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Discourses of Power Through Oral Consumption in Margaret Atwood's Select Novels

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Abstract

In several works by Margaret Atwood, food is a metaphor for power. The powerful ones eat and the weak counterparts do not. Power is latent under the acts of consumption in daily life basic survival acts. The paper discusses aspects mentioned about food in Atwood's novels, notably feminist ideas of eating disorders that invite intriguing significations regarding the food motif. The analysis of the politics of eating in her works within the framework of Foucauldian discourse overlapping with Gramscian hegemonic economy, offers a fresh perspective on women's subverted position attributed to food.

Keywords: Atwood, Consumption, Feminism, Oral, Power

The postmodernist term, discourse explained by Michael Foucault with its reference to the use of language, injects meaningful political impositions on the society that has maintained power relations across history. The paper exemplifies how the metaphoric incorporation of the same qualifies as the epistemic reality to perpetuate control as well as hegemonic hierarchy across genders, precisely regarding significations that arise from episodes that incorporate oral consumption. This paper concentrates on the deconstructive uncovering of power politics in terms of the oppression of female characters. It identifies power as a force operating in the vertically oppressive behaviours that usually go unnoticed pertaining to their mundane nature.

Intellectuals and scholars such as Tobias Döring, et al. interpret this correlation between the daily survival needs and resistance to political thrusts, to be the bodies' natural ability to withstand cultural beliefs (Döring 16). Additionally, Michel de Certeau interprets the same connection as a means for common people for restoring their own entity among forces consuming their 'self' within the ideological, and sociocultural parameters of functioning in the society. de Certeau contends that withholding food should be seen as a consumer strategy against the demands of economic and political forces (de Certeau 21). Academics in the field of food science frequently contend that bodies and the food that maintains them can indeed not be wholly restrained by the demands of cultural context and also that there is going to be a fraction of the body that will perpetually fight back cultural assimilation. In fact, J.M. Coetzee provides the following observation: "On a pre-cultural level, the level of the body itself, ...resists the forces of assimilation" (Coetzee 291). The source material, not the culture, is what matters most to Coetzee. Neither the materialism nor the culturalist perspective can adequately account for the dynamics of eating and hunger; this concept of Michel de Certeau has influenced the technique of numerous works on eating, diet, and foreign cuisines. Among other thinkers who advocate similar notions are Fine and Adapton. Conversely, de Certeau's culturalism has been criticised because of its identity politics and idealised depictions of its topics (Parasecoli 277). These theoretical understandings that exist in the realm of deriving political implications out of governed oral consumption in novels would be relevant to the following statements.

Margaret Atwood has an inevitable interest in food; her *The CanLit Foodbook* includes a selection of excerpts from poetry as well as prose precisely relating to food in Canadian Literature. This publication quintessentially points to the questions raised in a covert manner regarding the access, choice and rights to oral consumption in literature as a mirror to reality. Particularly indicating Atwood's concern for her female characters, this paper derives the inspiration to attempt a revelation of politics acting in a seemingly uneventful yet significant source of living or merely surviving from this quote–"but what did she have to eat?" (*CanLit*). Atwood, in her works, hints at relevant politics of eating and feminine appetite taboos. Additionally, John Berger expounds that images that appear in one's visualisations during the process of writing as well as reading texts are embodiments of politics. The presence of women along with their actions, precisely related to oral consumption, that is shown in Atwood's works are discourses that the following observations attempt to perceive in terms of power imposition as well as acceptance or resistance. Therefore, it is both interesting as well as intriguing to identify power subversions acting in an aspect as mundane

as eating, through the feminist lens from the point of view of power ingrained in the culture, as described by Foucault and Gramsci.

Atwood's novels deploy a seamless and effortless linguistic flow that infuses the reader's mindset into the environmental dynamics of the plot. Language and its signs, as per Foucault, transmit discourses that we have accepted for years, it becomes imperative to deconstruct and uncover the latent politics, deemed as normalised, pertaining to daily basic survival needs of human life that includes food as the foremost need. The following observations throw light on the covertly functioning hegemonies that need feminist resistance mentioned by Foucault to be an integral resistance to power functioning.

The concept of "relations of force" endorsed by Machiavelli holds relevance here. The vertical dominance on the psyche of women in the plots employs strength to an extent that those women hardly feel physically hungry for food. It curbs their hormonal transmission of the need for nutrition. This ultimately leads to the death of that need for power altogether in the sense that it is an implied loss in the fight of maintaining power and sovereignty over one's individual need for energy.

The narrator in *Surfacing* believes that her aborted kid's father controls her diet throughout pregnancy, symbolising her subjugation. Anna suppresses her hunger. She is "not permitted to consume food or defecate and has all the stereotyped feminine traits imposed by indoctrination" (159). The heron's death illustrates the power of feeding. Murdering someone is related to consuming and enslavement, suggesting that ingesting food is a powerful expression, "Food, slave or corpse, limited choices" (110). She stops eating manufactured food when she leaves civilization to become a "natural" lady. Patriarchal mindset pollutes society and food, both man-made and poisonous. The narrator eats solely raw and natural food and understands that she needs food just like she needs society when she runs out of it. She begins her hesitant reintroduction into society by eating at the cottage.

Marion in *The Edible Woman* stops eating as a way to protest when there is a realisation of the loss of self and sovereignty. Peter picks the menu at the food place, and hereby, Marion cannot obtain food. According to Duncan, it is a form of dissent by Marion. He says, "You're perhaps a contemporary kid fighting against the digestive system, which isn't conventional. Why not?" (192). Marion bakes Peter a woman-shaped cake after realising what was happening to her. After breaking up with Peter, she retains the lost confidence as well as the capacity to eat.

Life Before Man shows how food affects strength. Elizabeth craves control which is symbolised by eating. Power based on subjugating Chris and Nate is risky. Chris's suicide

shows that an unequal partnership is unhealthy. Elizabeth shows that control over others inevitably turns inward. Her power is fleeting. She loses control of Nate and Lesje's relationship, which she has been manipulating, and her marriage fails. Nate starts living in the same house along with Lesje and Elizabeth and talks about parting ways in marriage. Foodlessness defines helplessness for the latter. “There's nothing in the home for supper" is the novel's penultimate sentence (317).

Nate cooks since he's Elizabeth's subordinate. He even craves Chris, Elizabeth's boyfriend. "offer … some food, what?" Chris asks the former to get Elizabeth divorced and move in with him. (235). Nate dominates his women, but he is weak with Elizabeth. He orders Lesje lunch "the lowest menu item, a grilled cheese sandwich and milk. She chews slowly, hiding her teeth" (62). Nate devours his sandwich as Lesje feels self-conscious, "He nibbles onto a slice of turkey, chews; gravy crosses his chin" (64). The preference for flesh over Lesje's cheese implies his predatory character. He watches her tear apart a bread roll. Nate demands food payment as well. His finances mirror his subconscious eating power. Nate dominates Lesje's diet when he moves in:

> At least she's eating better since Nate moved in. Nate is making her eat better. He brought some cooking pots with him and he usually cooks dinner; then he supervises while she eats. (238)

Rotting food and its putrid decomposition reflect the unhealthiness of power-based relationships. The mealtime encounters in the novel demonstrate food's role in sexual politics. Rennie in *Bodily Harm* happens to be a helpless Atwoodian heroine. Jake rules via sadomasochistic sex. Food shows Jake's strength. He controls everything, even their diets. Rennie understands, "She would now choose her meals" (235).

Freud made reference to the tight link connecting food and sexuality in a number of his writings. On the other hand, Maud Ellmann demonstrates the notion that starving poses a threat to our material reality but celibacy does not; it implies that hunger is more innate than libido or that it is less infused with cultural value. When Freud claims that consuming is where sexuality originated, he stresses the point that both are not dissimilar in this way (Ellmann 36). According to Deborah Lupton, the association between both food and sex can be characterised by the fact that both are seen to constitute physical needs that are facilitated through cultural context; both are viewed as “animal instinct and substantiation of an absence of self-control. Lupton makes these points in her discussion of the connection between eating and sexuality. Each of these things is considered to be evil of the physical. The term "carnality," which originates from the Latin word for flesh, is what establishes the connection

among the body, sinful natures, and animal fat. In the act of consuming, hedonism and ecstasy are inextricably mixed together. (132) Doring, Heide, and Mühleisen argue that "there have been tangible indicators rejecting cultural appropriation fabrications: bodies that may enact alternative identity and culture in subversive … protocol. Food feeds these beings and preserves strength" (3). The link between food and reading is symbolic since both feed the individual. However, the link connecting food and sex is far more essential since it ensures the survivability of both the personal and the community.

Lady Oracle begins with Joan and her mother's food-related power struggle. Joan's mother controls her life and identity by denying her autonomy. She diets to shrink her daughter and exert her dominance. Joan eats to test her mother. She overeats to protest diets (69). Joan defeats the mother by eating. Joan loses weight mainly because Aunt Lou leaves her two thousand bucks. Money outperforms food. Joan, once tiny, is helpless due to her victim mindset. Food control mirrors her powerlessness. She struggles with cooking and shopping. Joan cooks and shops haphazardly. She conceals her writing in a "Recipes" folder. Joan constantly eats while trying to manage her life. "I sat at the white table with my hot cup, putting another white ring to the varnish, eating a box of rusks and attempting to manage my life"—she extracts empowerment from food (25).

Food is linked to political power in Rennie's Caribbean experiences, but domestic power in Toronto. On the island, power controls food, like Jake at home. Rennie says that she likes writing about living manners when Minnow asks her to write about the political situation there. The personal is political here, he says. "I simply do food," Rennie tells one of Minnow's pals when he asks about her profession. "What could be more important?" (190). Minnow's ham story proves that food is political.

> 'There's only people with power and people without power. Sometimes they change places, that's all!' 'Which are you?' says Rennie. 'I eat well, so I must have power,' says Paul grinning. (240-41)

The novel's guns underscore food's power. Canada provided a thousand units of nutritious flesh to the immigrated people in the islands, but it had been redirected to an Independence Day feast (29). Lora tells Rennie that a box from the airport has food and medication for her ailing grandmother, but it contains firearms. Since both signify strength, "food" may replace "gun." Paul's statement on food and power is the novel's most succinct aspect. This closeness is evident in jail when Rennie and Lora are starving. Rennie subconsciously links food to freedom. She fantasises about food and drools as she names them.

Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* denies women authority. Food enforces tyranny. The handmaids must eat what the authorities deem healthy and fertile. Sugar and caffeine are rationed. They dine alone with room service. Gilead controls the handmaids' bodies by managing their diets. The relationship of dynamics among aspects consisting of food as well as control is highlighted in the novel's episodes mentioning Red Centre, wherein all females happen to be groomed in order to properly propagate the assigned duties of being obedient handmaids. While eating, they're fed official propaganda. Eating involves biblical interpretation. Offred also suspects poisoned food. Offred also links food with liberation. She remembers eating anything she wanted pre-Gilead. Her unwillingness to accept what is supplied shows that she unconsciously recognises she is dominated by food. Her bodily objection to the meal represents her mindset as well as emotionally driven dissent towards her despotic dictatorship. She contemplates the Lord's Prayer "I don't need that. It doesn't matter. The challenge is swallowing without choking" (204). Offred seeks food's strength. She finds unusual oranges, which Rita wants while shopping.

> Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? …We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high-school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar. For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a disc, the voice was a man's. (99)

Food empowers Offred and symbolises revolt. Sugar symbolises possibility. Offred's butter symbolises food's subversion. She keeps her meal's butter and uses it as a moisturiser, which is illegal. Offred considers swallowing Serena Joy's cigarette. Offred understands she can use the cigarette to burn the home, therefore she wants to consume it to gain power. When Rita reluctantly gives Offred a cigarette match, she says, "Don't care whether you eat it, or what" (219). Offred's visions of Luke's message understand food's subversive power and food fantasies. In the Scrabble scene, Offred anticipates the Commander to be desirous of sex. "Forbidden," "hazardous," "indecent," and "something he can't do with his wife" make the game "attractive" (149). Offred desires Scrabble's power because she lacks control. Offred devouring the Scrabble letters symbolises women's powerlessness over words and food.

Maud Ellmann contends that "something more eschatological" could be "at stake in self-starvation" than that for a longing for leanness, the quest for ego, or political convenience, which are the kind of motivations that attempt to "describe the peculiarity of this practice of disengendering" (16).

Moreover, as Gilead is a theocratic regime, one can refer to what Lupton shows– there has been a significant historical connection involving spirituality and food routines. The Judeo-

Christian moral code is founded on the restraint and cleanliness reflected in ancient literature on food practices. Cutting out meat, sugary meals, and foods with intensified flavourings or seasonings are common asceticism behaviours believed to demonstrate one's capacity to resist the lures of the body, such as hunger and sensual urge (Lupton 132). Hunger acted as a realisation, a visual sensation that could not be reduced to hygienic and social advantages as well as a need strong enough to eradicate appetite and passion (Roy 104). Roy notes that the "loss of sperm via conception" equated to one day of cerebral effort or three days of manual labour. Sperm, however, may be transported to the mind and turned into Ojas, metaphysical or spiritual energy, if correctly managed (97).

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine taunts her buddy that she is a vampire and would drain her blood in a cemetery at night. Despite her incredulity, Cordelia is unsettled by the idea. The two females' power positions are forever changed.

> I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice. (193)

Speaking is like eating—powerful. Women have traditionally been silenced and their cravings stifled. In *Surfacing*, Joe's "teeth on my lips, silencing me" stops the narrator from telling him to stop raping her (141). Her voice is shaped by patriarchal women. When Joe proposes, her answer is trite and dishonest (81). Powerless, she is silent. To comfort herself, she says her name. "The English words sounded imported, strange," making verbal communication tougher (144). She views language as ineffective. She doesn't want to teach her baby words either. "For us it's vital, the mediation of words," the narrator says after returning to society (186). She regains language and speech when she stops being a victim.

Margaret Atwood's male-female relationships are vampire-like. Male characters feed off their female spouses like parasites. *Bodily Harm*'s invader drinks Ovaltine before leaving Rennie's bed. Ovaltine replaces her. Jake, Arthur, and Joe bite women's necks and grind their teeth during sex.

Repeated strangulation, "Again the choking sensation, paralysis of the neck" (13) is the protagonist's social anxiety in *Surfacing*. During the time of her leaving the social system and as she escapes towards the natural setting, she experiences fear in her throat (169).

Atwood's depiction of one's neck to be vulnerable to power threats is relevant in this context. The gothic element in the attire worn by Joan emphasises her heroine's neck. Redmond clasps Charlotte's neck multiple times, sometimes in passion, sometimes in wrath. As usual with Atwood, sex is violent and murder extremely seductive. *Bodily Harm'*s Jake and *Life Before*

*Man'*s William nearly murder Rennie and Lesje by blocking their partners' windpipes while making love, respectively. Nate also craves strangling Lesje. *Cat's Eye*'s ravine girl was strangled. Strangulation promotes the conceptual distinction between mind and body that underpins Western metaphysics and culture by preventing the life-giving passage between brain and body. Ironically, psychological strangling feels tangible.

All the female protagonists sense their emotions in their lips and stomachs. Food and sentiments are eaten here– in the mouth. When the narrator in *Surfacing* jumps into the water in order to search for the artwork and discovers the corpse of her father, her shock compels her to suddenly jump upright onto the top, "fear gushing out of my mouth in silver, panic closing my throat, the scream kept in and choking me" (136). Moreover, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* looks at Aunt Lydia at Salvagings with the statement, "hatred fills my mouth like spit" (286). Additionally, Joan comments, "I instantly felt ill to my stomach" as she looks at Marlene, one among the previous Brownie intimidators, in *Lady Oracle* (168). "Doomed, and my oatmeal porridge would twist itself into a ball and drop to the bottom of my stomach" as her mother tells her of terrible men in the ravine (53). Joan's mysterious first sexual experience occurred in her tummy (98). "She feels her wind go, as if someone had slammed her in the solar plexus, and grabs the midriff of her dressing gown" when Auntie Muriel unexpectedly comes to Elizabeth's residence when she's in bed with William in *Life Before Man* (215). Lesje also feels feelings in her tummy. She's frustrated by the delay caused by Nate as she leaves Elizabeth "His absence proves that. It's now a stone mass she bears in her tummy" (208). "Ofglen feels what I do, a pain like a stab, in the gut," Offred says in *The Handmaid's Tale* when she witnesses miscarriage burial (54). Janine's baby's gender surprises her "shredder," she feels "a sickness, in the pit of my stomach. Emptiness, not disease" (226). In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine ends up feeling nauseous each day in the morning waiting as her pals would give her a call. As Grace puts an accusation on Elaine for not doing her prayers at the church, her "stomach gets cold" (136).

Ainsley's story of the lady who attempts to kill one's own spouse through a scheme that includes short-circuiting of the husband's electronically functional tooth cleaning brush seems funny yet shows the power hidden in the existence of teeth. Several male characters emphasise dental hygiene. Joan denies getting her teeth uprooted in order to forge her passing away by spreading them in a lime vat, as Sam recommends. Rennie is obsessed with dental hygiene. At the time when the Commander wishes to pull Offred into a separate room at Jezebel's, she procrastinates in the toilet since she knows he wants sex; she feels like cleaning

her mouth. Many heroines worry about their teeth and mouths. Dentistry symbolisms are prevalent and constantly evoke dread and anguish.

Orality reinforces Atwood's politics of eating. Rosalind Coward demonstrated that women's mouths are vulnerable (Part II). Jake policies Rennie's lips in *Bodily Harm*: "Jake stated your mouth is filthy. Tongue-washing is required" (117). Rennie's recollection of getting scared by Mexican boys following her and sucking illustrates the strength of the masculine mouth vs the feminine mouth's exploitation. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's mom paints a wide mouth on top of her lipstick to show her longing for power and control over the diet taken by the daughter.

Atwood's symbolic representations show how the lips of women have usually been restricted and how the mouth may be powerful. Elaine's lips are normal before Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine and her sibling "practise burping at will, or we push our lips on the inside of our arms and blow to produce farting sounds, or we fill our mouths with water and see how far we can spit" (68). On the contrary, Cordelia bullies Elaine, causing mouth problems. Sickness shows her emotional pain. Her mouth expresses her weakness and resistance. Elaine has a "mean tongue" as power shifts between the girls.

Margaret Atwood highlights the power dynamics of eating and non-eating. Her writing is full of body-to-be-food imagery. Her deconstruction of the notion of woman being equivalent to food examines the repercussions of culturally sanctioned cannibalistic symbolism. The cinematic cannibal cult supports the metaphor. The novelist shows how symbolically cannibalism as a concept has taken up to be institutionalised and accepted as normal human behaviour. Cannibalism as the societal ethos reveals the terrible underbelly of a ghastly devouring connection between the genders that barely appears to be a civilised society. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s second epigraph, from Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is an indication of the satirical message conveyed in the latter.

Cannibalism maintains societal authority according to Peggy Reeves Sanday. It is about control. Subject-object polarities inspire the dominating behaviour of eating the social "other" (*Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System* 12). Her statements can be related to Simone de Beauvoir's stances, strengthening the connection between the sociological study of cannibalism by Sanday and the fiction produced by Atwood (*The Second Sex* 208). Atwood and Sanday agree that cannibalism is mostly about nongustatory signals to cultural order preservation, regeneration, and foundation.

Offred constantly portrays herself to be food, which shows how powerless she is. However, she additionally utilises the understanding of her body being equivalent to food in a schemingly. She knows that the Guardians are sexually frustrated, so she moves her back

with a purpose symbolic of "teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach." It gives her a feeling of being stronger than the people who impose dominance on her. "I like having power, even the power of a dog bone, which is weak but there" (32). Although Offred succumbs to the notion that she is food and the control that comes with it, she somehow manages to get around that dominance. What used to be a way to control and hurt people is now a way to gain strength without directly challenging the hierarchy. However, she does subvert it subtly by using its own tool of power against it as a way for her to stay alive. One can recall how Angela Carter propagandised her feminist resistance to seeing women as mere breeding machines that consume reproductive protein only to reproduce.

Margaret Atwood's heroines try to get away from the feeling of being a victim and protect some part of themselves by separating themselves psychically from their physical being. Marion does not know she is crying until she notices that her hand is wet. She moreover envisions that she would be going away and thinks that her physical existence is breaking down during the time she is bathing. In *Surfacing,* its main character thinks that she is merely fifty percent human; she also visualises that the remaining fifty percent fraction of her physicality is closed and concealed. As Elizabeth lies on the bed, she seems to float above her body. Rennie looks at herself as someone else would from the outside. "Offred pretends not to be there in "The Ceremony." She says, "One detaches oneself. One describes" (106). Elaine understands how to leave the body she thinks is hers by fainting. This backs up the claim by John Berger that females are generally trained to look at their own selves to be things to look at.

It is, therefore, both resistance functioning and normalised cultural economic exchange of reaction to power, as endorsed by Foucault and Gramsci respectively, that the aforementioned observations have uncovered. Atwood quietly encourages women to eat their way into power by showing how consumerism is linked to power. This Foucauldian postmodern inspection into deriving political subversion through food symbols, opens exploratory answers to how power truths have sustained even in the most basic human body survival need. Eating expresses the ineffable. Atwood exposes power's most subtle and subconscious mechanisms by penning down material related to the relation identified between women's being and food. Such articulation of women-subordinating ideologies as well as mythology imply that one must know that this should be resisted resiliently.

This deconstructive uncovering of political mechanisms that have been imbibed as Gramsci's "common sense" acceptances explored how deeply the hegemonic networks function in the most mundane survival needs of human life. Both Gramsci and Foucault have endorsed the

presence of power, either as localised events or omnipresent functions. Food episodes in the novels reflect these twin factors. Thus, this paper has showcased power sustenance across the obvious equitable needs of survival in humans, from a gendered point of view.

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