

Research Article

Voice of Dissent against Marriage in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: The present paper tries to focus on the voice of dissent against marriage in the novels of Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It deals with the position of women both in the Canadian and in Indian scenario. The paper also discusses the condition of women in the society. The paper also focus on the status of women in the family and the role of women in the society and outside the family. It also talks about a woman's transformation after marriage. It closely analyze the dual responsibilities assigned to a female after marriage. How certain taboos are imposed on women can be seen very effectively in the present paper. The paper also depicts women's own perspective towards life.

Key Words – Dissent , Marriage, perspective, women rights, patriarchal.

How to cite this article: Pathak K. Voice of Dissent against Marriage in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences.2026 March 23, 5(2):30-35.

Source of support: Nil.

Conflict of interest: None

DOI: doi.org/10.58924/rjhss.v5.iss2.p3

Received: 07-12-2025
Revised: 12-12-2025
Accepted: 17-02-2026
Published: 23-03-2026



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1. Introduction

Atwood's novel **The Edible Woman** was written during 1960s when the concept of Feminism was gaining popularity. It was the time when feminism was influencing the world. Women became more conscious about their self. They started to think about their legal rights. It was the time to bring change in their perspective. There were some books and essays which talked about feminism. These are **A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman**, (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, **The Subjection Of Woman** (an essay, 1869) by John Stuart Mill, **A Room Of One's Own** (an essay, 1929) by Virginia Woolf, **The Second Sex** (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, and the **Feminine Mystique** (a book1963) by an American writer Betty Friedan. These are some of the popular writings which were influencing the whole world. Apart from world, there were some specific incidents which took place in Canada alone. There were some events in Canada which compelled Margaret Atwood to write or to point out the issue of feminism through her work. During the year 1965- 1969, forty women in Canada were reported to have died because of illegal attempts to abolish their pregnancy and with the help of various sources, we could find that the number of abortions in Canada exceeded to about one lakh. In the novel **The Edible Woman** two characters Marian and Ainsley seems to be unsatisfied with the society which favours patriarchy. In the beginning of the novel, the speech of Ainsley indicates that she is an ardent feminist. She hates men. Though she want to become a mother, she don't want to enter into the institution of marriage, because it may take away her own identity. In order to satisfy her wish she chooses Len. But later on she came to realize that a figure of father is very essential in the life of a child. This thought infuses a feeling in her to get married anyhow. So she decided to marry Fish.

Margaret Atwood was born on 18th November 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. Being a prolific writer, she is a poet, a short-story writer, a novelist, and the critic. Atwood created such characters which portray the ' New Woman'. Her surprising plots demonstrates how the woman struggled to achieve a standing position in life and society. All the major novels

of Atwood comprises of young women who find themselves isolated from technologically advanced society. The protagonists of her novels attempt to escape through unconscious rebellion. The Edible Women is Atwood's first novel which tells about Marian's indifference in marrying Peter, her long-time boyfriend who is also a successful lawyer. The novel tells the story of Marian MacAlpin who works at Seymour Surveys, a market research company. She seems to be unpredictable and unsatisfied regarding her career in the company. To make her future secure, she decided to marry Peter, her boyfriend. She thought that marrying a successful lawyer will make her future secure and stable. When Peter put the proposal of marriage in front of Marian, she accepted his proposal instantly. After few days, she started to think over the marriage proposal again. Few days later after her engagement, Marian started to develop an aversion to food. She also started to think that she is being consumed by Peter as if she is an eatable commodity. She develops an aversion to meat, then eggs and even to vegetables. Now she thinks that she should not get married and if she will do so, she might lose her own identity. After marriage, she will be compelled to live a life of puppet. In a party thrown by Peter, she was feeling as if she was in a prison. There he asked Marian to stand straight and make a proper pose for a good photograph. She describes this incident:

"That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicide maniac with a lethal weapon in his (EW 246)

When she thinks about Clara, her fear of marriage becomes more intense. She says Clara is what women "turn into" after marriage – wife and mother. Before marriage Clara was a perfect example of femininity, now she is on her third pregnancy. Her body vegetable like seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of her. Marian was very glad to think that she was not Clara.

Ainsley, Marian's roommate was quite open in her thinking regarding marriage. She avoids to follow stereotypical moulds. Though she is capable of getting everything about which she is adamant, she knows that every woman should have at least one baby. Ainsley, the "free woman" ends married to fish – settled into the same mould as Clara, that of mother and wife. After witnessing the position of Clara and Ainsley after marriage, her fear of marriage intensifies. She no longer wants to get into the trap of marriage. Even small things reminds her of entrapment. When she was getting ready for a party with Peter and went to parlor to get ready for the party, she feels that she is being operated on like a slab of flesh, an object. She was having a feeling as if she was prisoned in the gold oval mirror. The thought of marriage filled her with suffocation. She was thinking about the ways to get out of all these. She no longer wanted to be an edible commodity. She realizes that Peter is metaphorically devouring her. To test her suspicion, she baked a pink cake in the shape of a woman and offered it to Peter. He left the place disturbed. Marian devoured the cake herself and her relationship with food is back to normal. She starts eating everything as she used to eat before her engagement. J. Brooks Bouson says in " The Anxiety Of Being Influenced : Reading and Responding to characters in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman " Atwood deploys her female protagonist Marian McAlpin to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women".(230) . As the novel The Edible Woman progressed, it showed how the protagonist was losing her identity gradually. J. Brooks Bouson says : " As a realistic novel, The Edible Woman shows how the female passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self".(231). In the essay , " Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists, Patricia

Goldblatt states that ,” Atwood creates situations in which women burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies discover that they must reconstruct braver, self- reliant personae in order to survive”.But at the end of the novel, Marian’s relationship with food is back which shows that she has not yet given up. Here it will apt to quote Salat : Thus Marian achieves a symbolic purification of herself by refusing to eat and her final act of baking a cake in the shape of a woman to offer Peter as a woman-substitute symbolizes her having attained the necessary self- knowledge. Henceforth , it implies she will not be Peter’s –or- any man’s, for that matter- consumable commodity{...}. Marian is finally able to defy Peter’s – the male’s desire to colonize her and refuses to be a mindless body {...}. Commenting on the experience gained by Marian, Rigney states : Marian knows more than she did in the beginning, she has come to terms with something , has objectified her situation and apprehended it more realistically. The cake thus serves as a reflection , a way of seeing herself as in a mirror, and it expresses a truth not before perceived .” Marian has finally been able to refuse to be The Edible Woman and she instead just a woman.[66]This shows that even the thought of marriage can psychologically disturb a woman explicitly or sometimes implicitly. The relationship of marriage can be a big question mark on the freedom of a woman which compels a woman not to enter into the relationship of marriage.

This indifference towards marriage can also be traced in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She is a renowned author and poet. She was born on July 29, 1956 in Calcutta, India. She has worked upon many themes which includes Indian and American experience, women’s position in contemporary world, family relationships, and challenges of living in a multicultural world. She is also having the prestige of getting her books translated into 29 languages. Some of her novels and stories have been made into films. Divakaruni teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

In India, marriage is considered as an ultimate goal for girls. From their childhood, they are told as they are girls, so they must learn to take the responsibility of household works. Women have to mould and transform themselves to suit the interests of their male counterparts and in this process suppress their own self-identity. Arranged Marriage by Divakaruni is a collection of 11 short stories and all these stories includes all aspects of marriage. These stories highlights how Indian women after getting married, entangle themselves in the web of marriage.They have to obey their husband and in-laws. Even when they are aware that their husbands are cheating on them, they keep themselves silent and bear everything silently. They take all this as their fate. They even bear their husbands violence silently. The image of Sita has profound effect on the Indian psyche. Her chastity and loyalty to her husband represents the ideal for an Indian wife. In one of the stories,” Meeting Mrinal” Asha, a divorced mother with a teenage son always tried her best to become a perfect woman as per the norms of society . She says :

“ I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology, I grew up on – Patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, p.298)

Indian women image is characterized by submissiveness, no matter whether they are in India or in America. In the story “ Affair” the central Character Meena considers her identity as a dutiful wife. She says:

“ Had I ever really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter.....And of course a good wife”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, p.269)

Divakaruni and Atwood worked remarkably well to strengthen the position of women in the society. Both the novelists deal with the personal and social difficulties of women. The two novelists beautifully depicts the trapped feelings of women which sometimes destroys their own self-identity. Throughout their works the protagonists seem to be lost, but after realizing their weakness, they try to overcome their weakness and strive to search their lost identity. Looking upon the difference in the works of Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, we can see that the protagonist of *The Edible Woman* seems to be reluctant in marrying Peter. They give more preference to their career. In Canada, though people give importance to the institution of marriage but they give the same equal importance to their professional life also. In the novel *The Edible Woman*, Marian, the protagonist wanted to marry Peter in the beginning, but as soon as she realized that this may impose restrictions on her personal life, she suddenly decided not to marry Peter. In India, more importance is given to the institution of marriage. Though in the 21st century, psychology of Indian women has altered. They are handling their personal and professional life simultaneously. This is providing them much more strength. The dual responsibility which they are dealing with infusing in them a feeling of confidence.

2. Conclusion

Both Atwood's and Divakaruni's novels reflect the plight of subjugated women. They always try to illustrate women's experience. In her novels, Atwood always works for the emancipation of her protagonist. Her *The Edible Woman* is a perfect example of women's triumph over patriarchal society. At the end of the novel, a shift from third person to first person shows that Marian finally gained her lost identity.

On the other hand, Divakaruni's '*Arranged Marriage*' reflects Indian women's adjustment throughout her life. It also shows how women are given more liberty these days. The ideal situation would be to provide freedom with certain limitations. Only that situation will create balance and will help to make a harmonious married life.

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