background and white text. At the top, there are decorative white and orange shapes. The main title is 'The Edible Woman (1969)'. To the right of the title is a small image of the book cover for 'The Edible Woman' by Margaret Atwood. Below the title, there are four bullet points describing the novel.

The Edible Woman (1969)

- Atwood's first novel
- A critique of North American consumer society in the 1960s from a woman's, feminist point of view
- A feminist social satire – funny and biting satiric
- Anticipated the trends of feminism in Dorris Lessing and Toni Morrison

And today we discuss her first novel published in 1969 titled The Edible Woman this novel has often been seen as a critique of North American consumer society in the 1960s that too from a woman's a feminist point of view. And this is when a scene as a feminist social satire; the work has been seen as both a funny and biting satiric at the same time. And this also incidentally happens to be the novel which anticipated the trends of feminism in the works of Dorris Lessing and Toni Morrison.

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This is a context in which the work *Edible Woman* has been produced; this was written in the 1960s which also happens to witness the initial stages of women's liberation movement particularly in America. This was also the beginning of second wave feminism particularly via 1969; this work in that sense has been seen as a proto-feminist novel as Atwood herself has described the work. And she was extremely influenced by Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedman who are pioneers in feminist writings and criticism.

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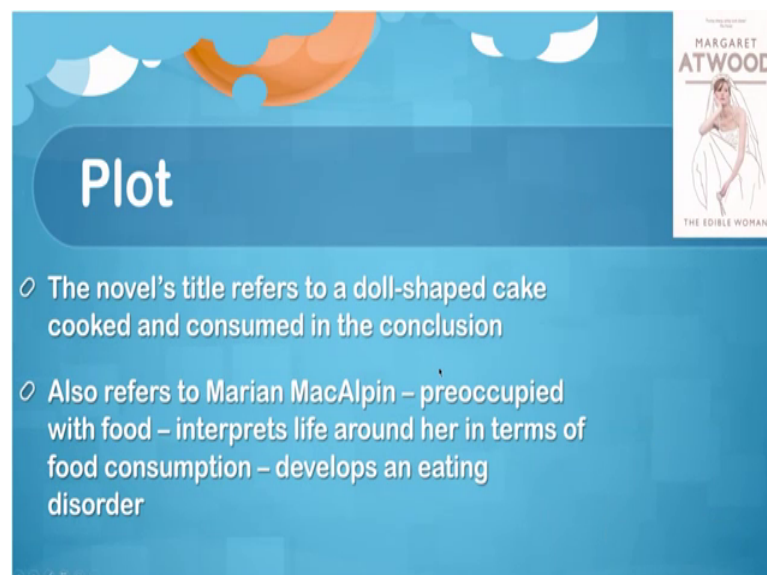


Some of the pressing concerns of the novel include deconstructing gender politics the indictment of male consumption over richness and the over decoration of women in a patriarchal, capitalist, consumer society. If we recall our discussions of the starting moments the starting points of postmodernism in the western context; we notice that 1960s were an important decade in shaping the beginnings of post structuralism as well as postmodernism.

And it is in this context that the relevance of this novel also needs to be seen and the concerns of the novel also include the ways in which the novel en envisage the passive subordinate and vulnerable status of women and through this narrative and also tries to successfully reshape the dynamics of gender.

And we also begin by looking at the edible woman this being one of the earliest a feminist post modernist works available to see how in the beginning there was a way in which gender was beginning to be questioned gender was beginning to be seen as a category which also needs to be rejected. We should also be later taking a look at one of the later novels of Atwood to see how her concerns have progressively moved towards a more fitting postmodernist a framework.

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Plot

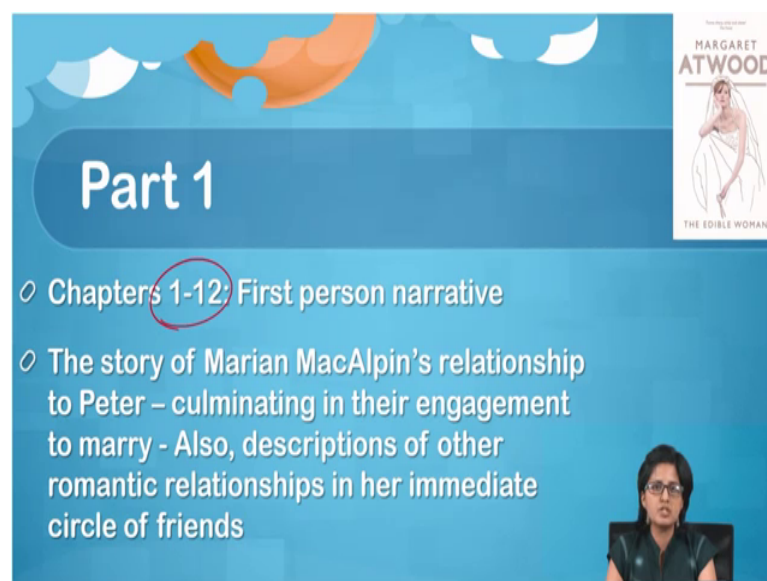
- The novel's title refers to a doll-shaped cake cooked and consumed in the conclusion
- Also refers to Marian MacAlpin – preoccupied with food – interprets life around her in terms of food consumption – develops an eating disorder

Coming back to a discussion on the edible woman are this is a plot of the novel the novel's title the edible woman refers to a doll shaped cake which is cooked and consumed by the protagonist towards the end of the novel. And the reference to the

edible woman is also referenced to the protagonist of the novel Marian MacAlpin. And she is preoccupied with food throughout her life and she also interprets life around her in terms of food consumption and the as a novel progresses as again she goes through certain crises in her life in relationships she also develops an eating disorder.

The novel is about successfully resolving certain issues in her life as and when she also struggled with these disorders in relation to her consumption patterns and in relation to her eating disorders.

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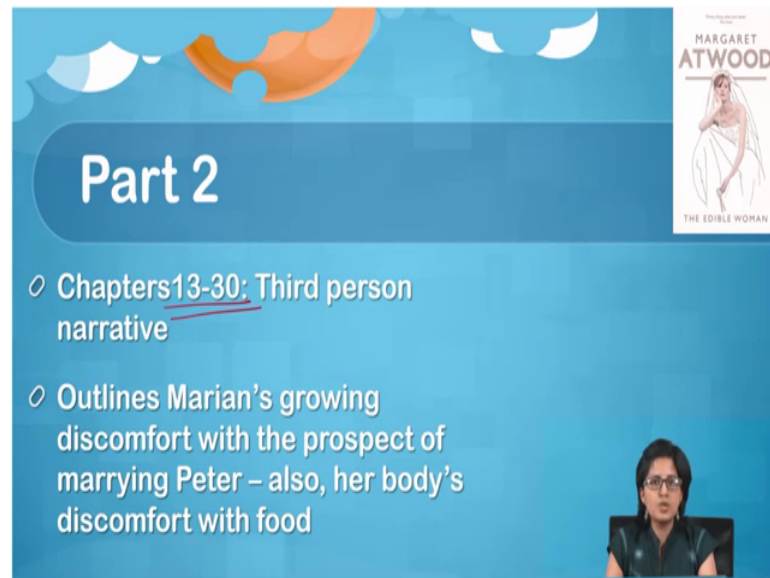
Part 1

- Chapters 1-12: First person narrative
- The story of Marian MacAlpin's relationship to Peter - culminating in their engagement to marry - Also, descriptions of other romantic relationships in her immediate circle of friends

The novel is rip divided into three parts the first part includes the first 12 chapters and it is in the first person narrative. And we also find a very confident a self narrating the story and this is the story of Marian McAlpin's relationship to Peter. And in the first part we also find this relationship culminating in their engagement to marry and there are also descriptions of other romantic relationships in her immediate circle of friends.

So in the first part through a first person narrative the novel assumes a very traditional conventional plot structure and also engages with some of the traditional ways in which gender and relationships have been seen.

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Part 2

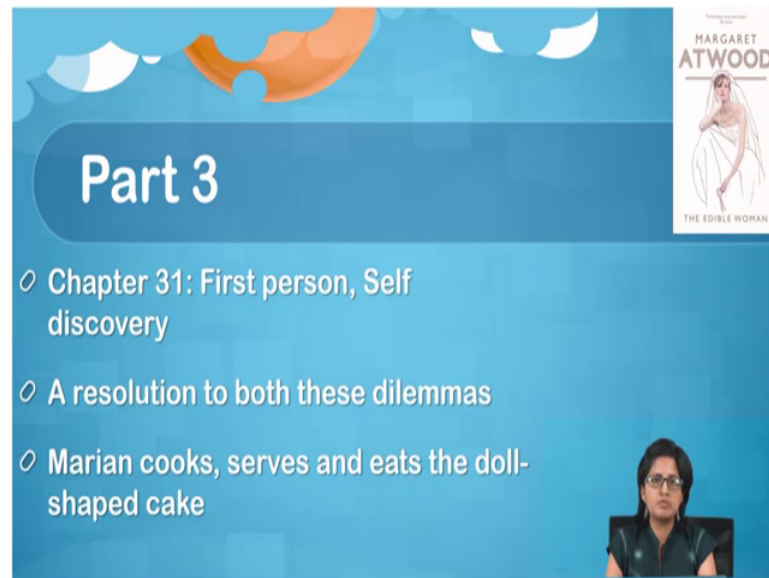
- Chapters 13-30: Third person narrative
- Outlines Marian's growing discomfort with the prospect of marrying Peter – also, her body's discomfort with food

MARGARET ATWOOD
THE EDIBLE WOMAN

In the second part the novel moves to a third person narrative from chapters 13 to 30. And during this phase the novel also outlines Marian's growing discomfort with the prospect of marrying Peter and her body also develops certain discomfort with food and this forms a major section of the narrative in the second part.

Here we find Atwood moving away from the conventional attributes of realism and the traditional notions of gender she also begins to use a lot of images and metaphors of food and consumption this can also be read as a critique of a contemporary consumerist society in America. And in the third part which comprises of just 1 chapter 31 we find the narrative coming back to the first person and this is also more in terms of self discovery.


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Part 3

- Chapter 31: First person, Self discovery
- A resolution to both these dilemmas
- Marian cooks, serves and eats the doll-shaped cake

MARGARET ATWOOD
THE EDIBLE WOMAN



We find a resolution to both of these dilemmas the struggles in terms of Marians relationship and also the struggles she faces in terms of her eating disorder. And we find her towards the end cooking serving and eating the doll-shaped cake which is also one of the most telling scenes in the novel.

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Marian's performance

"She went into the kitchen and returned bearing the platter with the cake in front of her, carefully and with reverence, as though she was carrying something sacred in a procession, an icon or the crown on a cushion in a play. She knelt, setting the platter on the coffee-table in front of Peter.

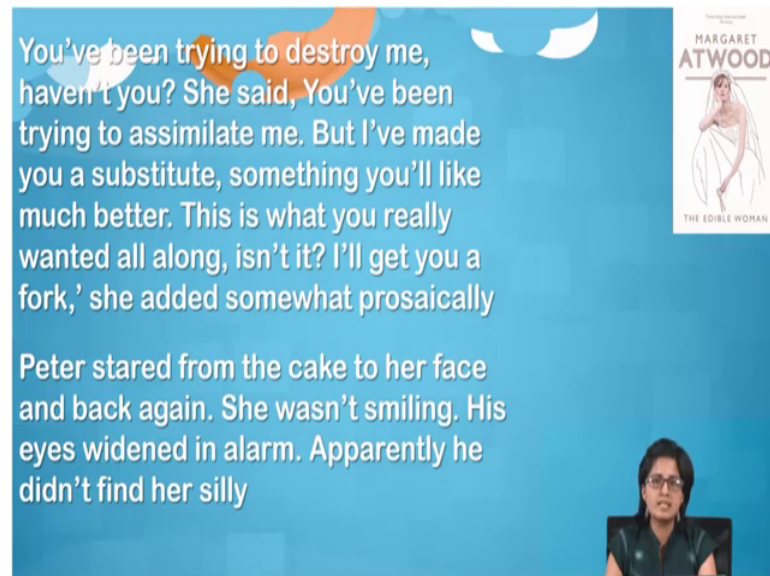
MARGARET ATWOOD
THE EDIBLE WOMAN



And this is how the novel describes Marian's performance towards the end this also has been seen as a one of the excellent renditions of a feminist articulation in contemporary women's writing.

So I read to you from the conclusion of the novel she went into the kitchen and returned bearing the platter with a cake in front of her, carefully and with reverence, as though she was carrying something sacred in a procession, an icon or the crown on a cushion in a play. She knelt, setting the platter on the coffee-table in front of peter, you have been trying to destroy me, have not you? She said, you have been trying to assimilate me.

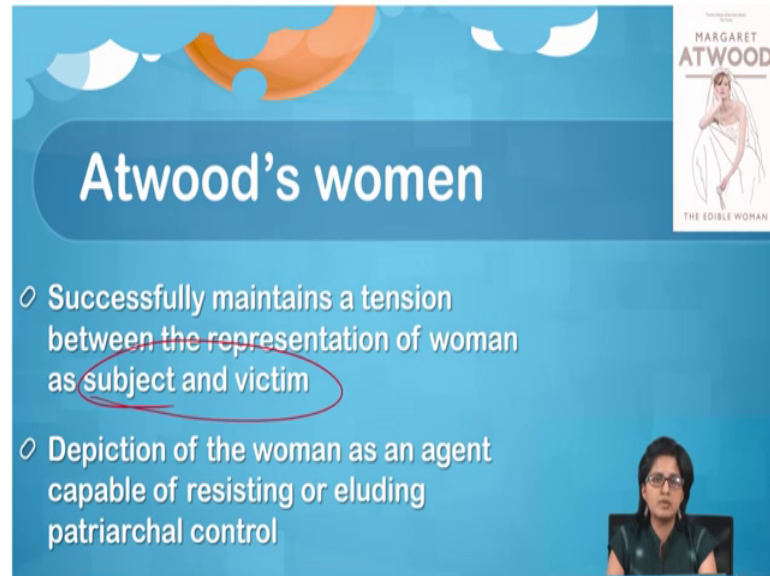
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But I have made you a substitute, something you will like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, is not it? I will get you a fork; she added somewhat prosaically Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She was not smiling. His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he did not find her silly.

So this scene parodies the ways in which women have been seen as objects for consumption and she also offers herself as well as a cake to Peter for him to consume and ironically she consumes herself in this act and this is also seen as a very telling performance of the gender roles towards the end of the novel. And this can be seen not as a realist depiction, but as a very ironical black humor which is being displayed over here. We also find in the male character a sense of discomfort a sense of unsettling towards the end.

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The slide features a blue background with a decorative top border of white and orange shapes. The title 'Atwood's women' is in white text on a dark blue banner. Two bullet points are listed in white text. The first bullet point, 'Successfully maintains a tension between the representation of woman as subject and victim', has 'subject and victim' circled in red. The second bullet point is 'Depiction of the woman as an agent capable of resisting or eluding patriarchal control'. In the top right corner is the book cover for 'The Edible Woman' by Margaret Atwood, showing a woman in a white dress. In the bottom right corner is a small video inset of a woman with glasses speaking.

Atwood's women

- Successfully maintains a tension between the representation of woman as subject and victim
- Depiction of the woman as an agent capable of resisting or eluding patriarchal control

When we examine Margaret Atwood's novels we find that Atwood's women have been created in a very different way. She successfully maintains attention between the representation of a woman as a subject and a victim. And we also find in this novel in the edible woman the character Marian transforming herself from being a victim to being a subject she also assumes agency towards the end of the novel.

And the depiction of the woman as an agent capable of resisting or eluding patriarchal control is the transition that Atwood's women undergo in course in the course of the novel and as mentioned before in the first part of the novel though it begins in a very traditional way with stereotypical depiction of relationships and about gender roles.

Towards the end we find the same tool being used as to subvert and to reverse the roles which are being performed. And if we particularly look at the character in the edible woman Marian MacAlpin, she resists male control and definition and this is a transformation that the novel successfully portrays through her relationship with Peter and also in terms of her changing nature of attitude towards a food.

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Marian MacAlpin

- resists male control and definition
- Parodies the male fantasy of woman as an edible commodity
- A character in search of the independent individuality in the patriarchal system

She also parodies a male fantasy of woman as an edible commodity and this parody in the particular in the section that I read out to you from the conclusion of the novel. It does not really entice the male character; on the contrary it only evokes feelings of horror and feelings of disbelief in him and Marian MacAlpin can be seen as a character in search of the independent individuality in the patriarchal system.

So here, by portraying a character who is initially fitting well within the patriarchal structure Atwood is successfully using the same character to subvert and to totally twist the ideals of the ideals of patriarchy.

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The slide features a blue background with a decorative header containing stylized white and orange shapes. The title 'Images and symbols' is centered in a white rounded rectangle. Below the title, two bullet points are listed in white text. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, square video inset showing a person with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark top, looking towards the camera.

Images and symbols

- The connection between consumption and patriarchal domination
- The symbolic elements of capitalism and materialism – through the images of food, eating, clothes and gatherings

And if you look at some of the images and symbols which are available throughout the novel; we find a very succinct connection between consumption and patriarchal domination. This also leads us to recall some of the discussions that we had in the context of feminism and the culture of consumption the contemporary and how both are engaged in a dialogue with each other.

The symbolic elements of capitalism and materialism can be seen throughout the novel through the images of food, eating, clothes and gatherings they also form a major kind of a critique against the American consumerist culture which was engulfing it from the 1960s onwards.

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Gender, body and food

- How regulations of gender norms inform one's action through the 'performativity' of gender
- The discussion of identity and self – mingled to the concept of body and gender
- Loss of self = loss of desire for food

Video inset of a woman speaking.

Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* can also be seen for the significance that it had got through gender, body and food. The novel tells us how regulations of gender norms inform one's action through the performativity of gender here we may also call the discussions on gender performativity that we had in the context and within the framework of postmodernism.

And discussion of identity and self we find this mingles to the concept of body and gender and here as a character Marian goes through different phases in her life we find that her loss of self is also equated with loss of desire for food. So here is a way in which gender, body and food are seen as different parts of the same kind of identity which is being constituted in within the character Marian MacAlpin.

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Marian's gender trouble

- Marian is a woman 'in process' of choosing her gender – this process is the recognition of self
- The novel begins with stereotyped female characteristics – then tries to reject sexual gender norms

Atwood at some level is also drawing her attention to Marian's gender trouble. And Marian is a woman in that sense who is in the process of becoming something. She is also undergoing the process of choosing her gender and this process can be seen as recognition of herself. The novel begins with a very stereotyped female characteristics and then it tries to reject the sexual gender norms and this is the point in which we identify Marian's gender trouble.

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Food and consumption

- Non-eating = powerlessness
- Non-eating = a protest against that powerlessness
- Rejection of an exploitative, predatory consumer culture



To further underscore the connection between food and consumption. We see that initially non-eating by the character Marian is equated with powerlessness, but gradually

this non-eating also assumes a very powerful state of protest against that powerlessness itself.

So, by not eating by developing an eating disorder, by rejecting certain kinds of consumption, the character Marian is also rejecting an exploitative predatory consumer culture. And towards the end when she tries to resolve this dilemma we also find her consuming her own image and also offering that in a platter; in a rather ceremonious way to the male figure; who has always been getting a lot of pleasure in the act of consumption. And this parody itself questions it subverts many ideas related to food, consumption and also gender.

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The metaphor of the body comes across as being very powerful in the novel and we find that the gradual loss of appetite is also linked to the denial of the self.

So the consumption of the food and the identity of the self is also connected in connected to each other in particular ways. And the abomination to food is also been seen as a psychological disenchantment that the protagonist Marian develops. The novel in that sense exposes and subverts the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women within certain kinds of western patriarchal consumerist societies.

Having taken a look at how the edible woman talks about a feminism and postmodernism through the story of Marian MacAlpin; we also need to take a look at one

of the later novels written by Atwood herself which is titled a Handmaids Tale. So, as soon when we begin to wrap up today's discussion, I also leave you in anticipation of discussion of Atwood's novel in the next session; which is titled a Handmaids Tale. I also encourage you to read through these novels as they would also enhance your understanding of feminism and postmodernism and how they could be applied within particularly critical frameworks.

So with this we wind up the discussion for today and I look forward to see you in the next session.