Between Reverence and Reduction: The Complexities of Female Identity in Sarah Elizabeth Holmes' and Margaret Atwood's Writings

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Abstract: *This study explores the intricate dynamics between Reverence and Reduction in the context of women's individuality by examining the works of 19th-century thinker Sarah Elizabeth Holmes and contemporary author Margaret Atwood. Through a comparative analysis of their perspectives, this research highlights the persistent struggle for autonomy and self–definition that women face. Sarah's advocacy for individual rights and natural law is juxtaposed with Atwood's literary explorations of women's experiences, revealing a complex interplay between societal expectations, personal identity, and the quest for independence. By investigating the tensions between Reverence and Reduction, this study argues that the erosion of individuality can lead to a power vacuum. The study concludes that the pursuit of autonomy and self-determination remains a fundamental challenge for women, underscoring the ongoing relevance of Holmes and Atwood's insights into human experience.*

Keywords: Autonomy, Individuality, Reduction, Reverence

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood was known not only because of her significant place in contemporary literature, but because her work provides a compelling framework for examining individualism and female identity. Although she is widely recognised as a feminist writer, this study argues that her literary vision extends beyond feminism and reflects a strong individualistic philosophy. Like Sarah Elizabeth Holmes, Atwood presents characters who assert their autonomy and negotiate their identities within restrictive social structures. This alignment makes her particularly relevant to the theoretical foundation of this study. Another key reason for considering Atwood is her exceptional characterisation. Her female characters are layered, conflicted, and psychologically complex. They are neither idealised victims nor simplistic symbols of empowerment. Instead, they embody contradictions and internal tensions that reveal the complexity of female identity. Atwood portrays identity as fluid and evolving, shaped by inner desires and external pressures. The paradoxical relationship between Reverence and Reduction argues that the valorisation of femininity often belies a deeper commodification of women's experiences. Theorists such as Damulescu contend that the exploitation of women has been reinscribed within the discourse of beauty culture and social media, thereby perpetuating patriarchal dominance and reinforcing gender inequality. By capitalizing on women's insecurities, these cultural narratives reify harmful gender stereotypes and reduce women to mere objects of consumption.

Through a close reading of select works by Sarah Elizabeth Holmes and Margaret Atwood, this study examines the complex interplay between objectification and individualism, highlighting social expectations and women's experiences. Reverence refers to societal adoration or valorization of women, where they are seemingly revered or held in high esteem. Reduction refers to the objectification and commodification of women, where they are reduced to mere objects and stripped of their agency, autonomy, and individuality. This paper argues that despite reverence or adoration, women are ultimately reduced to objects, highlighting the complex and problematic relationship between societal expectations and experiences. By integrating feminist theories, particularly those of Wendy McElroy, this analysis sheds new light on how women's lives

are shaped by the intersecting forces of patriarchy and commodification. This article poses two critical questions: (1) To what extent does the reverence of women perpetuate their objectification, effectively reducing them to commodities? (2) How do Atwood and Sarah navigate the complex relationship between objectification and individualism, illuminating the nuances of women's experiences?

By pioneering an innovative intersectional analysis, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist theory by exploring new perspectives on the interplay between literature and cultural critique. Through a nuanced examination of Atwood's works and the theoretical frameworks of McElroy and Kelly, this article offers a nuanced understanding of the ongoing struggle for women's individuality and freedom in a society that often reduces them to objects of adoration and consumption. While much scholarship focuses on Atwood's critique of patriarchy, this study emphasises her exploration of the individual's self. Her protagonists are not merely representatives of the collective feminist struggle; they are complex individuals confronting moral and existential challenges. Through their choices, resistance, and self-reflection, Atwood foregrounds personal agency and individual sovereignty.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Margaret Atwood's works, as analysed in Manuela López Ramírez's "Completion of Circle" (2022), explore individualism through protagonists' journeys toward self-realization or individuation. In "The Robber Bride" and "I'm Dreaming of Zenia with Bright Red Teeth", the female characters struggle with patriarchal definitions of femininity. Zenia, the femme fatale, catalyses their personal growth and pushes them to challenge societal norms. Through this narrative, Atwood highlights the complexities of female identity and the impact of patriarchal expectations on women. By navigating these challenges, the protagonists undergo significant transformations, ultimately discovering their own paths to self-realisation and individuation.

Atwood's writing critiques strict gender norms and the numbing effects of mass culture, prompting readers to reassess their connections to society. Her characters frequently experience spiritual disconnection and the erosion of personal freedom, highlighting the tension between individuality and conformity. Essay collections, such as Branko Borjup's "Margaret Atwood: Essays on Her Works" (2008), provide a deeper understanding of her style and global appeal, showcasing her nuanced exploration of the human experience and cultural commentary.

Reingard M. Nischik's (2010) "Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood" explores intersection of gender or genre in Atwood's writing, challenging traditional genre biases. While not directly addressing individualism, this paper's focus on gender dynamics sheds light on Atwood's nuanced portrayal of female characters and their experiences. By subverting genre conventions, Atwood creates complex narratives that often feature strong and independent women navigating societal expectations. This analysis offers insights into Atwood's literary style and contributions to feminist literature, indirectly touching on themes of individuality and self-expression in her works. (2009) in Re-Constructing Identity

through Language or Vision in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing or Cat's Eye emphasises Atwood's examination of individualism through protagonists navigating patriarchal ideologies. The characters' journeys towards self-discovery and identity reclamation highlight the tension between societal expectations and personal autonomy. Atwood's works advocate for creative non-victimhood, empowering individuals to redefine themselves beyond imposed roles. Through these narratives, Atwood sheds light on the complexities of female identity and the struggle for self-definition in a society dominated by male perspectives. By exploring these themes, Atwood's novels offer powerful portrayals of women's experiences and their quest for individuality.

Gheorghe Bichicean's (2023) " Who Knows What We'd Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?" explores how Atwood's characters are constrained by societal expectations rooted in sexism, classism, and religion. Her narratives highlight the struggle for personal identity and autonomy, showcasing the potential for resistance and self-reinvention. By subverting and rewriting imposed narratives, Atwood's characters seek to redefine themselves. This theme is particularly evident in her use of Scripture, which serves as a tool for both oppression and empowerment. Through her writing, Atwood offers powerful commentary on the human quest for individuality and self-definition, illuminating the complexities of navigating societal constraints and forging one's own path in life.

Margaret Atwood's works, as seen in Kate Moss's analysis (2011) " Margaret Atwood's Divided self", often portray protagonists struggling with divided selves, torn between societal expectations and personal histories. This inner conflict reflects broader themes of disunity and duality, highlighting the complexities of identity formation in the novel. Maternal figures play a vital role in shaping self-conception, impacting the protagonists' perceptions of themselves. Through these narratives, Atwood explores the tensions between individuality and societal norms, revealing the fragmented nature of human identity and the ongoing quest for self-definition and unity in the face of external and internal pressures. This theme is characteristic of Atwood's writing.

Margaret Atwood explores individualism through the concept of the Other, as analysed by Biljana Vlaškoviæ in "Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: Quest For Other, Conclusion the Self". The protagonist's journey towards self-discovery is deeply connected to her reconnection with nature, highlighting the importance of intersubjectivity and the interplay between the Self and the Other. Through this narrative, Atwood emphasises the need to reconcile internal and external dichotomies, ultimately revealing the fluid boundaries between the self and nature. This exploration underscores the complexities of identity formation and the quest for self-awareness, illustrating Atwood's nuanced portrayal of individualism and human connection.

METHODOLOGY

In light of the "intense, new, or striking qualities when the spatial, cognitive, or the intuitional distances between production, distribution, and consumption are great", Arjun Appadurai asserts that "culturally constructed stories and ideologies about commodity flows are

commonplace in all societies" (Appadurai, 56). According to him, stories and ideologies surrounding commodity flows, shaped by cultural contexts, are ubiquitous in all societies. These narratives gain significance when vast spatial, cognitive, or intuitive gaps exist between production, distribution, and consumption, highlighting the complex dynamics of global exchanges. Individualism is emphasized in Wendy Mcelroy's *Individualist Feminism of the Nineteenth Century*, where she affirms that it "is not merely contrarian position on problems such as affirmative action." It is a comprehensive, integrated system of beliefs that refers to the relationship between women and society (10). This ideology goes beyond simply opposing or reacting to specific issues, such as affirmative action. Instead, it is a holistic framework that encompasses a broad understanding of women's roles and experiences, offering a comprehensive perspective on gender dynamics and social structures. It is a proactive and integrated worldview rather than a reactive stance. Colebrook mentions the biased treatment of gender by quoting Rosi Braidotti's seminal work, *Patterns of Dissonance*, in which she challenges traditional views of gender and sexuality, arguing that a nuanced understanding of gender diversity recognises and respects the complexities of individual identities rather than erasing them. Moreover, she posits that sexual variance is not determined by biology or social constructs alone but instead emerges from individuals defining themselves as sexually distinct, encompassing their thoughts, bodies, motivations, and desires (85).

This study undertakes an in-depth examination of Margaret Atwood's oeuvre, focusing on three novels that exemplify her incisive critique of patriarchal societies and the concomitant objectification and subjugation of women. Atwood's seminal novel, *The Edible Woman*, presents a poignant portrayal of Marian McAlpin's entrapment in a stifling marital dynamic, wherein she is reduced to a mere commodity, stripped of agency and autonomy, as she struggles to assert her identity and self-worth. In *Life Before Man*, Atwood intricately weaves the narratives of Elizabeth and Lesje, two women navigating the complexities of a society entrenched in patriarchal norms. As they confront various challenges, both characters are subjected to insidious objectification, resulting in profound emotional trauma and emotional turmoil. *The Heart Goes Last* transports readers to the dystopian realm of Positron City, where the Chairman becomes embroiled in a totalitarian regime that systematically erodes individual autonomy and freedom. Coerced into conformity, Charmaine's existence is reduced to a state of servitude, underscoring the insidious consequences of patriarchal oppression in the novel. This study examines Atwood's select novels through the framework of individualism based on Sarah's and McElroy's theories. The analysis is divided into three critical categories: Fractured Identities, Constricted Agency, and Reclaiming the Self.

RESULTS

Fractured Identities:

A woman who was suppressed by her male counterparts is Sarah Elizabeth Holmes, a contributor to *Liberty* and an advocate of individualism. Radical men who followed Benjamin Tucker became her competitors.

Her first article, "Shall Women Beg for Liberty" (25 February 1888), was widely acknowledged for its depth in demanding a respectable and equitable society. "If a woman is boycotted because of the way she expresses her ideas in language or in her life, If she fears boycotting, then is a different matter that requires thorough consideration and choice", she states in Liberty, February 1888. I might decide not to commu-nicate my thoughts rather than go hungry, but if I have food, can I also forgo the rest? I shall request only bread and no smiles (142).

Sarah's strong words highlight the tension between intellectual freedom and material survival. If a woman faces socioeconomic hardship due to expressing her ideas, she must weigh the importance of self-expression against her basic needs. The author suggests that while survival (bread) is essential, she will not compromise her autonomy by seeking approval or validation (smiles) in exchange for survival. Instead, she prioritises her fundamental needs over societal expectations, asserting her independence and commitment to her beliefs. Patriarchal Ideology changes the whole aspect of knowing what individualism could actually offer. Zillah Eisenstein (1981) rightly stated, "The reason patriarchy exists is because a non-patriarchal sex-gender system could exist if allowed to" (2). Similarly, Atwood has expressed her ideas of such negligence of freedom through her novels. She is known for her complex writing and layered narratives, often employing non-linear storytelling with multiple narrative voices and symbolism.

Marian McAlpin, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, navigates the complexities of societal expectations as a young Canadian woman. Her demanding profession and marriage pose daily challenges, particularly in fulfilling her husband's conventional expectations. Working in market research, Marian feels disconnected from the consumerist culture that surrounds her. Her relationships with men are fragmented: Duncan lives in the present, refusing to consider the future, "…Duncan, she was caught in the present: they had no past or future" (227), while Peter embodies societal norms, prioritizing success, cleanliness and conformity. Marian's interactions with these men highlight her struggle to find her place within the societal constructs that surround her, "When you think about it, Peter is the perfect choice. In addition to being successful and attractive, he is also neat, which is important when living with someone" (124).

In *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth's identity is torn between her roles as a wife, mother, and individual. Her life is marked by trauma after Chris, an obsessive suitor, takes his own life when she rejects him, leaving her guilt-ridden. Meanwhile, Lesje, who works among palaeontologists, feels unloved and neglected in her relationship with William, an environmental engineer who prioritises work over emotional connection. Despite their differences, both women struggle with their identities and emotional pain, navigating complex relationships and grappling with love, loss, and self-discovery. " He has never called her without a practical message or something to say. I am coming over. See me at. I can't make it at. We should proceed. I would return when they moved in together. Furthermore, I will not be returning until" (20).

In *The Heat Goes Last*, Charmaine is exploited by

Ed, who objectifies and manipulates her vulnerability. When her husband passes away (his death is faked by the rescue operation), Ed tries to rekindle their connection, revealing his controlling and possessive nature. He seeks to dominate her movements, actions, and emotions, treating her as a possession rather than as an individual. Ed's Ego is threatened when chairmaine resists his advances, leading him to create a sexbot in her image to satisfy his desires. When this fails, he tries to keep her by his side, exemplifying the oppressive forces that reduce women to mere objects of desire. This experience leaves Chairmaine with deep-seated hurt, powerlessness, and self-doubt, fracturing her identity and shattering her dreams of becoming a doctor. "What a nerve, thinks Chaimaine with indignation. Making advances to a widow whose husband died bravely in a chicken accident" (199).

Constricted Agency:

Sarah Elizabeth Holmes highlights the inherent inequality faced by women due to biological differences in *Liberty*, May 12, 1888. She argues that women's reproductive roles lead to disproportionate burdens, making equality with men challenging. Homes emphasises the disparity in experiences between men and women in intimate relationships, where women bear the weight of consequences such as pregnancy and childbirth. This critique emphasises the societal and structural inequalities that exacerbate these differences. McElroy claims, "With nature having placed women at such a decided disadvantage in the path of life, of what avail are her protestations and cries for equality with man? To gratify one of her strongest natural desires, she is compelled to enter into relations with a man, of which burdensome and painful consequences she alone has to bear. Men's role is enjoyable throughout, but women pay a high price" (146).

Holmes' statement can be seen as a commentary on the patriarchal society's failure to acknowledge and address these disparities, leaving women at a disadvantage. Her words resonate with feminist arguments that seek to address these inequalities and promote a greater understanding of women's experiences. Her perspective is challenging and encourages nuanced discussions about equality, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach that considers the unique challenges faced by women.

One of those challenges is traced in *The Edible Woman, where* Marian McAlpin's relationship with Peter becomes strained as she loses interest in food and feels suffocated by his expectations. She rebels by baking a cake with a peculiar design, symbolising her resistance to Peter's attempts to control her. The Cake represents her desire to break free from Peter's objectification, where she is reduced to a mere possession. "The Cake had no eyes or hair, just a mouth, and it looked weird... She drew a nose and two big eyes, adding two eyebrows and a lot of eyelashes, one above each eye…" (176). Marian feels as if she is being seen as an individual. In contrast, Duncan sees her as a refreshing change and acknowledges his obsession with her without promising a future. In *Life Before Man*, Lesje's relationship with William subtly erodes her own autonomy. Despite being independent, Lesje's emotional dependency and uncertainty about her self-worth make her vulnerable to manipulation. He took advantage of her life and sexually

molested her, which left Lesje in emotional and physical pain, as she had hard bruises on her body. Baker says, "sexual harassment in context of interlocking systems of oppression, to retender the issue by analysing the ways American culture still embraces hegemonic discourses of male sexual dominance, and to challenge that discourse collectively both inside and outside the workplace" (445). Atwood highlights his inconsistent behaviour and lack of giving her the freedom that she deserved regarding her choice. This powerful incident highlights how power imbalances can quietly undermine a woman's agency, leading to self-abandonment in the name of love. Lesje's experience serves as a nuanced exploration of how relationships can shape and reshape one's sense of self, she says, "She has always thought that rape was something the Russians did to the Ukrainians and the Germans did to the Jews more sneakily. She never thought that William Wasp, who came from a good family in London, Ontario, would do that to her. They have known each other for years and talk about things like pollution and species getting extinct. They live together!" (186).

In *The Heart Goes Last*, a stark dichotomy exists between ideal and real societies. Chaimaine's perception of Positron City as a flawless and pristine residence starkly contrasts with its actual nature. Despite its supposed ideals, Positron embodies the vulnerability of women, highlighting their struggle for individuality and distinctiveness within a rigid, patriarchal framework. The project's rules and regulations dominate, demanding blind compliance and discipline from residents. "Consilience was a closed system- once inside, nobody went out" (65). Chairmaine was used as an instrument to bring Ed's illusions into reality, similarly McElroy seconds the thought "…relatively inoffensive acts, contribute to a social and sexual environment that makes rape not only possible, but politically inevitable" (208).

Reclaiming the self:

A Day Without Feminism showcases the significant progress made by feminist movements over the past few decades. In Just a generation, the world has undergone a profound transformation, with substantial changes in social norms, opportunities, and rights. Baumgardner and Richards state, "After 30 years of feminism, our world barely resembles the one we were born into, and there is still a lot left to do" (33). Despite this progress, much work remains to achieve true equality and address ongoing challenges. Sarah says in *Individualist Feminism of the Nineteenth Century*, "The satisfaction of a strong desire will no longer be seen by a woman as a more or less unfortunate natural consequence, but rather as an advantage…." (150)

From this perspective, Marian's transformation in *The Edible Woman* is a powerful exploration of self-discovery and autonomy. As she confronts the suffocating influence of Peter's expectations, she breaks free from the mould he has tried to shape her into. Atwood masterfully portrays Marian's journey, highlighting the liberation that comes from shedding oppressive relationships and embracing one's true self. Marian's smile signifies her newfound confidence and self-acceptance. She is no longer the woman she thought she was; she is meant to be. This moment of self-discovery is a testament to Marian's growth and her ability to find her voice. With a sense of empowerment, Marian takes a step

towards a more authentic life, one in which she can be true to herself. Her story serves as a powerful commentary on the importance of self-discovery and autonomy.

Lesje's journey in *Life Before Man* culminates in a pivotal moment when she discovers that she is pregnant with Nate's child. Faced with societal pressures and Nate's initial reluctance, Lesje must find her voice and make decisions that defy expectations. After grappling with her thoughts, she chooses to assert her autonomy by deciding to keep the child and confront Nate about her condition. This moment marks a significant transformation for Lesje as she sheds her passivity and naivety. Having been treated as an object by the men in her life- Nate's exploitation and William's emotional neglect and abuse- Lesje emerges stronger, declaring that 'she is not sorry" (311). This declaration signifies her growth, self-acceptance, and determination to forge her own path, no longer silenced or subjugated by others. Through Lesje's narrative, Atwood powerfully explores the themes of female agency, resilience, and the complexities of human relationships. Charmaine in THGL grows to distrust the position plan as she uncovers Ed's sinister intentions. His plan to exploit and objectify individuals for personal gratification horrifies her: "Prison abuses! Organ harvesting! Sex slaves created by neurosurgery!" (285). The revelation of a new project aimed at creating entities for amorous enjoyment through neurosurgery further disturbs her consciousness. Charmaine's concerns deepen as she realises the true nature of the plan, which erodes fundamental human value. Ed's motives are exposed, and Charmaine is left devastated by the disturbing reality of being treated as a mere object for other's pleasure. She is appalled by the plan's implications, and her trust is devastated. However, we can take it even further. Okay, concisely stated: "Why not utilize an existing brain and body to cause that entity, that person, to keep themselves from placing excessive emphasis on it through a painless invention?" (262).

CONCLUSION

Atwood's female characters are often depicted as fragmented and fractured, bearing the scars of reduction, being objectified and treated as mere objects, stripped of their agency and identity. This reduction stems from vulnerabilities and wounds. Meanwhile, societal reverence, that is, the adoration and worship of patriarchal norms, further entrenches their oppression. The interplay between reduction and reverence sparks a struggle for recognition and individuality as these women navigate the complexities of their fractured selves and strive to reclaim their identities. In *Life Before Man*, Lesje's traumatic experience exemplifies the violent outcomes of such a reduction. Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, Charimaine's duplication as a sex robot underscores that women's bodies are for male pleasure only. This reduction is often reinforced by societal norms. Atwood's portrayal highlights how these norms lead to the erasure of women's individuality and autonomy. The internalisation of these expectations can result in self-erasure, as seen in *The Edible Woman*, where the protagonist's relationship with food reflects her disconnection from her desires and needs. Ultimately, Atwood's works underscore women's struggle for self-definition in a society that often reduces them to mere objects of desire. Hooks states that the "vision of power that comes to mind is power that comes through the exploitation and oppression of others" (36). In conclusion, Atwood's work offers a rich and multidimensional foundation for examining individualism and female identity. While she is often categorised primarily as a feminist writer, this study demonstrates that her literary vision extends beyond a single ideological framework. Atwood's protagonists are not confined to representing collective feminist resistance; rather, they emerge as autonomous individuals who navigate moral uncertainty, conflict, and social constraints. Through their introspection, choices, and acts of resistance, Atwood foregrounds personal agency and the evolving nature of self. Her nuanced characterisation reveals identity as fluid, shaped by both internal desires and external structures, yet never fully determined by them. By emphasising autonomy, moral complexity, and self-definition, Atwood invites a broader critical perspective that recognises the sovereignty of the individual within oppressive systems. Therefore, her work remains particularly relevant to this research, illuminating the intricate interplay between individuality and the female experience in contemporary literature.

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