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Margaret Atwood

FEMINISM AND FICTION

FIONA TOLAN

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Margaret Atwood

Feminism and Fiction

Fiona Tolan

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INTRODUCTION

> "I live in the society; I also put the society inside my books so that you get a box within a box effect." [1]

Any undertaking to examine the nature of the relationship between fiction and theory is immediately problematic. So many of the most elementary aspects of the discussion are contentious. How can a novelist be said to relate to a particular theory to which they claim no allegiance? How can the abstractions of a theoretical discourse be said to enter into a relationship with a novelist? And further, if such a relationship is to be presumed to exist, is it demonstrable?

This book examines the novels of Margaret Atwood in conjunction with the development of second-wave feminism, and attempts to demonstrate the existence of a dynamic relationship between her fiction and feminist theory. Atwood is an interesting subject for an examination of the connection between theory and fiction for two reasons. Firstly, her career, which for this purpose is dated from the writing of her first novel in 1965, spans the four decades in which second-wave feminism has so actively developed and counter-developed, and secondly, because she is so evidently a culturally and theoretically-aware writer who both uses and challenges the ideas which permeate her culture.

A consequence of this awareness is a tension between the literary theorist who would read Atwood's novels in terms of a prevalent theory such as feminism, and the self-consciously theoretical or political aspects of her novels. This conflict is peculiar to the contemporary writer and is largely a postmodern or metafictional dilemma. It means that the text is no longer a passive recipient of theoretical interpretation, but enters into a dynamic relationship with the theoretical discourse, frequently anticipating future developments yet to be articulated by an academic discourse.

Atwood's political interests are by no means confined to feminist debate – a fact that productively complicates any critical readings of

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[1] Margaret Atwood quoted in Margaret Kaminski, "Preserving Mythologies", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll, Princeton, 1990, 28.

her work – but this book looks specifically at how her novels respond to contact with feminist analysis. The focus on Atwood's feminism is in acknowledgement of the common political ground that Atwood holds with feminist ideology. The last forty years have seen the rapid rise and expansion of second-wave feminism as it has come to permeate literary theory and criticism, interacting with and informing numerous other theoretical and political fields. Indeed, this diversity of connection means that feminism is less a theory – suggesting a coherent trajectory of thought – than a discourse: a discussion of multiple related ideas. "Second-wave feminism" is understood here as an umbrella term that usefully incorporates a wide variety of related but diverse and occasionally contradictory discourses, centring on the subjects of gender, femininity, and sexuality. The broad focus of second-wave feminism is appropriate to Atwood's own political breadth.

An examination of both Atwood's novels and the contemporaneous progression of feminist discourse from the 1960s to the present day quickly reveals a sympathy of concern and a coincidence of enquiry. Consequently, Atwood has repeatedly been pressured to support and endorse feminist politics and to explicitly associate her work with the movement. She has famously refused to be drawn into such an allegiance, and over the years has repeated in various guises the formula perfected after the publication of her novel, *The Edible Woman*, about which she said:

> I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that's what things were like in 1965.[2]

This refusal to be drawn into the feminist camp characterises Atwood's public discussion of her work. However, such denials do not preclude a feminist examination of her writing. Because feminism is not a bounded, monolithic theory, it is insupportable to claim that a novel may react and interact with feminist themes and still operate outside of feminism. In fact, second-wave feminism, by its historical nature, has always contained an internal tension between activism and theoretical discourse, and consequently, a dialectical negotiation between what does and does not constitute "real" feminism has always

[2] Atwood quoted in Kaminski, "Preserving Mythologies", 27.

been present within the discourse. Such a notion of inclusive and exclusive theoretical discourses will be challenged in the following chapters, which seek to demonstrate that discourse, by its very nature, is connective, permeable, and diffusive.

This study begins with a belief in the importance of fiction writers such as Atwood as instigators of theoretical debate rather than mere passive recorders of its impact. This view in dependent on certain assumptions: it is assumed that the text does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is subject to a multitude of influences and ideas. These ideas form the cultural and political background against which a writer works, and they inevitably permeate the text. Influences are many and varied and frequently interact and inform each other in a manner that generates entirely new areas of thought. To deconstruct the work of any author is to identify a promiscuous intercourse of popular, political and academic influences. If one then seeks to identify the thread of a single idea running through the work of a particular novelist, it is to be expected that the idea will not remain uncontaminated. A theory such as feminism, which is simultaneously political, popular, and academic, immediately negotiates sites of interaction with a myriad of alternative discourses. Consequently, the feminism to be read in Atwood's novels is not the feminism that is to be discovered in feminist textbooks. Therefore, it is to be assumed that the novelist has generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse.

To support this argument, the initial aspect of this book contains two elements: the first is an examination of feminism's influence on Atwood's work; this aims to illustrate the moments in her writing when the absorption of feminist theory is identifiable. Meanwhile, the second element entails a demonstration of how feminist influences are mediated by interaction with other identifiable factors within her work, that is, moments in which feminism as it appears in Atwood's writing undergoes a shift in direction or conclusion.

In addition to being influenced, it is argued that a novelist has the power to influence. It is in this assertion that the third – and central – element of my discussion lies. The novelist absorbs influences from his or her culture, and these influences interact in a manner at once unpredictable and generative, whereby the pure theory that is absorbed undergoes a process of contamination and manipulation by the novel. The third element of the argument is that this altered theory is then

disseminated by the novel, that is, it enters into the popular culture and becomes part of the public consciousness, absorbed by theorists in observations from which they then formulate and develop their theories.

This multi-step process of creation, dissemination, absorption, and adaptation results in a spiral of influence between the novelist and the theorist, or what could be better understood as a symbiotic relationship, with each providing material for the other. Although it is impossible to provide empirical proof of this process of evolution, the following chapters highlight moments when Atwood's work demonstrably anticipates future movements within feminism. Her work is never presumed to be a sole influence or a direct precipitant of feminist development, but it is identified as a salient and intelligent component of a general cultural discourse.

This argument is illustrated by close examination of the first eleven novels written by Atwood. The publication dates of these novels span a period of thirty-four years, from 1969 to 2003. Atwood's poetry is not considered, primarily in an attempt to limit the focus of the argument to manageable proportions. Second-wave feminism is presumed to broadly encompass the final four decades of the twentieth century, although Chapter X introduces the concept of the third wave, which is often dated from as early as the 1980s.

Finally, it is worth noting that the position from which this book begins is largely historicist. The cultural context of the text's production is closely examined, and where possible, authorial intention is considered. However, the analysis is also significantly anti-authorial, as it frequently works against Atwood's much publicised disavowal of feminist intention. This disregard is justified by a general rejection of the belief that the text's meaning is formulated at the moment of its production and remains unchanging thereafter. On the contrary, it is assumed that each reader experiences a dynamic interaction with the text, making associations and uncovering connections, and that the writer is equally a dynamic reader of texts. What results is a view of literature as a product of its time, but also as a shifting product of the time in which it is being read. The text is no longer a stable construct of situated influences, but stands in relation to both its predecessors and its successors.

Writers, readers, and communication

In establishing an understanding of how the text functions in relation to its historical context and its author, it is also necessary to consider how the text relates to the reader. Literary critic Jeremy Hawthorn suggests that literature can enter into the conflicts of ideologies, and "can display such conflicts for those readers willing to approach literary texts as records of complex and changing engagements with historical realities – and as the means whereby more challenging and creative engagements can be negotiated".[3] This view sees the text as a site of interaction, in which the ideological engagement already present can be further developed by readers who bring their own ideological concerns to the text. This is a complicated procedure, and one which is difficult to articulate. Stuart Hall does it very well in his essay "Encoding/decoding", which, although it refers to television viewing, manages to express something of the same process occurring in literature.

Hall addresses the manner in which a message is conveyed by television to an audience. Overturning the traditionally linear model of communication – sender/message/receiver – he proposes that communication should instead be understood as a circulatory process of encoding and decoding, whereby a message is not simply actively sent and passively received, but is first encoded by the sender and then decoded by the receiver in a manner not entirely determinable by the sender. Rather than the "perfectly transparent communication" that the sender desires, what is actually achieved is "systematically distorted communication".[4] The simple three-step process is now better understood as "a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction".[5] This is effectively the same framework being applied here to Atwood and her work. Where Hall traces the sending and receiving of a single message, the following chapters will instead attempt to track the movements of a complex discourse, in which communications are being sent and received simultaneously by multiple parties. The

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[3] Jeremy Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*, London, 1996, 227.
[4] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall, London, 1980, 135.
[5] *Ibid*., 128.

moment of reproduction on Hall's communication pathway is also the moment of further circulation. However, this is not to assume that the path itself is circular, but rather it is conceived of as a spiral, where each previous communication encourages the evolution of the next.

The consequence of this revised system of communication is the promotion of the reader, and the "birth of the reader" has been an increasingly popular topic ever since Roland Barthes declared "The Death of the Author" in 1968. Hawthorn articulates one simple understanding of the role of the reader when he says that "*Response* as well as *communication* is fundamental to the way in which art functions: artworks are items to which different individuals bring different expectations, experiences, knowledge – and, as a result, from which different responses result".[6] This is simply another description of Hall's decoding process. Both writers concur that the reader brings something to the text, and that the text itself is unstable because the completion of its function is reliant upon its being received by the reader, who is, by definition, a site of uncertain and shifting influences.

The argument being presented in this book rests upon an understanding of Atwood-the-author as, simultaneously, Atwood-the-reader. Part of what she is presumed to be reading is abstract: it is the culture as a whole. Atwood describes this in the following way: "novels have people; people exist in a social milieu; all of the cultural milieu gets into the novel."[7] However, the vague concept of the milieu is made more concrete by its distillation into texts of varying kinds: newspapers, novels, and books of theory. These are the influences, referred to above, which form the background against which a writer works, and to which Pierre Macherey was referring in his influential 1966 book, *A Theory of Literary Production*, when he wrote: "a book never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them."[8] This premise can be considered the starting point for the argument being presented here.

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[6] Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, 76.

[7] Atwood quoted in Gregory Fitz Gerald and Kathryn Crabbe, "Evading the Pigeonholers", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 137.

[8] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), trans. Geoffrey Wall, London, 1978, 53.

One of the difficulties posed in the undertaking of an investigation such as this is the collection of reliable information about the texts that Atwood had read before writing a particular novel. On rare occasions, this information was made specifically available. In the Introduction to *The Edible Woman*, whilst defending her work against feminist interpretation, Atwood admits to having read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, whereas in the acknowledgements of *Cat's Eye*, she mentions the work of Stephen Hawking as a valuable source of information. Such references can initiate a very specific comparative analysis, but other, less defined influences are more difficult to trace. There are moments when Atwood seems to deliberately echo another writer, and whilst it remains unclear whether this is a direct reference to an identifiable text, or is rather an intuitive articulation of a simultaneously detected problem or issue, it can reasonably be assumed that Atwood takes her part in a cultural web of reference across which popular ideas pass.

Other influences are not directly textual, such as liberalism, Canadian nationalism, or environmentalism, although they do however find expression in various textual media. These issues, which are typically spoken of in isolation, are for Atwood inextricably related, and the theme of connection is one that characterises her world-view. Asked of her opinions about nationalism and feminism, she responded:

> I see the two issues as similar. In fact, I see feminism as part of a larger issue: human dignity. That's what Canadian nationalism is about, what feminism is about, and what black power is about. They're all part of the same vision.[9]

This cross-fertilisation of her political sympathies goes some way to explaining how a novelist who is generally assumed to be feminist can so frequently disturb the assumptions of her readers. Because, of course, whilst Atwood may be a reader of cultural influences, she is primarily recognised as a writer of fiction, and in her writing her altered vision of themes such as feminism are disseminated to a reading audience.

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[9] Atwood quoted in Karla Hammond, "Defying Distinctions", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 102.

René Wellek and Austin Warren, who wrote one of the most influential early literary theory texts, made the important point that "The writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it …."[10] This understanding is central to my argument, and it is an idea that Atwood has talked about when interviewed. Her own understanding of the idea plays with the contrast between a mirror and a lens; she says:

> A lens isn't a mirror. A lens can be a magnifying or a focusing lens, but it doesn't merely give a reflection …. I recognize my work more as a distillation or a focusing.[11]

The lens through which Atwood is viewing the society that appears in her books is the lens of her own experience, and as such is unique, and consequently the picture that it produces is equally unique. Thus the author's perception of society is inevitably a transformative one, generating new images, new associations, and new ideas.

Each of the following chapters examines one of Atwood's novels, and attempts to trace this elusive spiral of influence between fiction writers and cultural commentators. Because of the potential breadth of the analysis, each chapter, whilst addressing a number of related concerns, generally focuses on one main area. This simplifies the investigative process, but also functions to highlight the main topical influences at work. Frequently, it is apparent that Atwood's articulation of a theme predates the presence of that theme in feminist theoretical literature. However, it is not assumed that the writer somehow precipitates a shift in cultural direction – Atwood herself refutes this idea when she says, "You can articulate change but it's already happening"[12] – but rather that the fiction writer is free to experiment with partially formed ideas in a manner that the theorist, bound by the necessity of a well formulated and considered argument, is not. Working from this premise, the book attempts to demonstrate the central argument that the fictional discourse and the theoretical discourse do not simply coexist, but enter into a significant and mutually beneficial relationship.

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[10] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn, London, 1963, 102.
[11] Atwood quoted in Karla Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 111.
[12] Atwood quoted in Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", 120.

CHAPTER I

THE EDIBLE WOMAN: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EARLY SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was written in 1965 but only published in 1969, by which time the second wave of feminism had begun to rise. Her thematic concern with the consumption of the female body seemingly drew her to the new feminist discourse, but in 1979 she appended an Introduction to the earlier edition, in which she wrote:

> *The Edible Woman* appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed that it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors.[1]

With this Introduction, Atwood located her novel within a pre-theorised discourse: a feminism that was yet to consciously identify itself as feminist. For Atwood, the feminist label is only applicable to those writers who were consciously working within the parameters of the feminist movement, and second-wave feminism has a generally accepted moment of origin in the late 1960s; consequently, she argues, *The Edible Woman* cannot be feminist. This same position was maintained in 1976 in an essay in which she contemplated the comparable assimilation of other mid-to-late twentieth-century women writers by the feminist movement. She wrote:

> When they were undergoing their formative years there *was* no Women's Movement. No matter that a lot of what they say can be taken by the theorists of the Movement as supporting evidence, useful

[1] Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *The Edible Woman* (1969), London, 1988. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

> analysis, and so forth: their own inspiration was not theoretical, it came from wherever all writing comes from.

By this defensive strategy, she sought to protect her text from unauthorised interpretation by what she saw to be a frequently ideologically conformist and "one-dimensional" feminist criticism.[2]

Subsequently, her relationship with feminism has remained defensive. And yet, Atwood's confident location of the rise of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s presumes an unfeasible rigidity of chronology. In contrast to Atwood's estimation, others have dated second-wave feminism "from 1960 to the present",[3] indicating an element of interpretative freedom in the chronology of the movement. Indeed, the division of feminism into waves is in itself an artificial imposition intended to structure a diffusive philosophical, cultural, and ideological discourse, whereby the concept of waves happily accounts for the shifting predominance and inconsequence of feminism within the dominant cultural discourse.

Feminism, however, did not spontaneously erupt in 1960 or in 1969, and the appearance of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 cannot be considered protofeminist anomalies, but rather expressions of an ongoing, if muted, developing contemplation of gender relations. Whilst second-wave feminism as it is generally recognised refers to the explosion of a highly theorised feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism itself is an ongoing project, in which each feminist-engaged text takes its place within a chain of reference, influenced by the ideas that influenced feminism, and influencing in its turn. From the first, Atwood proves to be engaged with the question of theoretical influence, and her self-conscious defence of her own ideological autonomy purposefully complicates any simple theoretical reading of her work, but it cannot disengage her texts from a pervasive feminist discourse in which they are inarguably implicated.

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

Atwood's casual reference to de Beauvoir and Friedan in the introduction to *The Edible Woman* is indicative of their influence on early second-wave feminism. Whilst Atwood may have disavowed her

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[2] Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Toronto, 1982, 191-92.
[3] *Feminisms*, eds Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, Oxford, 1997, 3.

connection with the movement, *The Edible Woman* is remarkable for the sympathy it holds with the pioneering works of these two writers. This chapter, therefore, will explore the manner in which Atwood can be seen to absorb and contemplate the ideas of anterior feminist theories.

Published in 1949 (1953 in English translation), *The Second Sex* explored the sexual dichotomy, examining its rationale, function, and consequence. Central to de Beauvoir's thesis is her exposition of the fundamental inequality between the sex roles in society. She argued that:

> [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.

De Beauvoir's work was founded in the existentialist tradition and borrowed heavily from G.W.F. Hegel. She reiterated the Hegelian principle of the struggle for subjectivity when she wrote that "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed".[4]

Whilst each conscious being is understood to enter into this struggle, de Beauvoir identified instead a social collusion to maintain the female as the inessential object, thereby undermining the female ego which would naturally posit the female as the essential self. De Beauvoir worked with a Freudian concept of the ego as the consciousness of the subject, and used these terms interchangeably. The ego marks the boundaries of one's self; it is the means by which to be conscious of one's own subjectivity. Following Hegel's belief that consciousness or ego is defined in opposition to the other, de Beauvoir pointed to the central paradox of the female ego: to define herself in terms of the other, the female must necessarily define herself in opposition to herself, which is an impossible concept.

Women, according to de Beauvoir, fail to resolve this paradox logically, by posing the male ego as a retaliatory other, and thereby providing the female ego with a stable defining opposition. Instead, they form male-female alliances – likened by de Beauvoir to Hegel's

[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, London, 1997, 16-17.

master-slave dichotomy[5] – and undermine female alliance. Rivalry, which might be expected between two sexes so divided, is negated by the assumption of differing purposes. The male is transcendent: his work and invention will shape the world for future generations, thereby affording him a form of immortality. The female is immanent: she produces the next generation in a purely animal way, and does not otherwise affect the future. If the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she can be said to be happy; she is content that her needs are provided for.

However, de Beauvoir asserted the existentialist view that the fulfilment of human potential must be judged, "not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty". This existential notion of human liberty is not based on the freedom to exist peacefully and comfortably. Such animal fulfilment is immanent and therefore stagnant, it is "a degradation of existence into '*en-soi*' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions …". True freedom can only be achieved through transcendence. The subject, wrote de Beauvoir, "achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties".[6] The female experience is a denial of this acquisitive compulsion – the desire to know more, do more, have more. Her liberty is limited and defined, and granted her by someone else, and as such, is no liberty at all.

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[5] In his essay, "Lordship and Bondage", Hegel describes the formulation of self-consciousness as a consequence of recognition by another. The two subjects "*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, 1977, 112). However, this recognition is antagonistic as each subject asserts his self, and thus reduces the other to an "other", denying his opponent's consciousness as an individual "*being-for-self*". A struggle ensues between two competing looks, in which one opponent will concede pure self-consciousness for a lesser, "*immediate* consciousness, or consciousness in the form of *thinghood*": "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman." The two, however, remain in thrall to each other, because "each is mediated with itself through another consciousness" (*ibid*., 115). In de Beauvoir's model, the female (taking the part of the slave) is reliant on the male, both socially and economically, and although the male is equally reliant on the female as his partner, he does not acknowledge this debt. She, however, needs his patronage to protect her in a society that does not recognise her independent validity. "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 20).

[6] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28-29.

In *The Edible Woman*, de Beauvoir's scenario of heterosexual relations is played out with comic force. The protagonist Marian internalises the social idea of women as other to such an extent that she cannot recognise her own self. Mirrors reflect the "eyes of a person she had never seen before" (222), and as she accepts Peter's proposal of marriage, she loses herself entirely and becomes assimilated by his reflection, "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (83). Marian congratulates herself upon her engagement: "He's attractive and he's bound to be successful", which she recognises as the fulfilment of her social obligation: "I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children" (102). But the engagement signals a shift in the text from first person narrative to third person narrative, and it is clear that the realisation of her goal has been achieved at the cost of her subjectivity.

De Beauvoir articulated the sexual dichotomy within a framework of interrelated binary oppositions: the male is the essential subject, the female is the inessential object, he is the rational mind, she is the sensual body. Being other, woman comes to represent all that man is not, all that he desires and all that he fears. (This idea of the inexpressible informed Friedan's title, *The Feminine Mystique*, and later became a central theme of French feminism.) In social life, this abstract opposition of the sexes into self and other is realised in the social male and the domestic female – a division rationalised by biological distinction. De Beauvoir writes: "woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature."[7] Whilst men are of course equally bound by the body, the female appears peculiarly corporeal because of her reproductive function:

> [during menstruation] she feels her body most painfully as an obscure alien thing …. Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself.[8]

De Beauvoir's thesis is founded on the rationalist belief of the schism in human experience as both animal and transcendental being. De Beauvoir implicitly accepted the Cartesian rationalism of western

[7] *Ibid*., 15.
[8] *Ibid*., 61.

philosophy that privileged the rational mind over the instinctual body, but her argument was nevertheless crucially anti-essentialist. In her famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman",[9] she initiated the sex and gender distinction that later became crucial to the anti-essentialist arguments of second-wave feminism. In Judith Butler's words: "*sex* is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that the body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation."[10]

For de Beauvoir, sex and gender may have been distinct, but they were also mutually influencing; physical difference had been exacerbated by cultural influence, and the female body had become the enabling site of social repression: "Weighted down with fat, or on the contrary so thin as to forbid all effort, paralysed by inconvenient clothing and by the rules of propriety – then woman's body seems to man to be his property, his thing."[11] De Beauvoir recognised that cultural influences were at play in the physical, but she still concluded that female liberation would necessitate the transcendence of the body. The woman's body remained, for de Beauvoir, a handicap to be overcome.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian accords with de Beauvoir's view. Images of femininity in the novel are obsessively related to images of the body and are frequently grotesque. The women in Marian's office "squatted at their desks, toad-like and sluggish" (17-18), her pregnant friend Clara is "a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead" (115), and the bodies of older women are repulsively depicted: "They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel" (166). The association of women with food and bodily wastes is compulsive for Marian, and proves increasingly irrepressible: "What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out" (167). Seeking to stem the tide of repulsion, she paints and clothes her body beyond recognition: "She was afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain" (222). As Clara forcibly demonstrates her femininity through a "bulgingly obvious"

[9] *Ibid*., 295.
[10] Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 35.
[11] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 190.

(31) pregnancy, Marian subconsciously responds to the prospect of her own imminent motherhood by regulating her body more firmly than ever, denying it essential food and nourishment.

Marian has constructed a pejorative divide between a "thick sargasso-sea of femininity" and a "solid, clear" masculinity (167). This division equates with the unbounded other and the unified self. The bodily identification of the female positions her on the side of the other and thus necessarily precludes her subjectivity. In *The Edible Woman*, Clara is entirely subservient to her biology: "her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers" (37). Following de Beauvoir's principle, it is only when Clara is momentarily released from the binds of reproduction that Marian can experience her as a human being: "She decided on impulse to buy her some roses: a welcome-back gift for the real Clara, once more in uncontended possession of her own frail body" (115).

In pregnancy, Clara becomes, in de Beauvoir's words, "something other than herself", and it is this servitude to biology that de Beauvoir sought to redress when she stated "humanity is something more than a species".[12] Although biology may be both inevitable and significant, it is not, for de Beauvoir, destiny. With technology, women can be freed from reproduction to experience a new liberty: "The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal."[13] This faith in the liberating power of science was later echoed by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*, in which she expanded de Beauvoir's argument to advocate artificial gestation and communal childrearing. In Firestone's revolutionary vision, "pregnancy, now freely acknowledged as clumsy, inefficient and painful, would be indulged in, if at all, only as a tongue-in-cheek archaism."[14] For Firestone, de Beauvoir's argument was supremely anti-essentialist. By overcoming the body, the modern woman could achieve equality, liberation, and ultimately, transcendence.

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[12] *Ibid*., 725.
[13] *Ibid*., 727.
[14] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, London, 1979, 273-74.

In *What is a Woman?* Toril Moi argues that the common feminist belief that de Beauvoir viewed the female reproductive body as inherently oppressive stems from a fundamental misreading of *The Second Sex*. To support this, Moi points to de Beauvoir's proposal that "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming … the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation".[15] By this, Moi contests, de Beauvoir was forwarding an existentialist understanding of human identity as a progressive collection of experiences. According to Moi, the predominant feminist understanding of de Beauvoir's division of the self into sex and gender (as it is understood, for example, by Butler, quoted above) is misguided; de Beauvoir did not envision a biologically sexed body divisible from the gendered body, but instead understood that "the body-in-the-world that we are, is an embodied intentional relationship to the world". And so for Moi, the claim that the body is a situation does not lead to the necessary denial of the reproductive body, as has been understood by Butler *et al*, but suggests instead that "greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman's body, *not* that women will forever be slaves to the inherently oppressive experience of childbearing"[16] (my italics).

There is, however, a slight problem with Moi's argument. She begins by defending de Beauvoir from the accusation that de Beauvoir's belief that woman was trapped in her animal body was basically an essentialist belief. However, it is commonly accepted that de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is an anti-essentialist stance, so Moi's defence is unnecessary. Whilst de Beauvoir undeniably did prioritise the mind over the body (even Moi concedes a certain "ambivalence" in de Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood and the female body), she equally allowed that women could transcend the body just as men had done, and this is the conclusion of her argument. Moi's suggestion that the body for de Beauvoir is a site of possibility and not a fixed destiny is extremely useful in understanding the often seemingly contradictory arguments of *The Second Sex*. However, Moi's assumption that a negative reading of the body in de Beauvoir's text irresistibly leads to the understanding that de Beauvoir believed

[15] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 66.
[16] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford, 1999, 66-67.

women to be inevitably trapped in biology is untenable. De Beauvoir's modern woman was not trapped in her biology, nor was it immediately obvious that she was experiencing it differently due to new freedoms – it appeared instead that she had *transcended* it.

In *The Edible Woman*, transcendence of the body is a desirable but ultimately unattainable fantasy. For Marian, the intellectual equality attained by de Beauvoir's modern woman, enabling her transcendence, is a culturally prohibited resolution. Biology proves insurmountable, as Marian recognises in her work life, where she could never "become one of the men upstairs" (20). Partial transcendence is attained instead by her wilful collusion in the male desire to restrict and limit the boundless other. Marriage will become, for Marian, a "hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other" (167). In the novel, marriage, like anorexia, is a voluntary diminishment of a repulsive, other-identified self.

Marian's attempt to negate her body through starvation can be read, as Gayle Green reads it, as a covert rebellion against a system that appropriates femininity as a commodity to be consumed. Marian's anorexia, by this understanding, is a rejection of her femininity.[17] But the processes by which Marian starves and petrifies her body paradoxically embrace a socially acceptable image of femininity until, at the height of her self-negation, she becomes entirely artificial, "fake, like soft pinkish white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible" (229) – a situation that Peter finds "absolutely marvellous" (228). *The Edible Woman* is far less optimistic than *The Second Sex*. Both texts reject the immanence of the body, but where de Beauvoir seeks transcendence, Atwood's protagonist aspires only to a secondary association with masculine rationalism, which she hopes will diminish the irrationalism of her female body.

Successive feminists proved uncomfortable with de Beauvoir's analysis of femininity as a redundant or reductive state and the assertion that masculine rationalism should be the goal of the modern woman, and this claim was countered variously. Diana Coole outlines the conflict: "The question was whether human culture represented some neutral undertaking into which women might be assimilated

[17] Gayle Greene, "Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: 'Rebelling Against the System'", in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, ed. Beatrice Mendez-Egle, Edinburg: TX, 1984, 106.

without loss, or whether it existed as a particularly masculine project which, masquerading as a human norm, had suppressed an alternative feminine culture."[18] Where the former, liberal view was grounded in anti-essentialism, and was the view assumed by Firestone, the latter, essentialist view was taken by, amongst others, ecofeminists and spiritual feminists, who questioned the profitability of emulating male values characterised by aggression and destruction.

A schism appeared between two factions of feminism, where one sought the attainment of rationalism, whilst the other called for its rejection in favour of alternative feminine qualities. Ecofeminists and spiritual feminists in particular were concerned to preserve the supposedly feminine values of nurture, harmony and healing, and championed the positive association of woman with the body and with nature. Feminist theologian Mary Daly, for example, author of *Beyond God the Father* and *Gyn/Ecology*, described Christianity as a barbaric colonisation of ancient goddess myths, and advocated the rejection of patriarchy. With communication and co-operation, she argued, women could begin to rediscover their suppressed natural selves by "speaking our Selves, hearing and following the call of our undomesticated, wild be-ing".[19]

Atwood examined similar feminist positions in her second novel, *Surfacing*, but in *The Edible Woman* they were entirely absent. For Marian, there is no mystical power in maternity, which is instead a dangerous imposition on the female body. Describing her pregnant friend, Marianne notes that "Clara's body is so thin that her pregnancies are always bulgingly obvious, and now in her seventh month she looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (31). Much of the claustrophobia of the novel lies in the impossible resolution of the female role. Motherhood is embodied by Clara: "Look at the mess she had blundered into" (131), and unmarried life is envisioned as "a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater" (21). Marian considers femininity an inescapable burden, but rejects the essentialist's celebration of difference.

Ecofeminism and spiritual feminism were influential in the 1970s, but they prompted criticism for their acceptance of the patriarchal

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[18] Diana H. Coole, *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*, Hemel Hempstead, 1988, 241.

[19] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, London, 1979, 343.

equation of women with nature. By associating women with sensuality, reproduction, passivity and intuition, regardless of the essentialist project to invest these qualities with potent authority, women remained tied to the domestic rather than the social sphere. And Carol McMillan describes the consequences even more seriously:

> From this rationalist position, then, the fact that woman is engaged in many activities which have a counterpart in the animal world has made it difficult for philosophers both to admit that she is human and to say in what her humanity consists.[20]

McMillan discounts the common feminist solution to this challenge to female humanity, which is also de Beauvoir's solution: to prove that women have what Coole describes as "a capacity to transcend their (inferior) sexed nature in order to scale the lofty peaks of human (male) achievement".[21] This view allows that women may with effort overcome their irrationalism, but continues to locate qualities such as immorality, weakness and hysteria in the feminine. At the same time, argues Coole, the alternative belief in "natural and *unassailable* differences between men and women" (my italics) held by essentialists is also a traditionally conservative view, and correspondingly, McMillan's book, *Women, Reason and Nature*, argues that essentialist feminists and conservative rationalists have much in common.[22]

The essentialist feminism propounded by Daly, and the anti-essentialist feminism associated with Firestone, both turn on an implicit acceptance of the Cartesian divide between a superior rational mind and an inferior instinctual body. Where Firestone sought to promote women to rationalism, Daly sought instead to invert the hierarchy and prioritise anti-rationalism. Anti-essentialists assume rationalism to be a gender-neutral ideal to which both sexes should aspire. Essentialists, however, reject this belief and argue instead that (to borrow from Craig Owens' discussion of the modernist aesthetic): "the representational symptoms of the West admit only one vision –

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[20] Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature: Some Philosophical Problems with Nature*, Oxford, 1982, 10.
[21] Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 264.
[22] McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature*, 13.