

“NEATLY SEVERING THE BODY FROM THE HEAD:”  
FEMALE ABJECTION IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S  
*THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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**Abstract**

In Margaret Atwood’s fiction and poetry, wounded female bodies are a frequently used metaphor for the central characters’ severe identity crises. Atwood’s female protagonists or lyric personae fight marginalization and victimization and often struggle to position themselves in patriarchal society. In order to maintain the illusion of a stable identity, the characters often disavow parts of themselves and surrender to a subversive memory that plays all sorts of tricks on them. However, these “abject” aspects (J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*) cannot be repressed and keep returning, threatening the women’s only seemingly unified selves: In *Surfacing*, for example, the protagonist suffers from emotional numbness after an abortion. In *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist’s crisis results in severe eating disorders and in *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride* the central characters’ conflicts are externalized and projected onto haunting ghost-like trickster figures.

In this paper, I will look at various representations of “wounded bodies and wounded minds” in samples of Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, focusing on the intersection of memory and identity and analyzing the strategies for healing that Margaret Atwood offers.

**Keywords:** *Canadian literature, female identity, abjection, healing strategies, symbolic cannibalism.*

**Introduction**

“Neatly severing the body from the head” – this paper’s title, a quote from Margaret Atwood’s first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), is only one of many passages from the Canadian author’s extensive work that would have offered themselves as paper titles for a conference on the topic “Wounded Bodies,

Wounded Minds, Intersections of Memory and Identity.” In fact, the conference title would lend itself very well as a synopsis of Atwood’s novels.

All of Margaret Atwood’s novels are novels of individuation.<sup>1</sup> Although they were written over a period of roughly thirty years and differ considerably in style and tone, the central theme remained the same: The narratives deal with the formation of a female identity. Atwood’s female protagonists are often split between two domains: the expectations of the hegemonic patriarchal society – which would demand their adherence to a traditional feminine, passive role, or self-realization – which would require the overthrowing of stereotypical concepts. However, the binary oppositions the characters are torn between are not equally strong. On the contrary, as Jacques Derrida observed, one is usually dominant, and includes the other in its field of operations. (Hall 235) This insight is vital for the female characters in Atwood’s novels. During their exhausting search for a female subjectivity the protagonists’ inner conflicts manifest themselves in severe identity crises. These conflicts constitute a central theme that can be found in many of Margaret Atwood’s narratives.

This article looks at the manifestations of personal and political “colonialization” in *The Edible Woman* and analyzes the protagonist’s struggles to come to terms with her (self-imposed?) role as a victim. The complex subject matter of identity formation can certainly not be treated without also considering the closely related phenomenon of language. Many of Atwood’s novels contain numerous passages referring to language – which points at the interconnectedness of language and subjectivity and supports the postmodern feminist notion that language shapes the unconscious and is a medium through which the symbolic order is internalized. (Özdemir 58)

In the book that is subject to analysis in this article, the entry of the main character into the “symbolic” – as opposed to the “semiotic” (Kristeva, *Revolution*) – is especially significant. This article attempts an analysis of Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* on the basis of Julia Kristeva’s theory of “abjection.” (Kristeva, *Powers*) Just like Atwood, Kristeva is concerned with marginality both in terms of femininity and nationhood, the latter constituting an aspect of major importance in her work<sup>2</sup>, albeit not in *The Edible Woman*. The

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<sup>1</sup> See Ulla Kriebernegg, “Female Identity Threatened: A Kristevan Reading of Margaret Atwood’s Novels *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *The Robber Bride*.” *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives. Culture et Idéologie: Perspectives Canadiennes*. Ed. Jelena Novakovic and Biljana Dojcinovic–Nesic. University of Belgrade, 2009. 223 – 236.

<sup>2</sup> The topic of nationhood is particularly significant in Atwood’s *Surfacing*, *Survival*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*, but also in lesser known works such as the *Kanadian Kultchure Komix* that Atwood published under the pseudonym Bart Gerrard in *THIS Magazine* in the 1970s.

phenomenon of abjection, however, is central to many of her novels. It has been developed by Julia Kristeva in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982) and links language to the development of identity, providing a powerful lens through which Atwood's novels, and especially *The Edible Woman*, can be read.

In *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist Marian MacAlpin realizes that none of the female role models available are desirable for her. She fights for self-determination and her own self-created version of a female identity. As the title of Atwood's first novel suggests, eating is one of the major themes in the book. Atwood deals with it on two levels: consuming in the literal sense, and devouring in the figurative sense. The pivotal metaphor is that of a cake in the shape of a woman. In the introduction, Atwood states, "I'd thought it up while gazing, as I recall, at a confectioner's display window full of marzipan pigs. It may have been a Woolworth window full of Mickey Mouse cakes, but in any case, I'd been speculating for some time about symbolic cannibalism." (EW 7) This symbolic cannibalism plays a pivotal role in the novel, and it turns out to be a healing experience for the victimized protagonist in the end. Throughout the book, Marian MacAlpin allows herself to be absorbed, that is to be possessed and assimilated by the patriarchal value system. On realizing the danger of being completely consumed, Marian struggles to free herself from social constraints. This struggle, however, is not without problems, because it involves unpleasant implications the most obvious of which develops into a severe eating disorder that can only be overcome after Marian manages to empower herself and thus end her victimization through projecting her crisis onto a cake woman that gets eaten in the end – the symbolic cannibalism Atwood talks about in the introduction to the novel.

The novel consists of three parts. In part one, the reasons for the narrator's problems are revealed and her crisis is hinted at; in part two, the crisis reaches its peak and finally leads to a climax, and in part three, which consists only of a very short chapter, the protagonist starts to hatch plans for a new beginning. This article's structure corresponds to this development.

### **"The Problem That Has No Name"**

The personality of Atwood's narrator in *The Edible Woman* develops along similar lines as the women's trajectories described in Betty Friedan's feminist classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It reflects American suburban women's struggle against traditional male dominance on a domestic level. In the introductory chapter "The Problem that Has No Name" Friedan describes the pervasive unhappiness of women in the 1950s and 1960s who adhere to

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For a detailed analysis of these comics, see Reingard Nischik. *Engendering Genre. The Works of Margaret Atwood*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2009.

traditional and idealized role models (married with children) and feel frustrated despite financial security. Friedan's work was influential for Atwood, and it parallels her own concerns. Also, it was highly political in its day insofar as it compared private experiences to power structures on a public and social level and encouraged women to reflect their own position in society, contributing to what became the feminist slogan "the personal is political" that was coined in the 1970s. Both these slogans provide synopses of Atwood's texts and seem to be foreshadowed already in her early books.

Marian McAlpin, the novel's central character, is a woman in her early twenties just out of university and living in Toronto in the 1960s. Together with Ainsley Twence, another young woman, she shares a rented apartment. Marian is portrayed as an average young woman, who does not seem to have any difficulties in coming to terms with her life. She works at Seymour Surveys, a market research company and spends her evenings with her boyfriend Peter Wollander, an ambitious young lawyer with a passionate interest in cameras and guns. He has very clear ideas of what his future wife should be like, and Marian tries to live up to his expectations. She accepts the circumstances of her "normal" life in a male-dominated society and hardly questions the values and roles Peter has planned for them. While trying to imagine her future, Marian suddenly nearly panics. She realizes that she is totally other-directed and dependent, fitting in a pre-fabricated mold: "Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, pre-formed." (EW 21)

She considers some of the possible future scenarios that are embodied in the other female characters in the book, such as her flatmate Ainsley, who is quite unconventional and chooses single parenthood as her way of living – an idea Marian does not approve of. Clara, Marian's friend from college, represents another option: like sixty percent of American women in the 1960s, Clara married before finishing her degree (Friedan 16) and spends her days in an untidy house completely exhausted by her children and her third pregnancy. The most unattractive option is epitomized by her female colleagues Emmy, Lucy, and Millie, the "three office virgins", as Peter calls them. (EW 232) Suddenly sensitive to her own existence, Marian begins to observe the other women closely and is disgusted:

She examined the women's bodies with interest, critically, as though she had never seen them before.[...] What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage... . (EW 167)

She is horrified that she is seen as belonging to these women (they are her colleagues) and that the same processes are going on inside her own body – a realization that causes her nausea. Marian feels “suffocated by this thick Sargasso sea of femininity” (EW 167) and cannot help associating femininity with fluidity and unstable, permeable body boundaries, and associating them with excrement, defilement and waste. According to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Marian is unable to draw a clear line between her own body and the “unproper/unclean” substances that one must exclude and keep at bay in order to define oneself as subject. (Gross 87) She cannot establish this clear border because her identity as a separate subject does not exist. She is horrified because she perceives herself as dirty, as excrement or refuse. Kristeva defines this as

Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (*Powers* 4)

Marian’s lack of centered self and her other-directedness is a result of her inability to delimit herself from others. In other words, the permeability of her ego-boundaries does not allow her to differentiate between *I* and *other* – subject and object. This differentiation, however, is a precondition for identity development and subjectivity, a lack of which causes abjection. Kristeva explains this inability to distinguish between subject and object on the basis of the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. She argues that a child first experiences abjection at the point of separation from the mother. The child has to break away from the symbiotic relationship in order to see her as *m/other*. It is about to take up a position in the symbolic order. Yet, as a precondition, a clear borderline between subject and object, self and other has to be established. Kristeva argues that the acquisition of identity in the symbolic order only becomes possible through the delimitation from what is considered ‘improper’ and ‘unclean’. As Elizabeth Gross maintains, Kristeva is

fascinated by the ways in which ‘proper’ sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its ‘clean and proper’ self. [...] The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability. (Gross 86)

At several points in the novel Marian feels a lack of clear borders. She is afraid that she is dissolving, “coming apart layer by layer like a piece of

cardboard on a gutter puddle.” (EW 218) Staring at one colleague’s bracelet, she imagines it as sort of a protective line and envies her colleague who seemed as if she was “drawing its hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other.” (EW 167)

When Marian announces her engagement to Peter, her colleagues envy her because she seems to have everything a woman her age could wish for: a successful, handsome boyfriend who will make it possible for Marian to take on her role as his wife and thus meet society’s requirements. Society in this case is embodied by Mrs. Bogue, Marian’s boss, who had “by the mere fact of this public announcement coming without warning or prior consultation, made it clear to Marian that she would be expecting to leave her job whether she wanted to or not.” (EW 168) The most threatening force, however, is Peter whose marriage proposal is one of the pivotal scenes in the novel:

“Marian.” I could feel his neck swallow. I couldn’t tell now whether it was his body or mine that was shuddering; he tightened his arms around me. “How do you think we’d be, married?”

I drew back from him.

A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light, I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes. (EW 83)

Marian – again unable to recognize her own boundaries – can see her image in Peter’s eyes, but not as a reflection like in a mirror, but distorted and reduced in size. She does not comment further on this incident nor does she reveal what she herself replied to Peter’s proposal. As a reader one is not surprised in the next section to learn that she has accepted it.

### **The Crisis in Marian’s Identity**

The effects of accepting Peter’s proposal are no less surprising, given the context of the novel. The first sign of her gradual inability to eat occurs when she makes breakfast the next day: “I was wondering whether I could face an egg.” (EW 83) From this moment on her extreme food loathing starts, and Marian’s body and mind virtually separate. This is also underlined on a textual level by the shift of narrative perspective from the first to the third person. William Keith observes that “Atwood has not switched from Marian’s viewpoint to that of a detached narrator; rather, Marian has resolved to view her own actions from an external perspective.” (Keith 43) This could be interpreted as a sign of loss of her independent self, her increasing passivity. The third person allows her to objectify, it creates a distance that makes it possible for her to free herself: “She had caught herself lately watching herself with an abstracted curiosity, to see what she would do.” (EW 173) Annette Kolodny interprets this shift as follows:

With part two of *The Edible Woman*, Marian moves out of the first-person and into a third person narration. It is at once a reminder of just how out of touch with herself she has become, and, simultaneously, a linguistic notation that the movement from an 'I' to a 'her' perspective makes two separate people of the observer and the observed. As Marian takes on the standard female role of an object in the story, so, too, the narrative grammatically 'objectifies' her in and through the third person. It is a split which follows logically upon her own earlier sense of disjunction and adumbrates, through the narrative structure, the character's own grammatically 'reflexive' habit of self-perception. (Kolodny 42)

Marian sees herself as an object rather than as an active subject. At the same time, her eating disorders reach a peak; her body simply refuses certain foods and tolerates less and less variety each day until she cannot eat anything anymore:

Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind certainly, rejected anything. (EW 152). [...] This refusal of her mouth to eat was malignant. (EW 153). She was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed and tempted it, but it was adamant. And if she used force, it rebelled. [...] From then on she had resolved to humor it. She had done everything it wanted, and had even bought it vitamin pills [...], it simply refused to eat anything that had once been or... might still be living. She faced each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind. (EW 178)

Finally, Marian's body revolts: "Her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside." (EW 257) Here, the division becomes obvious. Body and mind have separated, and Marian can no longer perceive herself as a single entity. Her refusal to eat grows out of the feeling that she herself is being consumed. In psycho-feminist theory, food loathing also plays an important role in connection with identity development, as Kristeva observes:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.[...] Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. [...] it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my

own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. (*Powers* 3)

For Marian, it is *eating, consuming* a process that she is aware of, that threatens her identity, system and order. Kristeva uses the example of milk’s skin to describe this phenomenon. The skin, she argues, represents the subject’s own skin, the borderline between itself and the outer world. In the words of Elizabeth Gross, abjection is “the body’s acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections – effects of desire – not nature.” (Gross 90)

Marian subconsciously rejects these superimposed projections. This rejection is carried out by her body. Coral Ann Howells sees this as a political statement: “In this early feminist text the personal is fused with the political as Marian’s body speaks its language of rebellion against the socialized feminine identity that she appears to have already accepted.” (Howells 47) Abjection takes hold of Marian during her fight for individuality and independence. Eating becomes impossible during her struggle for self-determination. By refusing food, she violently delimits herself and thrusts aside everything that endangers her unified sense of self. The peak of Marian’s crisis, however, is reached at her engagement party. She is hardly able to recognize herself in a mirror, another of Atwood’s favorite and recurring images. The more objectified she becomes, the more distorted is her reflection in the bathtub water, symbolizing her narcissistic crisis: “It was a moment before she recognized, in the bulging and distorted forms, her own waterlogged body.” (EW 219) It seems significant that, during her identity crisis, Marian is never fully able to see herself in the mirror as a single and non-distorted entity. When Marian and Peter have dinner in a restaurant, for example, she “gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of her spoon: herself upside down, with a torso narrowing to a pinhead at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled, then receded” (EW 146). During a narcissistic crisis at the engagement party, her ego boundaries have turned completely permeable and Marian feels as if she were disintegrating: “She was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer [...]” (EW 219)

When at the engagement party Peter tries to take a picture of her, to literally capture her with his lens, she flees from Peter: “That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead center: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands.” (EW 246) Equating Peter’s camera with his gun, or – seen from a feminist perspective, threatened by his male gaze that objectifies her – she panics again and secretly leaves her engagement party. Her flight takes her to a laundromat where she again meets Duncan, a young man who attracts her enormously as he is Peter’s complete opposite and, as Eleonora Rao argues, a

“projection of Marian’s alter ego.” (Rao 50) Duncan, embodying chaos and anti-bourgeois values, serves as a catalyst for Marian’s epiphany. In the words of William Keith, “Duncan’s function in the novel gradually emerges as the voice of Marian’s instincts and intelligence, as kind of spirit guide from a ghostly underworld who can dispense a paradoxical wisdom” (Keith 41). The pivotal scene is their unsuccessful attempt to make love, which is experienced by her as “an attempt to unite with death itself, a union which annihilates meaning and reveals the absurdity not only of death but also of life.” (McLay 136) Marian “was tense with impatience and with another emotion that she recognized as the cold energy of terror. [...] The knowledge was an icy desolation worse than fear. No effort of will could be worth anything here.” (EW 254) Duncan tries again: “He put his arm around her. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you have to unbend. Assuming the foetal position won’t be of any help at all.’” (EW 254). This allusion to birth and the regression to a pre-verbal stage symbolize a new beginning that is to follow short afterwards: When a few hours later Duncan and Marian go for a walk in a Toronto ravine, the maze-like setting symbolizing an underworld the immersion into which Marian is finally able to break free of her past. On a symbolic level this could be seen as a journey to the underworld. In an interview, Margaret Atwood remarks, “the maze I use is a descent into the underworld. There’s a passage in Virgil’s *Aeneid* which I found very useful, where Aeneas goes to the underworld to learn about his future. He’s guided by the Sybil and he learns what he has to from his dead father, and then he returns home.” (Sandler 16)

Similar to Aeneas, Marian, accompanied by Duncan, goes down to a symbolic underworld, a place that Duncan describes as “so close to absolute zero. It makes me feel human.” (EW 263) This return to the beginning frees Marian, and she seems to learn what she has to from Duncan, her alter-ego. After a few minutes, she suddenly gains new energy and decides to go home and talk to Peter. “‘We’re escaping! Come on!’ Under her arm a seam split. She had a vision of the red dress disintegrating in mid-air, falling in little scraps behind her in the snow, like feathers.” (EW 260) Having cast off the tight red dress that she had worn to please Peter at her engagement party, another symbol of Marian’s victimization, she feels free and is suddenly able to find her own way in the maze. Marian is not dependent on her guide Duncan anymore and literally knows a way out: “Now she knew where she was.” (EW 265) This indicates her steps towards re-orientation and self-determination.

### **A New Life Plan For Marian**

Coming back to her apartment, she feels that something is about to happen. She receives a phone-call from Peter, who is very angry. For the first time it is he who loses control. The roles have suddenly changed, and Marian feels stronger than ever: “She was conscious of her own craftiness. Though she hadn’t made

any decisions she could feel she was about to make one and she needed time.” (EW 266) To make Peter understand what had been going on inside herself during the last couple of months, Marian decides not to communicate her feelings through language. To avoid a verbal argument with her lawyer-friend who would be rhetorically superior she does something much more subversive: “What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn’t want to get tangled up in a discussion.” (EW 267) She bakes a cake in the shape of a woman – an edible, consumable, woman. She designs it as her double, but Peter, when presented with it, cannot understand the symbolism, is shocked, and leaves immediately without even touching the cake. After a long period of food loathing, Marian suddenly feels very hungry and eats the cake, which can be seen as an attempt to incorporate the aspects of femininity that she had been rejecting. She cuts it apart, “neatly severing the body from the head.” (EW 273) No longer identifying with the consumable victim, she can now project her inner conflict to this “other woman” and is able to end her eating disorder. The regaining of the protagonist’s individuality is expressed also on a grammatical level: The narration shifts back to the first person singular. The ‘I’ can be resumed: “I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again,” (EW 278) Marian observes. When at the end Duncan comes to visit and enjoys the rest of the cake, he welcomes Marian back to reality: “[Y]ou’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer,” (EW 281) he states. Marian is still wondering how to proceed. Regarding the novel’s ending which has been much discussed, it has to be considered that it was written in a decade when the women’s movement had only just started. It is often argued that *The Edible Woman* lacks closure, but if one chooses to draw parallels between Marian’s finally unified self and the ending of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963), where “A New Life Plan for Women” (463) is drafted, a little bit of optimism may be justified:

Then the split in the image will be healed. ... They will not need the regard of boy or man to feel alive. And when women do not need to live through their husbands and children, men will not fear the love and strength of women, nor need another’s weakness to prove their own masculinity. They can finally see each other as they are. And this may be the next step in human evolution. Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? (Friedan 377)

## Conclusion

Similar to other novels by Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* deals with personal and political colonialization and the post-modern notion that identity is something fluid, undeterminable. Especially in the age of globalization, it becomes increasingly difficult to come to terms with the complexity and multiplicity of sources that shape identity. In Zygmunt Bauman’s terms,

“identity seekers invariably face the daunting task of ‘squaring the circle’” (Bauman 10). It is true that this unsettling perception has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century become widely accepted as an aspect of the human condition. Margaret Atwood’s protagonists strive to reach self-determination within what Baumann calls “liquid modernity.” (Tolan 12)

Employing a post-modernist aesthetics, Margaret Atwood’s novels include borderline experiences that involve the protagonists’ dealing with the powers of the unconscious and abjection. The terrifying encounters with her split-off parts, and the food loathing the protagonist in *The Edible Woman* needs to cope with requires a dissolution of her seemingly stable self, a questioning of the symbolic order, and an immersion into a pre-verbal stage (in Kristeva’s term, the semiotic). The acceptance of the semiotic, often expressed on a metaphoric level by Atwood’s frequent use of imagery related to the underworld, to water and mirrors, evokes epiphanies that enable her character to resume control over her life. In order to come to terms with their female identities, all of Atwood’s female protagonists have to acknowledge that they have to confront oppression and the mechanisms at work that victimize them. As Atwood writes in *Survival*, they need to strive at “Position Four: To be a creative non-victim” (*Survival* 38). Even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the theme of survival and the search for female identity are still central problems which are expressed in Atwood’s more recent novels such as *Oryx and Crake* (2003) or *The Year Of The Flood* (2009).

Although at the end of the novel Marian is able to “internalize and assimilate the other within herself,” (Tolan 34) the ending is still open. Atwood herself stated that “the tone of *The Edible Woman* is light-hearted, but in the end, ... it is a circle.” She continues to argue that the heroine ends where she began (Davidson 124, qtd. in Tolan 34). Here, Atwood contradicts many of her readers who see the protagonist’s self-discovery in a more positive light. In the end, however, the lack of definite closure which is also a common feature in her other novels encourages active involvement and participation on the reader’s part in the process of ascribing meaning to the texts. This active participation may also lead to self-discovery and emancipation, thus facilitating “creative non-victimhood.”

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