

**Anna Kisiel**

WSB University, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8803-0145>  
[kisiel.anna@outlook.com](mailto:kisiel.anna@outlook.com)

# **“Her Body Islanded”**

## **Corporeal Resistance in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman***

### **Abstract**

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Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, is a “marvellously normal” (Atwood 207) young woman. However, at one point—coinciding with the acceptance of her partner’s marriage proposal—something goes utterly wrong. Her body, in an act of revolt, refuses to accept more and more food; it becomes an increasingly independent, as if exterior entity. While trying to fight off this impenetrable rebellion, Marian comes to face social norms she is supposed to comply with as a woman, finding them indeed indigestible. Written in 1965 and published in 1969, *The Edible Woman* touches upon issues that are still relevant for the contemporary reader. This article examines Margaret Atwood’s novel within the framework indebted to the recent shift of feminist studies towards fragility: a notion that no longer has to entail mere passivity or surrender. Aiming at an exploration of the theme of a fragile corporeal protest, this article juxtaposes the revolt of Marian’s body with such tropes and categories as fluidity and containment, abjection, agency, and becoming in order to trace the dual nature of corporeal resistance presented in the novel.

### **Keywords**

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Margaret Atwood, femininity, feminism, becoming, abject, protest

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[S]he faced each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind. (Atwood 178)

## Corporeal Protest

Written in 1965 and published in 1969, *The Edible Woman* discusses topics and dilemmas that are still relevant for the contemporary reader. Such issues as its affinity to the second wave of feminism, the mind/body and self/Other dualisms, and the questions of normativity, eating disorders, and hysteria have been extensively commented upon (see, e.g., McWilliams 63-72; Tolan; Sanchez-Grant 77-92; Nilsen 126-139; Howells). Yet, as I believe, there are also other territories in this novel that are worth exploring. The framework proposed therein is informed by the recent shift of feminist studies towards fragility: a notion that has ceased to entail passivity or surrender (see, e.g., Ettinger 1-31; Butler). The aim of this article is to examine the theme of a fragile corporeal protest; the revolt of Marian MacAlpin's body will be juxtaposed with such notions and categories as abject, agency, fluidity, containment, and becoming. As I will endeavour to prove, Marian's resistance is entangled in corporeality in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it is a form of protest *with*—or by means of—the body, and, on the other, it is a protest *of* the body. In the article, *The Edible Woman* will be interpreted side by side with the mentioned tropes, which will make it possible to provide a more complete picture of the intricacies of Marian's corporeal resistance.

Before proceeding to more detailed examinations, let us begin with a brief summary of the novel. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, is a "marvellously normal" (Atwood 207) young woman, leading an apparently satisfying and stable life. A recent university graduate, Marian has found a job in a market research firm, where she is responsible for survey questions. She lives in Toronto, sharing a flat with her quirky roommate Ainsley, and has a boyfriend Peter, an aspiring young lawyer and a practical man. She also stays in touch with Clara, a friend from high school and college, who is now married and expecting her third child but does not seem to handle her situation well. Near the beginning of the novel, Marian and Ainsley pay Clara a visit, after which Ainsley—influenced by what she has witnessed—shares her plan with Marian. She wants to have a baby on her own, believing that the father is an unnecessary nuisance; in order to achieve it, she sets out to seduce Len, Marian's

college friend known for his interest in underage girls. The protagonist disapproves of the idea. At one point of the story, Marian begins to act in a weird manner; during the dinner with Len and Peter which Ainsley joins (pretending to be a schoolgirl), she suddenly runs away. The same night, Peter unexpectedly asks Marian to marry him, and she accepts her partner's marriage proposal. Soon after, the protagonist learns that Peter's decision is not so much romantic as strikingly mundane and hard-headed. He says:

And now things are settled I feel I'm going to be much happier. [...] It'll be a lot better in the long run for my [law] practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife; people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're a queer or something. [...] And there's one thing about you, Marian, I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrained but you're such a sensible girl. You may not have known this but I've always thought that's the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife. (Atwood 89)

Marian begins to notice changes in her behaviour. Among others, she becomes passive, letting Peter decide for her, she engages in an affair with Duncan, an eccentric and immature graduate student in English she met during the field research for work, and she spontaneously invites a lot of her acquaintances to Peter's party only to escape it soon after it begins. She also pays more attention to her fiancé: to his behaviours and personality traits that have not bothered her before. Most importantly, however, she marvels over her body, which—in an impenetrable act of resistance—refuses to consume certain foods. Having first rejected the steak and other kinds of meat, Marian's body becomes an increasingly independent entity, seemingly exterior to herself, which relentlessly eliminates more and more items from the protagonist's menu. At the point when there is nothing left for her to eat, the protagonist identifies Peter as the source of her problem. She bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and invites her fiancé over. She asks Peter to eat the cake, saying: "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you[?] [...] You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?" (Atwood 271). Having refused to eat the cake, Peter leaves quickly. Their relationship ends while the hunger returns; Marian devours the whole cake.

## Abjection and Agency

Marian's rejection of food comes gradually and is usually stimulated by an association connoting Julia Kristeva's seminal notion of the *abject*.

In Kristeva's reworking of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, abjection is one of the processes that occasion the detachment from the mother. In line with the workings of the mirror stage and the recognition of castration, the abject is responsible for provoking the separation of the subject-to-be from the motherly corporeal sphere; simultaneously, the abject is profoundly fluctuant and disruptive, for the unceasing threat of returning into the *chora* is its inherent feature (Kristeva 13). When experienced, abjection equals the return of the repressed: bodily fluids, certain foods, corpses, faeces, filth. Moreover, while the mentioned examples of that which is repressed are bodily themselves, a reaction to them is corporeal as well, including repulsion, convulsion, and vomit. As can be observed, abjection carries the threat of dismantling the *I*, seemingly stable borders, and order, and yet it is identified as a condition for narcissism and, thus, the gateway to the Symbolic (see: Kristeva 2, 12–13).

The circumstances and consequences of Marian's revulsion are to an extent different from those depicted by Kristeva—after all, the protagonist is not an infant entering the Symbolic order. Simultaneously, it is hard to ignore resonances of certain scenes from *The Edible Woman* with abjection. Soon after the acceptance of the marriage proposal, Marian and Peter go to the restaurant. At the table, Peter chooses the wine for them, and they begin to talk about disciplining children; Peter explains that she is unaware of dangers of not punishing children, adding: "you've led a sheltered life" (Atwood 147), which is a comment that upsets the protagonist. When they proceed to the supper, Marian finds herself unable to eat the steak. At first she only notices the inherent violence of the act of cutting the pieces of meat and recalls the beef map from her cookery book, but then she observes her plate with a sense of horror. We read:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. (Atwood 151)

Realising that makes her feel a little sick; she is both surprised with and worried about such a reaction. This is, however, merely the beginning. The next products she rejects are other kinds of meat, ones that have "an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" (Atwood 152). After a while, Marian meets with Len, who shares his childhood trauma with her; in his narrative, he was forced by his mother to eat an egg which had a developing chicken inside. Len's trauma becomes appropriated by

Marian, who ceases to consume eggs. This becomes a frequent tendency as Marian begins to reject certain foods after being told various stories about them, for instance about finding mouse-hairs in a hamburger. Other types of food soon become inedible, too. Among others, carrots seem to be alive and able to scream, rice pudding reminds Marian of cocoons, and cake happens to have a lung-like texture, which she finds unbearable. Finally, the protagonist's basic fear becomes real; she—or rather her body—has crossed out every possible product. Returning to the question of the abject, we can note that Marian's inability to consume foods results in an ongoing separation from her body, which, in turn, emerges as "a locus of intelligence" (Tolan 22), to use Fiona Tolan's description of its increasing independence. Just as more and more products become revolting, Marian is in revolt as well; among others, we read: "How she longed to become again a carnivore, to gnaw on a good bone!" (Atwood 173). Her resistance, however, seems to be doomed; she might be tempted when she considers returning to certain foods in her thoughts, but when she faces the actual plate, her body wins the battle and its rebellion continues. Marian's abjection becomes a path towards split which makes her body an exterior entity, capable of deciding on its own.

Agency and decisiveness are crucial questions in the discussion on resistance, but the position the two notions occupy in the novel is highly inconclusive. The first sign of the detachment between Marian's actions and her body's own choices can be spotted just before Peter's sudden proposal. During the mentioned dinner Marian, Peter, Len, and Ainsley have, the protagonist observes that she has shed a tear, possibly as a reaction to Peter's unusual behaviour; the problem is she has not done it consciously. Her action amazes and terrifies her, but then another extraordinary thing happens: she runs away as soon as they leave the restaurant. We read: "I was running along the sidewalk. After the first minute I was surprised to find my feet moving, wondering how they had begun, but I didn't stop" (Atwood 72). These two actions seem to belong to the body: Marian has no conscious control of them, is slightly shocked by their absurdity, and yet gives in to them, which results in Len calling her "the hysterical type" (Atwood 74). After that, she seems to regain control over her body, but again in a peculiar way. Overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the meeting that continues in Len's apartment, she decides to hide herself under the bed, having reached the conclusion that this is the safest, quietest place she can find. In fact, by becoming invisible, in an act of extreme fragility, she just tries to attract their attention, which finally works, but Peter is angry and disappointed. Nevertheless, she has a sense of victory here; inspired by

her body, Marian has acted freely and unconventionally. This is soon going to change; having accepted Peter's proposal, she lets her fiancé make various decisions for her, and the more she does, the more her body resists. She begins to surrender both to Peter and to her puzzling corporeality. Her reactions to her body eliminating foods from her menu range from "resignation" (Atwood 161) to annoyance, with a pinch of longing. Speaking of longing, the way she expresses it is emblematic; we read: "she faced each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its *mind*" (Atwood 178, emphasis mine). Marian herself proclaims her body an entity with a mind of its own; curiously enough, this increasingly foreign entity decides for her, but this mechanism does not work the other way around: after all, as we learn, "if she used force it *rebelled*" (Atwood 177–178, emphasis mine). The moment when Marian realises she cannot eat anything at all is the point in which her body seems to have gained full independence; ironically, as we shall see in detail further on, it does so only to make her extremely hungry some time later, by which she is manipulated again.

In the light of the activities performed by the body and of Marian's range of emotions regarding them, it is hard to ignore the question whether Marian's corporeal sphere is her ally or her enemy. According to Ellen McWilliams, Marian's act of surrendering to her body's will is a sign of her disapproval of social norms imposed on her as a female in Canada of the sixties (McWilliams 63; see also: Atwood 8), and Sofia Sanchez-Grant agrees with that statement, claiming that "food and the body become the language with which Marian is able to communicate her resistance to dominant and reductive conventions of femininity" (Sanchez-Grant 87). Fiona Tolan adds that, making use of her corporeality, Marian endeavours to resist "Peter's metaphorical consumption of her" (Tolan 21). The above critiques join together Marian and her body, portraying the protagonist as one who has agency in this pair, even if she is not fully aware of that. However, the abovementioned examples from the novel suggest otherwise. Indeed, Marian seems to protest by means of her body against the issues recognised by the researchers; yet, her body also grows to become a resistant entity on its own, which does not abide by the rules Marian endeavours to impose on it.

## Becoming (Un)contained

The fluctuant relation between fluidity and containment is another interesting trope in the context of resistance and female subjectivity.

We can begin by noticing the way Marian perceives other women. For example, during an office party, she observes her colleagues, spotting numerous food associations. Let us immerse into a longer passage from this richly visual scene:

They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel [...]. [N]ow she could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge's back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks [...]; and the others too [...]; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones [...]. 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... For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. [...] [S]he felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity. (Atwood 166–167)

On the one hand, the female colleagues are compared to food, but not in an attractive way; rather, these connotations often point to repulsive qualities of the portrayed women. On the other hand, it is the watery associations, commonly ascribed to femininity, that prevail in the description. The women here are paradoxical entities existing on the verge of the interior and the exterior, made of various—often repulsive—substances, capable of expanding and even devouring the protagonist herself. She, in turn, admits with fear that she is just like them while she desires “something solid, clear: a man” (Atwood 167). Marian's dread of fluidity resurfaces also in the dream she has before the engagement; in her dream, her body starts to melt and become transparent. In a sense, it happens near the end of the novel; while having a bath, she observes her body, described as “islanded” and “no longer quite her own” (Atwood 218). Afraid of the progressing fluidity of her body, she puts the engagement ring on her finger, feeling that it can somehow prevent her from melting and, thus, becoming uncontained. As Fiona Tolan argues, “Her rejection of the feminine body is a rejection of herself, but it does not precipitate her entry into the masculine mind. Instead, it leaves her dislocated, trapped between Peter's alien rationalism and her increasingly intelligent body” (Tolan 20). Indeed, Marian is suspended between her body, her expectations, the expectations of society imposed on her, and her fear of “sargasso-sea” femininity. Still, as the novel goes, she unwillingly turns into a more and more dispersed, inconstant, watery, vulnerable creature up until the final scenes during which she is re-contained.

Marian's transformation recalls Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *becoming*, but in a twisted, or even reverse, edition. In brief, becoming “[extracts] particles between which one establishes the



relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 318, emphasis in the original), to use Deleuze and Guattari’s words. Hence, the process of becoming is by no means aimless: one necessarily struggles to become-*somebody/something*. The founders of schizoanalysis recognise three stages—or aims—of this an active, continuous, and transformative path that involves making rhizomatic connections, namely becoming-*woman*, becoming-*animal*, and finally becoming-*imperceptible*. In this context, the first question we need to pose is: what is Marian MacAlpin becoming? She has no idea: “she only wanted to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared” (Atwood 206). If we consider becoming-woman, it seems not to be her aim; after all, at least on a superficial level, she is every now and then accused of “rejecting [her] femininity” (Atwood 80, 272) by Ainsley and Peter, and she constantly tries to escape femininity and the feminine roles even if she falls right into them. Still, if we delve deeper into the protagonist’s motivations, we will find no need to explore her femininity in any interpretation of this term (and not only the socially-constructed one), whereas agency and willingness to change are crucial in the practice of becoming. One can argue that, by ceasing to eat, Marian strives towards becoming-imperceptible, but instead she gains visibility, especially when acting in a non-normative manner in front of other people; also, all of these actions rather point in the opposite direction, that is, she desires to be seen and paid attention to. Nonetheless, even if reversing the path delineated by Deleuze and Guattari, Marian cannot be denied the inevitable process of change.

Let us for a moment turn to a known cliché, “you are what you eat”; in the case of Marian, she is eating less and less to the point of having nothing else to devour but herself. By the end of the novel, she prepares the cake for Peter to consume, but he refuses to do so and walks out. Left with the cake, Marian looks at it and becomes hungry. She begins to devour the cake when Ainsley comes home and is shocked by Marian’s act of quasi-cannibalism, but Marian fails to acknowledge the strangeness of this situation, saying: “It’s only a cake” (Atwood 273). Is she thus *becoming-herself*? Indeed, she moves towards her unaltered self, but she “[extracts] particles,” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s words, which are not her own or closest to her, but which are taken from the woman-shaped cake: a product. As Tolan puts it, “Consumption, it seems, is inevitable, and whilst she may have achieved a temporary escape from its manipulations, the return to reality necessitates a return



to its limitations” (Tolan 34). Marian has not been successful in her endeavour; in fact, nothing has changed for she has found herself back in the original state of affairs.

## Futile Resistance

Marian MacAlpin is a figure trapped between two forms of protest, that of her body and that of her self. Without realising it fully, she becomes involved in resistance, even if some of its mechanisms are beyond her conscious control. In this article, several tropes that help characterise this peculiar bodily protest have been discussed. Abjection is a process that creates and widens the gap between Marian and her body, occasioning the protest of the latter entity. This boundary becomes impossible to cross, but Marian and her corporeality are by no means fully independent of each other; after all, the body makes decisions that the protagonist cannot understand or prevent, and she gives in to its demands instead. Marian’s obedience is most visible in the case of rejecting food. She is not able to influence her corporeality in any way: it is the body that chooses what not to consume, and it is the body that lets—or makes—her eat by the end of the novel. What the body appears to punish Marian for is her as if obsessive persistence in keeping the binary opposition of containment and fluidity, where the former is associated with masculinity, safety, and reason, and the latter stands for femininity, abject, and danger; as a response, her corporeality gradually cuts itself off, taking food hostage.

Unluckily, it appears that neither of the agents discussed above—that is, neither the protagonist nor her revolting corporeality—triumphs. In the conclusion of the novel, Marian denies the symbolic nature of her act of cannibalism. Since there are no signs that her thinking or attitude have changed as a result of her rejection of food, the protagonist is somewhat reset: she returns to her previous self. The whole process of resistance, then, turns out to be futile. Still, whether successful or not, the protests found in the novel are marked by fragility: on the most basic level, Marian eats less and less, but, much more importantly, she usually reacts with resistance in vulnerable, uneasy moments, and it is then when she gives in to the body’s guidance. However, the fragile nature of the protest is not the reason why it has had no effect after all. Rather, the problem lies in Marian’s inability to identify her—or her body’s—motivations and aims; nowhere in the book does she begin to comprehend what her body might be trying to communicate by its process

of gradual alienation. Undoubtedly, via her bodily resistance “she was becoming.” Yet, as we learn, she was not aware of the direction of this movement, and as a consequence she rejected the changes inaugurated during her rebellion.

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