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The Objectification of Female Body in Margaret Atwood's "Spring Song Of The Frogs" (1986)

The female body is one of the important motifs in Margaret Atwood's fiction and she uses it in multiple dimensions according to the themes she deals with. "Spring Song of The Frogs,"¹⁸ from the collection *Bluebeard's Egg*, is one such story in which this motif recurrently appears. The purpose of this study is to explore the contention that female protagonists in this story, in an attempt to abrogate patriarchal roles, are in fact allowing patriarchy to encroach upon their female space by controlling their bodies. Thus, the lure of empowerment leads them to another kind of slavery that has reduced their "human individuality and human morality" to "article of trade and the material in which money exists" (Marx, *The Paris Manuscripts*).

The emphasis upon having a specific slim and trim figure is harped by the whole printed and electronic media. They have created hype about weight and to be obese has become synonymous with ugliness. Robyn and Cynthia have to say no to food; otherwise they would lose the space in society which they can enjoy due to their slimness. For Robyn, the word "bread" is an alien word and she "shudders" when Will mentions it "as if the thought of it is slightly repulsive" (168). This "mass deception" by the media has forced women like Robyn to stultify the growth of the individual self that lies beneath the veneer of a beautiful and desirous body (ant). She becomes all the more responsible for adopting that *persona* that she is aware of the shadow that lurks beneath. All she can do is to give it a "deep look, brief but sincere." (166) However, this "looking picturesque and mythical" attracts men like Will and "works" so that she can sustain herself. She is singing the "irresistible" Siren Song through her body, but at the same time, she is weary of that "boring song" (twoed, "Siren Song"). Robyn's awareness of her inner self makes her position all the more pathetic that she has lost herself in the confusion between body and mind. She has now to separate herself from her body in order to survive.

The reduction of the human self to a commodity by women themselves not only encourages men to sustain their life-long notions about women as bodies and objects, but preserves themselves as superior minds and vital

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, "Spring Song Of The Frogs", *Bluebeard's Eggs and Other Short Stories*, (Surrey: Vintage, 1986).

beings. With men in general and with Will in particular, a woman exists only in her physical abstract reality. She is a “thing” (Atwood, “This Is A Photograph of Me”) and even perhaps that Keatsian “thing of beauty” that has to be “a joy forever” (Keates 50). Will’s knowledge and understanding of women have been informed by popular magazines like *Playboy*. He represents the modern and enlightened man who, according to J. C. Young, is the “undressed West, which demands that women uncover themselves whether they want it or not” (Young 83). As a result, David, in *Surfacing*, forces Anna to undress and dive into the water while, at that moment, she is just a “naked” body. For him, there is nothing “humiliating about [showing her] body” (Atwood 2006: 128).

The objectification of the body by Robyn and Diane themselves is accomplished so that they can be desirable to men, thus confusing their “sexuality” with their “being sexy”. As Molly Hite argues, “desire is not the same as being desirable” (Hite 120). But at the same time, their refusal to provide Will with sexual pleasure, if it announces their freeing from the old roles of women as objects of sexual satisfaction, simultaneously leaves them with unnatural or marginal choices such as lesbianism. Thus, the whole effort of conforming their bodies to the mould prescribed becomes futile as it does not offer any further spiritual bonding. (165) Rather, it gives the impression of a useless exercise that has no rationality in it, which Will fails to understand as a protest against patriarchy.

Women have not only allowed “the beauty industry” to encroach upon their bodies by seeking obsessively the help of beauty saloons but have above all alienated themselves from their own bodies. (Huxley 47-53). Their bodies have become objects for experimentation in the hands of others. Cynthia can change her original hair colour from dark to “nearly blond” (168) and she does not feel badly about it because it has become a routine matter. Marian, in *Edible Woman*, was sensitive enough to acknowledge her disgust about her experience of the beauty saloons and she realized that “her whole body felt curiously paralyzed.” Atwood, very sensitively, captures her uncanny feeling:

Marian had closed her eyes, leaning back against the operating-table, while her scalp was soaped and scraped and rinsed. She thought it would be a good idea if they would give unaesthetic to the patients, just put them to sleep while all these necessary physical details were taken care of; she didn’t enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object. (Atwood 2004a: 209)

The emphasis upon an outer polished self is being coined as “building self-esteem.” However, it is making girls like Cynthia, in Melissa Janssen words, “undermine the potential for women.” Because, as she says, “if you are spending too much time on weight and looks [...] you are not focussing time on expanding your mind, spirit or the rest of your life” (Kienzle). Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott similarly argue that “meaningfulness requires that bodies are not separated off from those who inhabit them”(Jackson & Scott).

According to Young “the negotiation between different identities [...] by assimilating the dominant culture” never makes the subaltern become “white” (Young 23). In the same vein, women inspired by the second wave of feminists have in fact tried to become like men by adopting their ways. They are “subject to the painfulness of what Fanon recognises as a hybridized split existence, trying to live as two different, incompatible people as one” (*ibid.*). Women like the waitress can lose their “flesh” and transform themselves from “plump women” to “muscle and bone [...] as if they are made of solid gristle”(167), as the waitress in the story has done. Her “red brush haircut” and “tuxedo pants” made Will to consider her as a man (166). But she could not get rid of “two slight bumps visible on her ribcage” and Will “decides that she really is a woman after all” (167). Briefly, he confuses the waitress’s identity and considers her as a man like himself. A man is a human being who could be treated as an equal and respected. But a woman who has become a product of fashion and beauty industry has lost her identity as a woman and “stands as though her head is fixed on a hook and the rest of her body is drooping down from it, with no tendons”(166).

Even Diane has lost her identity and individuality by becoming “spindly” and has “diminished” as a former “well-fleshed” and “hefty woman” (175). She wants to be treated as a man because she is economically empowered and wants Will to “cheer [her] up” when she says: “Now it’s your turn”(175). But what she overlooks is her right to be respected as a woman. She has “betrayed” herself by losing the opportunity of being herself with Will, because in spite of his callousness, he relevantly didn’t want her to feel responsible for the breaking up of his marriage. She thought that it was because of her fat body that he did not like her much and that this brought their relationship to an end. Her new look has made her “secretive” and Will could no longer access to the old Diane who teased him and “pull[ed] him short.” As C. S. Lewis put it : “If the beauty or look is attained then what? How am I loved? How to be loved or people in love believe they should be loved. They don’t love but want to be loved” (Lewis 181). Diane and Cynthia want to be loved and admired for the look they have attained, but what about men like

Will who are not sensitive enough to understand their new demands and have their own rigid notions about women? This is perhaps how women have become acceptable women, the way Marian in *Edible Woman* “imagines her colleagues: “They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay” (Atwood 2004a: 218).

If the consciousness about figure and weight has reduced women to the level of inanimate objects who could be fitted into any size and shaped like “porcelain jars,” then it poses serious questions as to their health as well (Huxley 50). Cynthia’s insistence upon not eating led her to hospital as she has reduced herself to “the size of a straw,” forgetting her real self (Atwood, “Torture”). While she enjoyed the unity of her body and her mind, she could stand up to her cousins when they “tease[d] and provoke[d] her” by telling herself that “there was nothing they could do she couldn’t do.”(169) But the “beauty industry” talked to her before her mother or anyone else could, and now her mother had to send Will to her as Cynthia has “cut [them] off.” (169) The phase that began with “painting her nails” is now leading her to “digest herself” because “her heart is a muscle and if it isn’t fed it will atrophy.”(171) She may exercise her right to refuse the patriarchal roles thrust upon her by her parents and family, but at the same time, she is reducing her space of action by reducing her body. By denying the “needs” her body demands she has made possible the inanimate objectification of her body and is now reduced from “someone to a sexual object,” the way Joan in *Lady Oracle* felt when she lost her weight (Atwood 2004b 59). Susie Orbach explains in *Fat Is A Feminist Issue and Its Sequel*, that “[the] fat has the function of making the space for which women crave [...]. We want to be bigger than society will let us. We want to take up as much space as the other sex” (Orbach 27). Cynthia lacks this mature realisation of Joan and Susie Orbach, perhaps because she is “barely eighteen.”(172) What she does is “only dissolving herself, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (Atwood 2004a: 218).

The responsibility of procreation and the nurturing of humanity should grant women respect and establish them as the active doers and creators in society. However, woman’s natural reproductive capability is the predominant reason why she is designated as a mere body, a “handmaid” who is a “womb on two legs” (Atwood 2005: 68). Robyn, Cynthia and Diane by denying themselves the right to procreate have not only become “docile” (78) bodies but also parallel themselves with men such as the unnamed lover

and David in *Surfacing*, who insist upon “abortion” and “pills.” Moreover, the “enemy” who has “tied” a woman’s “thighs [...] so she could not give birth” is none other than the woman herself misguided by hardliner feminists” (Atwood, “Spelling”). Atwood alienates herself from such feminists,¹⁹ by saying: “if practical, hard-line, anti-male feminists took over and became the government, I would resist them. Why? Because they could start castrating men, throwing them in the ocean, doing things I don’t approve of” (Messe 183). As far as women are concerned, Atwood propagates Sartre’s idea of responsible freedom, inciting them to exercise their liberty and freedom by realizing the importance of their role as women (Sartre 87). Society needs men and women like a “barometer couple” in Paul’s porch, supporting and sustaining each other rather than being arch rivals (Atwood 2006: 18). What she suggests is that women have to redefine themselves according to their specific individual talents and that they have to bring in a change by actively engaging themselves through writing as she has done herself. Relevantly, she says in an interview with Katharine Viner, that “she gets a large mail from British men, who write to say they wish they had read her books before their divorces—it might have saved their marriages” (Viner, *The Guardian*, 16 Sept. 2000).

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¹⁹ C.P. Gilman in *Herland* (1969), presents a country inhabited by women only.

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