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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Non-Edible Women: The Question of Marriage in
Mid-20th Century Feminist Thought through the Lens
of Atwood and Soueif**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of Master of Arts

By

Asmaa Abdallah

Under the supervision of **Dr. Amy Motlagh**

May/ 2015

The American University in Cairo

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DEDICATION

To the strong women in my life,
who continue to inspire me every day.

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ABSTRACT

Non-Edible Women: The Question of Marriage in Mid-20th Century Feminist Thought through the Lens of Atwood and Soueif

By Asmaa Abdallah

Adviser: Dr. Amy Motlagh

This thesis examines the relationship between fiction and theory by examining how authors Margaret Atwood and Ahdaf Soueif interact with second-wave feminist discourse in the four works: *The Edible Woman*, *Cat's Eye*, *Aisha* and *In the Eye of the Sun*. The two authors, who seem to have different backgrounds and are writing about different contexts, engage in their exploration of the institution of marriage and the conditions of women in society by responding to contact with the works of Anglo-American feminists Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer who call for reforming domestic politics as a means for social change. Improving the conditions of the women within the household and liberating themselves sexually are examples that Atwood and Soueif portray as possible solutions for women's issues within oppressive societies. The two authors also enact the theories of French Feminists H el ene Cixous and Julia Kristeva when it comes to their approach to language as a realm that is male-dominated and needs to be claimed by women. They do so by defying the expectations of readers with regard to genre conventions, experimenting with narrative techniques and adopting a circular mode of telling their stories rather than the linear one associated with men. In their depiction of marriage and gender, Atwood and Soueif present the ideas of these second-wave feminists in ways that do not always concur. There are instances where Atwood seems to criticize some of these ideas, or at least she demonstrates that they do not always work: particularly the idea of the sisterhood, which anticipates the advent of post-feminism later in the 20th century. By interacting with the theoretical aspect of feminism in this way Atwood and Soueif's works can be seen as examples of how fiction can contribute to and impact theory.

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Introduction

After women in the West gained the right to vote in 1920s, and with their return to focus on family life in the post WWII era, a new wave of feminism arose by the mid-century, this time no longer concerned with the position of women in politics, but rather in the home. Issues such as sexuality, reproductive rights, notions of femininity that are imposed by society took center stage. By the 1960s, many terms were born out of the feminist discourse of this second-generation movement: “sisterhood is powerful,” “consciousness raising,” “the politics of housework,” “the pro-woman line,” but most important of which was “the personal is the political” which became the slogan for the movement. Two important figures of this movement were Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer whose respective books *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and *The Female Eunuch* (1970) moved the area of struggle of women from the political sphere, where she had to fight to gain the right to vote, to her private life.

A strong influence on Friedan and Greer, as well as on other second-wave feminists, was Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex*. Published in 1949, de Beauvoir’s book focuses on the otherness of women based on biological distinctions as well as patriarchal social traditions that make women the “second,” inferior sex. De Beauvoir argues that women have taken part in othering themselves by accepting this classification imposed upon them by men. She explores the otherness of women, their lack of subjectivity and suggested that the reason these women never rose up against their oppressors was due to the intertwined personal relations they have with them in the house. She asks:

Why do women not contest male sovereignty? No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But

in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in woman come from? (De Beauvoir 17)

The main ideas in *The Second Sex* paved the way for both Anglo-American second-wave feminists (like Greer and Friedan) as well as the so-called “French Feminists” who sought social change for this otherness of women through different means. While the Anglo-American feminists advocated reform of domestic politics, French Feminists focused on language as the means to any change.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan discusses “The Problem That Has No Name,” which women endure because of the expectations and image that the media and society impose on young women:

She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of. (Friedan 46)

Women realized there was something wrong, something missing, but they didn’t know what it was or how to express it. Friedan explains: “Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say “I feel as if I don’t exist” (48).

Psychiatrists came to call it “the housewife’s syndrome” (Friedan 49). Friedan explores how mass culture, and consumerism aided in the idea that the woman’s place and role begins and ends in the home, taking care of the house and children. Education, career, and any work other than housework were regarded as unimportant and unfeminine, and women were encouraged to stay away from it.

Another important work in the second-wave movement in the 1970s was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, in which she says that men have oppressed women by separating them from their libido, and that the way to women's liberation was through celebration of the differences women have from men, and through sexual liberation. Women must take charge of their sexuality rather than embrace the image imposed on them by society. Greer explains, "What happens is that the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of the other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity" (17). Her suggestion is that rather than be passive, women should take control of their sexuality, "[m]en are tired of having all the responsibility for sex, it is time they were relieved of it" (Greer 356).

Most second-wave Anglo-American feminists argued that in order for women to regain their subjectivity they needed to move away from the nuclear family model and its expectations. Only then could they lead more fulfilling lives in which they would not have to experience their lives as objects while men are the subjects, or endure the problem with no name. Although we cannot always verify direct influence, it is clear that some of the main ideas in Friedan's and Greer's very important books permeated culture at various levels. For example, the Canadian author Margaret Atwood acknowledges having read *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Second Sex* "like many at the time" (qtd. in *Feminism and Fiction* 9). Although in the same statement she distances herself from the second-wave feminism and would rather call her first novel *The Edible Woman* "protofeminist" rather than feminist. It is true that this novel came out in 1969, which coincided with the beginning of the second wave of feminist movement, but Atwood explains in her introduction to the novel that it took her four years to publish the novel and accordingly it

cannot be related to feminist discourse that emerged later. Atwood is an environmental activist, who says of feminism: “I radically think that women are human beings and therefore they have all the variety that other human beings have. But just because some of them are wonderful, some of them are terrible and most of them are in between, that should not have any bearing on the laws” (Atwood, Interview).

Despite her feminist tendencies and her belief that feminism is “a set of human rights,” Atwood has refused to label her novel as feminist, but Fiona Tolan states that, “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” (*Feminism and Fiction 2*). In addition, Atwood rejects the idea that her work is ideological but does not deny that it contains feminist ideas and concerns.

Egyptian Anglophone author Ahdaf Soueif clearly accepts the feminist label; perhaps it is because she is writing some twenty years later when feminism is no longer a taboo subject.

Soueif says in an interview:

Yes I am [a feminist]. I think that it’s sad that a lot of women, particularly Arab women, reject feminism. However, they clearly are feminists in that they believe that women are equal as men and they believe that women should be paid the same amount of money for doing the same job. . . .
(qtd. in Roushdy)

Margaret Atwood and Ahdaf Soueif are canonical authors from backgrounds that seem, on first glance, dramatically different. Atwood is a Canadian-born author who writes about the condition of women in society. Atwood has continued to live and write in her nation of origin, though her works have been translated widely and are broadly considered canonical. Soueif, on the other hand, is an Egyptian-born author who for much of her life has lived in England and

written in English. Unlike Atwood, she is from a family of upper-middle-class intellectual elites, a status that conferred upon her a number of privileges. Her first book, *Aisha*, was published in 1983, some twenty years after Atwood wrote *The Edible Woman*.

The writings of both authors have often been read in terms of their biographies. Indeed, it does appear that these two writers use the personal as basis for social and political critique, as per second-wave discourse, thus engaging with many of its themes in their works. However, their novels also contain criticism of the movement -- or at least a departure from it at some moments. This is most evident with regard to the idea that women should collectively empower one another and form a sisterhood, wherein they can find strength in each other; this is far from the case, particularly in Atwood's novels, where women are powerful, often menacing, figures who do not always help their "sisters" but often hinder them. Critic Patricia Goldblatt has noted that in *The Edible Woman*, Marian is one of the women who conspires against other women by finding out their preferences in order to sustain the consumerist system that subjugates them (Goldblatt 279). None of Marian's homosocial relationships qualify as forming this supportive community of women described by second-wave feminist discourse.

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood's "ambivalent feminism" (Howells 584) becomes even clearer as she has her protagonist speak on the very subject of feminism, dodging all the questions her interviewer is asking her: "What I have to say is not altogether what she [the reporter] wants to hear. She'd prefer stories of outrage, although she'd be unlikely to tell them about herself, she's too young. Still people my age are supposed to have stories of outrage; at least insult, at least put-down" (*Cat's Eye* 68). And although she could tell her interviewer these stories, she chooses not to; instead, she chooses to downplay this side of her life story.

Elaine seems to be the mouthpiece of Atwood on issues related to feminism, clearly refusing to be “Woman” when she says, “I am not Woman, and I’m damned if I’ll be shoved into it” (*Cat’s Eye* 277). This is Atwood’s own stance. In one interview, she cited as a reason for distancing herself from the movement the fact that she herself feels excluded from the movement, which she considers to be an American one:

Someone who understands my position would more likely be from a peripheral culture such as my own, someone from Scotland or the West Indies or a black feminist in the States . . . What the term “feminist writer” means to certain American feminists cannot mean the same thing it means to me. They are on the inside looking at each other, while I am on the outside. (FitzGerald qtd. in “Situating Canada” 139)

This is confirmed by the fact that she includes a number of minorities, her father’s Indian student, their Jewish neighbor, and her Scottish teacher in the novel *Cat’s Eye*, and these are the people with whom Elaine seems to identify the most.

Souef also does not offer sisterhood as an easy solution in her works. In fact, the women in her stories often betray one another. In “The Wedding of Zeina,” Zeina is betrayed by her family and relatives, including the female relatives who help her groom violate her on the wedding night. Then in “Her Man,” Zeina in turn, betrays her husband’s second wife by manipulating her and getting rid of her so she can be his only wife.

For both authors, marriage is a social institution crucial to understanding women’s subjectivity and position in society. In this way, we can speculate that the influence of second-wave feminism and its concern for the private sphere has touched them. In this thesis I will examine how these two writers from seemingly different backgrounds are commonly engaged in the exploration of marriage as an institution that continues to shape and define women’s lives. In

doing so, these authors seem to respond to the theoretical discourse of second-wave Anglo-American feminism, and one can also find in their writings what has been defined by French Feminists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray to be “écriture féminine.” Thus both Atwood and Soueif seem to be entering into an interactive relationship with theoretical discourse of second-wave feminism, first by responding to contact with the theories and writings of the aforementioned feminist critics, but also by developing their own ideas and concerns about the same issues and about the theories. The two writers here perform the function of literature that has been defined by critics Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in their work *Theory of Literature* as being “a form of philosophy, as “ideas” wrapped in form; and it is analyzed to yield “leading ideas” (106). These ideas are then disseminated again into the cultural milieu which impacts society and theorists and leads to development or changing the course of theories related to the same subjects. In this way, Atwood and Soueif demonstrate the impact fiction can have on shaping theoretic and academic discourse, as well as in forming new ideas that address society’s problems and issues.

In Chapter One, I will demonstrate how the depictions of marriage in the works of these authors heavily echo and respond to the feminist criticism of the institution offered by Anglo-American second-wave feminists Friedan and Greer, particularly how women suffer from the problem with no name which is portrayed in the works through metaphors and monologues that establish their loss of identity, sense of self-alienation, and patterns of femininity that they are expected to fit into. I will also examine the alternatives put forth by the novelists as they have these female characters resist the institution of marriage and the social codes that are imposed on them

through it. Whether it is an extramarital affair, resorting to art, a divorce or separation, most of the characters of these works do not succumb to the pressures exerted upon them.

In Chapter Two, I will show how through their writing techniques, including narration, and experimentation with traditional forms, Atwood and Soueif seem to create their own kind of *Écriture Féminine* that echoes French Feminist discourse by H  l  ne Cixous and Julia Kristeva of how female writing might be like. The two novelists seem to particularly focus on writing the female body, again an idea advocated by Cixous as a means of creating feminine writing that would counterbalance patriarchal language.

In the conclusion, I will demonstrate how the works of these writers seem to have absorbed much of the Anglo-American feminist discourse written by Friedan and Greer, and how they seem to enact the theories of French Feminists Cixous and Kristeva, whether consciously or simply by being part of the same historical moment. However, these writers seem to engage with the concerns and ideas advocated by second-wave feminists in ways that do not always concur.

There are instances where Atwood seems to criticize some of these ideas, or at least she demonstrates that they do not always work: particularly the idea of the sisterhood, which anticipates the advent of post-feminism later in the 20th century. By interacting with the theoretical aspect of feminism in this way and writing about it in their works, the two writers disseminate their own ideas and impressions about it into society. This in turn can develop the course of these theories either further in the same direction or in a new one. Accordingly, Atwood and Soueif's works can be seen as examples of how fiction can contribute to and impact theory.

Chapter One: Second-Wave Feminist Criticism of Marriage

“Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist.”

-Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

American feminist Betty Friedan dedicates the first chapter of her groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* to this problem that has no name; namely that married women of the 1950s and 60s of America suffered from an inexplicable dissatisfaction with their lives. While these women do not lack husbands, or children, or homes with the latest products, they do lack financial independence, careers, and a sense of self-fulfillment.

Friedan was one of many second-wave feminists who chose to examine the daily practical concerns in the personal lives of women, particularly related to the institution of marriage. Alongside feminist critics Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Gloria Steinem, Friedan tackled these concrete problems and analyzed the reasons behind them in an attempt to find a way to improve the personal lives and conditions of women as a way to make social and political change.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the works of Soueif and Atwood respond to and reflect the major themes related to marriage in second-wave Anglo-American feminists represented by Friedan and Greer such as sexuality, femininity, consumerism, education and sisterhood. I also examine the solutions and alternatives as set forth by these feminists and represented in the works of Atwood and Soueif.

The Problem that Has No Name

The most prominent idea of Friedan's book is the problem without a name, which is presented in several ways in the works of Atwood and Soueif. Marian's old college friend Clara in *The Edible Woman* is perhaps the best embodiment of Friedan's problem without a name, showing how marriage can, rather than be a means of self actualization for a woman, turn into a destructive force that robs her of a sense of purpose and her agency to act. Clara was a college student who chose to drop out in order to get married and have children. She is dissatisfied with her life, or, in her own words when asked how she is doing, she replies "shitty, thanks" (*Edible Woman* 24).

It is no wonder that Marian is "glad she wasn't Clara" and why should she be? (*Edible Woman* 142) Clara is described as "passive," "helpless," and completely lacking control over the simplest aspects of her life: "she simply stood helpless while the tide of dirt rose around her, unable to stop it or evade it" (34). Of course Marian does everything in her power to make sure she doesn't turn into another Clara, but despite her clear statement that her marriage would not necessarily turn out that way, she becomes strongly averse to the idea of marriage (*Edible Woman* 108). Yet she does not articulate this aversion; nor does she seem to even be aware of it at first. In fact, upon receiving a marriage proposal, Marian immediately accepts and begins planning this new chapter in her life, but she is subsequently overcome with a malaise for which she can find neither a name nor a valid explanation.

As she tries to fit into society's and Peter's expectations of her as a prospective wife, Marian can no longer relate to herself. This self-alienation occurs on a very physical level; she loses control

over her body. The instances of her loss of control of her body and not just that but also losing touch with it are many.

After a few more instances of feeling ill at ease with her body, Marian begins to feel another malaise which is a cannibalistic threat that robs her of the ability to eat and also by a feeling that she is being consumed and hunted by her future husband whom she confronts at the end as “trying to destroy her” (*Edible Woman* 299). Gradually Marian’s body rejects different types of food. It starts with steak on a date with Peter. Again she tries to reason with herself; “[e]veryone eats cows, it’s natural; you have to eat to stay alive, meat is good for you” (*Edible Woman* 164). But she fails. Eggs, vegetables and more are then added to the list of foods she cannot get herself to eat.

Cat’s Eye’s Elaine Risley also suffers from the problem with no name. Under the weight of domestic life, childrearing and a dysfunctional marriage, Risley finds herself unable to paint or work or do anything. Her husband is unhappy about her staying up to work on her art. All that matters to him was that it doesn’t eat away at his own time with her. But the ideas of gender roles that are prescribed by society are the ones that make her life miserable. The reason evades her, much like the feminine mystique, she says: “it strikes me with no warning that I am miserable” (*Cat’s Eye* 217). For Elaine, this ends in a suicide attempt followed by a divorce.

Soueif’s Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun*, who has far more self-awareness and who is outspokenly analytical of her situation, is able to pinpoint the exact problem. After she is married, Asya often finds herself vacant, silent; she has to censor her words in order to fit the image her husband has in mind for her. She does not feel like herself:

I feel like a stranger. I feel like I'm acting, I know I'm just closing my mouth and suppressing ninety per cent of the things that come into my head... I feel like I could – should – slip away and leave some cardboard cutout like his Kodak ladies in my place and he wouldn't notice the difference, or if he did he'd think it was an improvement. (*Eye of the Sun* 573)

Asya's sense of self-alienation started with her being a crying doll (*Eye of the Sun* 600) and she adds that she is "surprised when I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror" (*Eye of the Sun* 662). She explains this by saying that she can't feel anything which sounds, again, very similar to Marian.

And when Asya decides to break away she expresses the reason quite perfectly: "I don't know who I am any more. I don't know what I want... I think your thoughts instead of my own..." Then she describes her dilemma: that she feels she always belonged to someone, if it is not her parents, then it is the husband (*Eye of the Sun* 583). And to put it metaphorically, she describes the dynamics of their relationship in terms of a play in which he is the author and director and she is just the cast (*Eye of the Sun* 593).

Because of her social class, Asya does not become a housewife, but she still suffers from this nameless problem. Like Marian, it begins from the time she is engaged. She is against anything that appears to follow a very traditional path, from having to wait until they are married to have sex to the long engagement and the family interactions that are more about society's expectations than her own wishes. Asya does not have control over when she can marry. She hates the waiting, dreads it and resents it: she says that this time "is actually pushing [them] apart. [They] are not drawing gradually closer; [they] are solidifying in their positions. And [their] positions are separate" (*Eye of the Sun* 183). With the engagement, and the family coming into the relationship, Asya finds that the romance and spontaneity are no longer there. Rather than spend

time alone with her future husband, Asya has to share him with her family who have to get to know him. Asya complains that she is unhappy with the whole idea of the engagement for its lack of spontaneity, wishing it were different, but her best friend puts it “[t]his is marriage. It can’t be any other way” (*Eye of the Sun* 228). Once married, this lack of control is intensified. This is expressed clearly to her professor when she says “all my decisions are being made for me” (*Eye of the Sun* 268).

Yet, she manages to escape the pitfalls that many of the other characters fall prey to by maintaining a sense of herself. For example, she has the self-awareness that she has to have her own independent life. When asked why she bothers to do the PhD when it means she will be separated from her husband, she explains, “I don’t think I could live without doing something that’s mine” (*Eye of the Sun* 521). This is verified upon deciding to separate, Asya has second thoughts while standing outside his window and looking in after she has left him. She imagines that she goes back in and “vanishes” (*Eye of the Sun* 734). This fear of vanishing is similar to Marian’s fear of being consumed. They both fear for their identities and literal selves from the threat of extinction.

Education vs. Marriage

What most of Atwood and Soueif’s female characters have in common -- in addition to suffering under the weight of a patriarchal institution -- is that they were all college educated. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan discusses how education, though an early goal of the women’s movement, compounds the problem that has no name which housewives face. According to Friedan, “[s]ome said it was the old problem – education; more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their role as housewives” (49). After their academic

achievements women are reduced to housework and denied the opportunity to realize their potential. Rather than build on the accomplishments of previous generations to gain access to education, Friedan notes with irony how the problem was dismissed with “drastic solutions no one could take seriously” such as not denying women access to universities and colleges (Friedan 50). In *The Edible Woman*, Joe, Marian’s friend and Clara’s husband, repeats this analysis when he declares that it is worse for women who have been university educated because they realize they have potential and are more aware of what they have to give up. Unlike the experts in *The Feminine Mystique*, Joe does not “suggest that women no longer be admitted to the four-year colleges and universities” (Friedan 50). Instead, Joe suffices to say that marriage has destroyed the core of his wife and that it is harder for university girls to adapt to married life (*Edible Woman* 259). Len, however, expresses his outright disapproval of university education when he discovers that Ainsley has deceived him, that she is not innocent but rather that she is college-educated (*Edible Woman* 172).

The theme of education as incompatible with marriage also appears in *Cat’s Eye*. When Elaine starts studying Art and Archaeology at university she notes, “[n]one of the girls students want to be an artist... or, in one case, a curator in a gallery. Or else they are vague about their wants, which means they intend to get married before any of these other things become necessary” (*Cat’s Eye* 199). For most young women, college education is seen as something inconsequential because they will not use it, or it is simply a pastime until they do get married, which is their top priority because society has depicted it as something indispensable to their lives.

As the only female student who genuinely wants to become an artist, Elaine finds herself identifying more with boys than with the girls, who only seem to be passing their time at college.

Elaine starts out by trying to dress like the other girls, in the cashmere twin sets and heels and earrings, but then she begins to dress more like the boys. Her male classmates take her seriously as an art student but do not really consider her to be a female; rather, she is one of them. Elaine notes that they call the other female students “lady painters.” When Elaine asks whether she is a lady painter, the explanation is: “If you’re bad, you’re a lady painter. Otherwise you’re just a painter” (*Cat’s Eye* 201).

Why Marry?

All of these female characters seem to be aware somehow of the threat looming before them. Their perception of marriage even before entering it, their attempts at avoiding it, or at least avoiding the traditional version of it, seems to imply that marriage entails this nameless hostile problem that will forever ruin their lives.

In *The Edible Woman*, marriage is first introduced when Peter is traumatized by the marriage of his last remaining bachelor friend Trigger. Peter refers to it as being “like an epidemic” and Ainsley is described as being “decidedly anti-marriage” (22) and (37). At Elaine’s school as a child in *Cat’s Eye*, there is also a silent categorization of women as those who are married and those who are not, which indicates to Elaine what kind of future she should opt for, “[t]he teachers are often women over a certain age, women who aren’t married. Married women don’t have jobs; we know this from our own mothers. There is something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women” (23).

Yet, at the same time, Elaine considers marriage to be an insult. “I don’t want to marry Joseph, or anyone else. I have come to think of marriage as dishonorable, a crass trade-off rather than a

free gift” (*Cat’s Eye* 106). When Joseph says that she is “the sort of girl who should get married” she thinks, “this may be an insult, but I’m not sure” (*Cat’s Eye* 243). She adds, “Anyway, I’ve put myself beyond marriage, I can see it back there, innocent and beribboned, like a child’s doll; irretrievable” (*Cat’s Eye* 216). Similarly, in Soueif’s novel, *In the Eye of the Sun* Asya Al-Ulama seeks out marriage because it is the only way to be with the man she loves. But, like Marian, once she begins to take steps towards getting married, her relationship with Peter deteriorates.

Yet, even for non-educated, non-career oriented women, marriage is depicted as an oppressive force that dominates women and controls their fate. Soueif’s short stories “The Wedding of Zeina” and “Her Man” from the collection *Aisha* offer a different critique of marriage, particularly because they are about a very different socio-economic class than the one the main character belongs to. In the former, Aisha’s nurse, Dada Zeina recounts how at the tender age of 15, she was prepared for marriage without quite understanding what it was, then on her wedding night she was victim of a common practice in which her new husband deflowered her and put proof of her virginity – her family’s honor – on display, as one would show off a new product/commodity that is sound and unused.

“Her Man” continues with Dada Zeina’s life, after a few years of marriage when her husband has taken up a second younger wife. Her way of fixing this situation is tricking the new wife by making her appear to be cheating on her husband in order to get rid of her. She neither blames nor resents the man, but prioritizes his presence in her life above all else.

Why are these women so quick to rush into the institution despite of their negative view of it? Apart from Zeina, whose marriage was not a matter of choice but rather the fate of all women that fall into that socio-economic class, perhaps it is the question of identity, or as Friedan puts it,

“[w]e don’t like to be asked what we want to do. None of us know. None of us even like to think about it. The ones who are going to be married right away are the lucky ones. They don’t have to think about it” (92). It is a hard question indeed and the feminine mystique offers an easy way out since it “permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity” (Friedan 92). Accordingly, it makes sense for Marian to think “[o]f course I’d always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does... I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is...” (*Edible Woman* 108).

In addition, the freedom that results from not getting married comes at a price. Greer argues, “[l]iberty is terrifying but it is also exhilarating. Life is not easier or more pleasant for the Noras who have set off on their journey to awareness, but it is more interesting, nobler even” (22). This is evident for some of the female characters of Atwood and Soueif. It is easier for them to opt for marriage than figure out what to do with their lives. And when forced to choose ultimately they are not really sure what to do. For example when Marian turns down Peter at the end of the novel, she has no sense of direction for her future, but at least she has made progress in that she is not under the threat of being consumed. Elaine has her art and with it a sense of purpose and direction, Asya also has aspirations for an ambitious career.

Consumerism and Femininity

Another theme prevalent in second-wave feminism is consumerism and how the notion of femininity is created in the minds of women through a consumerist oriented media. Friedan elaborates on this idea in *The Feminine Mystique*:

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of boredom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home... It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and the spirit? (Friedan 61)

Here she describes the content of the magazines that targeted women as their audiences and which were devoid of any serious content. The result is that women are expected by society and sometimes even by themselves to fit into this mold regardless of what they really want.

Atwood represents the connection between consumerism and femininity most prominently in *Cat's Eye*, although she had begun earlier with *The Edible Woman*. In both novels, women, and people in general, are encouraged to buy products, regardless of how necessary they are. Marian works in a consumer survey company and is aware of her role in manipulating the surveys in order to better be able to sell products that are of no use really. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine arrives at an urban society to find that she and her family are different and not in a good way. She becomes fascinated by the clothes her friends and their mothers wear. She is introduced to the Eaton catalogue which is to be “treated with reverence” and the shopping experience which is completely new to Elaine is a big example of this: “I began to want things I’ve never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse of my own” (*Cat's Eye* 39). This identification with clothes takes another level “[m]y clothes seem a part of me, even the ones I’ve outgrown” (*Cat's Eye* 60). The pressure put on Elaine to fit into this profile of femininity starts long before she is married – it can be said to be a criticism of her own parents’ marriage and lifestyle – the fact that her mother does not conform to the standard image. It continues well into her adult life and becomes apparent when she is shopping for something to wear for her retrospective and/or the

interview with the cultural reporter before that. She is constantly uncomfortable and unable to fit in.

After being introduced to this type of consumerist society, Elaine becomes critical of her mother because she does not dress the way the other mothers do, nor does she take joy and pride in the cooking and housework as they do. She particularly does not dress as the pictures in Elaine's school reader shows. Her mother does not go to the hairdresser like Carol's mother. These ideas of femininity are directly linked to the consumerism that Betty Friedan introduces in *The Feminine Mystique*, in which consumption mainly targets women and housewives. Elaine's view of her mother becomes dependent on these gender roles of domestic life as it is prescribed by these other mothers, and also as it described in her school books. Although she was perfectly content with their earlier life, she begins to think that it is irresponsible of her mother not to care about how she looks or dresses, not to "give a hoot" (*Cat's Eye* 154).

Marian's preparation for her party with Peter is also a clear example of fitting into this model of femininity. The red dress she wore, the girdle she was morally blackmailed into buying although she knew she didn't need it, and especially her makeup. The end result was:

Marian stared into the Egyptian lidded and outlined and thickly fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before. She was afraid to even blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain. "Thank you," she said doubtfully. (*Edible Woman* 244)

In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Saif showers Asya with gifts and possessions. He inflicts upon her his own view of femininity. "Her clothes have become much more subdued in the last two years. She hardly ever wears patterns anymore.... Saif's engagement ring is on her right hand and the Omega he gave her on her left wrist. Her nails are the matt beige which he prefers" (*Eye of the*

Sun 228). He takes it to the point where she breaks down crying once and asks, must it always be beige? She does not want to have to wear the things she did not like. Later on when they have separated, he has inflicted this same style on a new victim, the same beige outfits that he wanted Asya to wear, are now being worn by his new girlfriend. Asya, watching from the outside, is grateful to have escaped.

Also, Asya dedicates so much of her time to just this: “the backbreaking two hours that she has spent over the *halawa*, the three hours on her hair, the mud-mask and the thirty minutes at the living room table with her elbows planted in the two halves of a lemon to make them silky soft, the careful pedicure, the nail varnish...” (*Eye of the Sun* 406).¹ And perhaps because of these things that her friend, the liberated and confident Mina probably views Asya as “a frivolous conventional woman” (*Eye of the Sun* 405). Secretly, Asya wishes to be like Mina, who has flouted these expectations of femininity fearlessly; “she wears her nails square and clean like a man’s and six weeks ago she had cut her hair... to a short, soft brush just covering her scalp” (*Eye of the Sun* 380). Here is a woman who will prioritize the things that matter to her than catering to the looks that people – including her own boyfriend – expect of her.

The problem with having women fit into this imposed model of femininity to serve consumerist purposes is that they also turn into objects to be infantilized by men. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, “He is the Absolute. He is the Subject. She is the Object” (15). In these cases the women became the object. Asya is aware of that she is no more than an object to her husband: describes it as having “a husband who treats her like a pet; to be indulged and given treats as long as she behaves – a husband who turns his back on her every night, who speaks of looking

¹ A sugar based wax used by women for depilation.

forward to the day when, in the courtesy of advancing years, they will address each other as ‘Asya Hanim’ and ‘Saif Bey’” (*Eye of the Sun* 353). This treatment had come in many forms and examples, after a fight “he’d given her had a quick pat” (*Eye of the Sun* 302). It also appears in his taste in music and literature, as Asya puts it “all the women in the books you like ... they don’t really exist. Not as people. They’re only there to wait for the men. To love them and be loved back or not – mostly not; to be beaten up or killed” (*Eye of the Sun* 345). And when Asya points these things out, and asks for more, Saif complains, “Your demands on my time and my emotions have become intolerable” (507).

After she has finally managed to save herself by leaving him, Asya considers for a moment what would happen if she went back. “She imagines going inside and sees herself vanish. It is like vanishing into one of those black holes they are talking about these days – a black hole brimming with a kind of still, secret energy that sucks you in effortlessly – like quicksand; that can’t help sucking you in – until there’s nothing of you left, nothing at all” (*Eye of the Sun* 734).

Art and Sexuality: Modes of Revolt

The first exercise of the free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality. The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding, the more clearly she can see the shape of future action. (Greer 23)

Having established that women live under oppressive terms within societies that do not easily offer them the means to find themselves or their voices, Greer and Friedan attempt to lay out the ways in which women can free themselves. According to Greer, it is different for every woman – and this is true in the works of Atwood and Soueif.

None of the main female characters in the works discussed here are free in the sense that Friedan and Greer articulate -- and they are least free when they are married, as this appears to be the time when they lose their identities and become self-alienated. However, these women do find their own modes of revolt, whether consciously or unconsciously, that help get them out of their trapped situations. The alternatives to the marriage can be a sexual affair, a divorce, resorting to a creative outlet such as writing or art, or a female-female relationship.

In *Edible Woman*, Marian's mode of revolt is her body, which becomes a battlefield. First she tries to control it, to command it to do the simple actions that she wants to do, like moving her arm, or stopping running. At a later stage, her body rebels altogether and refuses to eat. At first, her conflict is not completely clear to her: Marian doesn't know why she is behaving this way, but she is at least happy to break her passivity: "Though I wasn't at all certain why I had been acting this way, I had at least acted. Some kind of decision had been made, something had been finished" (*Edible Woman* 81).

Marian's relationship with Duncan is a half-hearted attempt to escape from Peter and marriage. She develops a strange relationship with this infantile young graduate student, who seems even more disturbed than she is. Although she gets no particular satisfaction from being with him, and sleeps with him only once, his presence to her becomes of great importance; perhaps because he puts no pressure on her to be anyone other than who she is. Marian is so stuck that she needs someone to help her move away from where she was. In addition to not having any claims on her because he does not wish to marry her, Duncan's infantile and effeminate qualities make him the complete opposite of Peter. This is referred to by both himself and Marian when both men are made to avoid meeting each other because if they do, one of them would evaporate. But some

critics also consider Duncan to be an extension of Marian herself: in so connecting with him, she is trying to further connect with herself – to become a subject.

Marian achieves clarity at the point of baking the cake. A very telling and significant episode in the plot of the novel, it provides resolution of the conflict. This marks the point of realization when she tells Peter that she realizes he's been trying to destroy her (*Edible Woman* 299). Peter, however, refuses to eat the cake, and so Marian ends up eating it herself. Critics have argued that this cake represents agency for Marian, and that it allows her to “swallow society's flawed vision and emerge with a very different, if wry, self-estimate and feminine image” (Bender 321).

Another interpretation is that by eating the cake, which is a symbol of herself, Marian is trying to reconcile the subject and object in herself since she becomes both the one eating and being eaten. Although the interpretations may vary, one thing that is definite is that Marian has taken control of her life.

Elaine's body also turns into a battlefield when she attempts to kill herself while in an unhappy marriage. But as an artist, Elaine has an additional channel for revolting: “Her work fosters her liberation. By projecting her rage outside of herself, she confronts her demons and exalts herself as a divine redeemer” (Goldblatt 281). This confirms Friedan's argument that “[t]he only way for a woman ... to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way. But a job, any job, is not the answer – in fact, it can be part of the trap” (Friedan 250). Eventually Elaine is able to marry again, but with a fewer expectations and a stronger sense of herself.

Asya Ulama in Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun* is as self-aware as Elaine Risely and she understands very well what is happening to her. She is the character most able to vocalize her

thoughts and fears. Nonetheless she allows herself to be victimized and to become dependent on her husband, thus losing herself and identity. For her, as for Marian in *Edible Woman*, salvation comes by taking control of her sexuality, and by having an affair. After an unfulfilling sexual relationship with her husband, Asya is finally able to find sexual satisfaction through a long affair with Gerald Stone while in England. Once she takes control of her sexual life, her marriage is destroyed, not only because of her unfaithfulness, but also by her realization that continuing in the marriage meant that she would vanish as a person.

This heavily echoes Greer's argument in *Female Eunuch*, where she encourages women who are unhappy in their marriage not to settle down, and in fact to enter affairs. She also asserts the importance of not becoming dependent:

[W]omen ought not to enter into socially sanctioned relationships, like marriage, and that once unhappily in they ought not to scruple to run away. It might even be thought to suggest that women should be deliberately promiscuous. It certainly maintains that they should be self-sufficient and consciously refrain from establishing exclusive dependencies and other kinds of neurotic symbioses. (Greer 23)

Asya's promiscuity turns her from a pet into a person who voices her wishes and seeks to fulfill them, thus asserting her identity. But this alternative was not entirely satisfying, because although she found sexual fulfillment, she found that it was lacking because she still needed romance.

Most of the characters in *Aisha* do not seek alternatives. They are passive characters that either do not develop at all; instead, they are solidified into passivity. Zeina not only accepts the act of violation, but falls in love with the man who has inflicted it upon her and betrays another woman to make sure she keeps him.

Sisterhood: A Critical Approach

Atwood and Soueif present a nuanced approach to the notion commonly held by second-wave feminists -- and exemplified in *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) an anthology of feminist writings edited by Robin Morgan -- which stressed the idea that women can and should collectively empower one another.

In addition to relationships of marriage, the works by Soueif and Atwood are full of relationships of female homosocial relationships which potentially could provide a social formation that is an alternative to marriage. Although these friendships may exist while one of the women is married, they are strongest when the women are not married. Examples are many: Asya and her best friend Chrissie, Asya and her nurse, Asya and her mother in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Elaine and Cordelia, Elaine and the female artist community in *Cat's Eye*, the two wives in *Her Man*, Zeina and her female relatives in *The Wedding of Zeina*, Marian and Clara, and Marian and Ainsely in *The Edible Woman*. Some of these relationships provide the positive support and reinforcement that allow the main characters to be their true free selves. But there are others that are as, if not more, oppressive as the male-female relationships, especially when it comes to marriage.

Asya and Chrissie are inseparable. They are unconditionally there for each other, supporting and helping one another. This was perhaps the kind of sisterhood that second-wave feminists had in mind when they suggested women find strength in one another. However, the level of support and presence they offer each other lessens dramatically when they both get married -- as if to say that these two types of relationships are mutually exclusive. Asya also has a very strong relationship with her mother, who is her rock but does not suffocate her in the way mothers often

do in patriarchal societies by reinforcing the oppressive values to which they themselves have been subjected. Asya's nurse also provides her with moral support and in some cases counsel, even it is not exactly advice that Asya follows.

But not all the female friends and relatives in Soueif's works are supportive and kind to one another. Soueif reveals that in some cases, the women impose the patriarchal system as much as the men. For example, in the "Wedding of Zeina," when the child-bride is practically raped by her new husband as proof of her virginity, it is with the assistance of the female relatives, including her own mother, that this happens. "Her Man" also examines the complicated relationship between two women married to the same man. Zeina, who was violated in the previous story, proceeds to do everything she can to rid herself of her husband's second younger wife. She ruthlessly frames her for something she did not do and leads, in the process, to the latter's divorce and ruin. In this case, the woman is not only selfish and uncaring, but she favors the oppressive male who has hurt and reduced her over her fellow female who is suffering under the weight of the same system. Cultural Anthropologist Deniz Kandiyoti would call this behavior a "patriarchal bargain" (274). Kandiyoti explains that "[d]ifferent forms of patriarchy present women with distinct "rules of the game" and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (Kandiyoti 274). In order for Zeina to cope with the constraints of the particular type of patriarchal system in which she exists – and which is far more severe than those of the other protagonists of Atwood and Soueif – she must make this bargain in which she betrays another woman. In order to secure her own position she must be willing to perpetuate the patriarchal traditions regardless of how much they subjugate or hurt other women. While Friedan and de

Beauvoir blame women for allowing the oppressive patriarchal system to continue, it appears that for some women the constraints under which they exist allow them very little to bargain with and so they end up victimizing one another in order to secure their own positions.

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's depiction of the relationship between roommates Ainsely and Marian borders on hostile. Marian enjoys feeling morally superior to Ainsely. The absence of support and even of understanding continues in several other female-friendships. Clara longs for a visit from Marian, but neither Marian nor Ainsely are able to lift her spirits during this mood as she continues to feel terrible on account of her situation. Their relationship is mutually critical. The office girls are also friends with Marian but their friendship is only a superficial one and they are also ready to double cross one another as when Lucy clearly makes a move for Peter in the absence of Marian.

In *Cat's Eye* Atwood problematizes the female-female relationship even further as it is other females who inflict pain and oppression on the protagonist, rather than men. From the beginning of the novel, Elaine is able to relate more to boys since she grows up camping all over the country in an environment that does not stress or enforce gender roles very significantly. The fact that her mother seems to eschew typical femininity also affects Elaine's perception of gender roles. The result, when she returns to civilization, is that she has a traumatic experience with other girls her age, she explains the result: "But I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (*Cat's Eye* 33). Elaine's inability to fit into the expected image for little girls of her age makes her realize that boys are her allies. At a later stage, she begins to empathize with the

fathers at a later stage. The pressure her girlfriends, and particularly Cordelia, put on her leads her to torture herself physically, by biting her fingernails and peeling the skin off her feet. Twice she comes very close to taking her life, but she survives and is able afterwards to save herself and change her life. Goldblatt says of this that along with many of Atwood's other protagonists "they assassinate their former identities" to avoid remaining victims (280).

Ultimately, this notion of "sisterhood" and a community of women who help support one another do not feature prominently in Atwood's work, nor in Soueif's stories. Rather than help their sisters escape the male gaze with all its oppression, the women in these authors' stories replicate and reinforce it.

Atwood and Soueif present their characters with alternatives to marriage, some successful, such as art and memory in the case of Elaine Risley. Other alternatives are presented which are not successful in themselves, but may perhaps lead to a more successful ending for the women, as in the case of Marian and Asya, who discover that finding and freeing oneself from a patriarchal system is an ongoing process.

Chapter Two: *Écriture Féminine*

“It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain; for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.”

- Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.”

Although she acknowledges the impossibility of defining a practice of writing that is purely feminine, Hélène Cixous proceeds to emphasize that such a writing does very clearly exist, i.e. one that is very distinctly different from that of masculine writing. *Écriture féminine* is linked very much to the body, it is why she calls on women to write “through their bodies” (Cixous 886).

The idea of *Écriture Féminine* was initiated by theorists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who are labeled as “a Holy Trinity” of French Feminism by Anglo-American feminists.² This label has been appropriated by Anglo-American second-wave feminists who were thought to have ulterior motives for labeling and presenting them thus, as Christine Delphy argues (192). Although French Feminism³ is presented in this selective, biased manner that Delphy describes as an Anglo-American fabrication to promote specific ideas while hiding behind foreign critics,⁴ this does not negate the fact that their analysis is important in demonstrating ways in which women can counterbalance the patriarchal realm of language by inscribing the female body in

² Along with Kristeva and Cixous, Luce Irigaray explains how women must free themselves of phallogocentric control enshrined in language in order to express themselves. I use Cixous and Kristeva as representatives of this work.

³ Delphy argues that there is a distinction between what was being written and advocated in the feminist scene in France and what Anglo-American authors invented and labeled as “French Feminism.” I capitalize French Feminism and French Feminists here, and throughout, to refer to the latter, the Anglo-American fabrication of French Feminism.

⁴ According to Delphy, there was a need in the Anglo-American scene to present the ideas of French Feminism as foreign. She says, “French Feminism was invented in order to legitimate the introduction on the Anglo-American feminist scene of a brand of essentialism, and in particular a rehabilitation of psychoanalysis, which goes further than the native kind” (216).

the text. One way of inscribing the female experience in the text and language is by placing stress on the differences between men and women.

Julia Kristeva has supported the idea of differentiating the practices of men and those of women, specifically in language. While first-wave feminists tried to find a place within men's linear time, or "Father's time" the phrase that Kristeva borrows from Joyce to denote how men follow a linear time, Kristeva instead sought to recognize and emphasize the sexual differences that made practices of both genders distinct from one another (15). It was unnecessary and perhaps even harmful to expect women to fit into the linear time of men, instead, women should use cyclic patterns associated with their time in the household, such as preparing meals, cleaning, doing laundry and looking after children, and to make of them equally dominant forms as those of men. This is necessary because, Kristeva explains, "female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations" (16). Accordingly, although it remains impossible to define this feminine practice of writing, it is possible to identify some of the features described by Kristeva and Cixous in writing from women, and about women.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Ahdaf Soueif and Margaret Atwood enact the theories of French Feminists such as Kristeva and Cixous by producing writing that is feminine. They do so by breaking the conventions of traditional forms and by writing through the body.

Breaking Traditional Conventions

In an interview, Atwood explains that she intentionally decided to challenge the traditional forms and genres, saying that a writer can break these conventions once he or she becomes familiar

enough with a particular form (Hancock qtd. in Osborne 97). And true to her word, Atwood has often adopted traditional forms only to move beyond them or to defy some of their characteristics, breaking, in the process, not only the molds of literary conventions but of structured, stereotypical thoughts and views.

In examining *Cat's Eye*, critic Carol Osborne describes Atwood as one of “many contemporary women writers ... adopting structures of circular return. These plots, in emphasizing a woman’s need to define herself relationally, reflect the differences in male and female identity formation” (96). Elaine, *Cat's Eye's* protagonist, revisits during the course of the novel the painful moments in her childhood, the shifts of adolescence, and other key moments in her life as a young woman -- all in an attempt to understand herself, her art, and how far she has come. She can only free herself from the demons of her past by revisiting them, and not by separating from them as is the case in the traditional *bildungsroman*. Atwood breaks the conventions of the traditional *bildungsroman* by telling the coming-of-age story of a female artist as she prepares to take part in her first major retrospective which brings her back to her hometown of Toronto, and with this return, memories of her childhood, adolescence and youth. Since memory functions in a circular -- rather than a linear -- way, the novel follows a circular plot, defying the tradition of the linear plot, which is generally followed in the *bildungsroman*, and whereby the typically male artist proceeds chronologically from childhood up to the point where he can declare himself an artist.

Also in the traditional *bildungsroman*, the protagonist’s development is mostly external, while Elaine’s is primarily internal. Atwood builds on an existing tradition of female protagonists in *bildungsromans* such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Awakening*, but also chooses to deviate from the traditional female *bildungsroman* form, as Osborne notes, by choosing to begin her narrative at a

later point in the life of her protagonist. The result is that by removing actions such as marriage, giving birth, or career as points of maturation, Elaine's maturation must come from within herself and not be influenced by any other factors, particularly those that can be related to men. Osborne states that "[t]he reader is trained to expect a man to enter the plot, providing a foundation of wisdom through which the woman discovers herself... no man in *Cat's Eye* is given such power. Instead Elaine's development is internal" (97). In this way, Atwood defies the expectations of the reader and with it the stereotype that the appearance of a man will provide the resolution to a woman's search for her identity.

These differences in how genders develop, behave and relate to others were also stressed by American feminist sociologists and psychoanalysts Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, also writing in the 1960s and 1970s, who stated that men and women construct their identities through different means, by connecting with others rather than through separation from them. This also echoes Kristeva's notion of female subjectivity: "Essentially interested in the specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realizations, women seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past" (Kristeva 19). This is opposed to first-wave feminists who sought to gain equal rights by overcoming their differences from men. They tried to become more like men and to fit their accomplishments into men's concept of time, which was a linear one "as the time of project and history;" however, second-wave feminism rejected this linear temporality entirely (Kristeva 19).

The Edible Woman (1969) is another example of Atwood departing from a traditional form. The novel starts with all the makings of a Jane Austen marriage plot. A young heroine of marriageable age, Marian, receives a marriage proposal within a few chapters, is torn between

two men: one seemingly more “appropriate,” but the other more desirable. Yet the novel does not end with the happy union of Marian with either of the men, but rather with a breakup and many questions. By disrupting the expectations of the marriage plot, Atwood here demonstrates that marriage is not the answer, and that neither a man nor a marriage have any power over determining the course of a woman’s life or future. By deconstructing the marriage plot in this way, the reader’s expectations are deflated, raising questions about the inevitability of marriage as a necessary and happy ending.

Atwood alternates between first- and third-person narration to delineate the self-alienation and self-effacement Marian feels after agreeing to marry Peter. The novel starts out with Marian telling her own story. For the first part, containing twelve chapters, the reader hears from the heroine firsthand about herself: her relationship to her roommate, her fiancé, her work. This not only gives the reader direct insight into her mind, but also says something about her frame of mind and how she sees herself.

The first chapter of the book begins with a statement in which Marian speaks in the first person, describing clearly and surely how she feels. She is aware that something is wrong with her, although she is unable to pinpoint exactly what, yet she is in touch with her feelings. She says, “I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual” (*Edible Woman* 3). But this transforms as Part One proceeds: she is still able to describe her feelings, but it becomes clear to the reader that she is gradually losing touch with them, and being surprised by herself: “I was astounded at myself. I’d never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it” (*Edible Woman* 94).

The drastic change arrives with Part Two of the novel, which is the longest section in the book, as the narration shifts to the third person limited where Marian no longer narrates her own story. The result is that it is not only the reader who cannot enter the thoughts of Marian, but she herself has lost touch with her thoughts. Atwood gives us a preview of this in the dinner date with Peter, when Marian is unable to realize that she is crying until she sees the tear that has dropped on the table. “After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then!” (*Edible Woman* 71). This is because she is losing touch with her body and self. This disconnection heightens with her inability to eat an increasing number of things, and Atwood chooses to manifest it as well in her narration in order to demonstrate to the reader the drastic change that the character is undergoing. Marian’s loss of identity and her self-alienation both end with the end of the third-person narration. In the final section of the book, when her inner and outer conflict with Peter is resolved, and the threat of marriage is removed, she is able to get in touch with herself, body and mind again. She resumes the narration her story, again in the first person.

Critic Ellen Peel identifies this alternation of narration as a device that works well to portray a feminist presentation of a female protagonist, particularly in their “uneasy view of themselves as both subject and object” (108). Peel argues that having alternating narrative voices, as opposed to integrated voices, stresses the alienation and tension between the subject and the object; however, at the end of *The Edible Woman*, Marian seems to be able to bring both together when she says “[n]ow that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his” (284). The union also occurs with the baking of the

cake which looks like herself, since she both bakes and eats it, symbolically attempting to reconcile herself as both subject and object. However, it is not possible to ignore the extreme brevity of the last part and that the longest chapter in the book is that which is narrated in the third person. The reader gets the sense that Marian, although having saved herself from the danger of being consumed, has no clear vision of herself or her future.

Likewise, Soueif experiments with form in her novels. She too uses the *bildungsroman*, but adapts it for her female protagonist Asya Ulama. *In the Eye of the Sun* shares a similar plot to Arabic post-colonial coming-of-age novels like Altayib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Tawfik Elhakim's *Asfour men al-Sharq (Bird from the East)*, Yahya Haqqi's *Qindil Um Hashim* and Bahaa Taher's *Bel Ams Halimt Bek*. However, in form, content and tone, Soueif does it differently. Firstly, again, Soueif does away with the linear plot of these *bildungsromans* and replaces it with a circular one. Time in the novel is highly complex, as there are four levels which intertwine at many levels (Ashour 265).⁵ There is the time of the writing of the story; there are also flashbacks to Asya's adolescence and childhood. The third level is that before her existence, as the reader learns of the history of Asya's grandparents and aunts and uncles, and even of the parents of her families. And also there is the time of the Egypt's national history in the late '60s and '70s: the wars, revolutions, movements of this period are integrated into the novel.

Kristeva's definition of women's time and how time is a different concept for men and women is echoed in Soueif's complex relationship with time. In explaining why she finds it important to write, she cites freezing the moment as one of the reasons. "I long for a moment at the same time

⁵ My translation

that it occurs. I do not wait for it to pass, since it is in a constant state of passing, and so the longing is constant.... In fact, I want for all moments to coincide and writing is my way, somehow, of achieving that” (Soueif qtd. in Mehrez, 183).

The same complexity and circularity exists in the modes of narration that Soueif chooses to employ. As Joseph Massad argues, “Soueif’s literary techniques are varied, including a sophisticated use of stream of consciousness. She uses letters, diaries, flashbacks, and political communiqués to contextualize, layer, and interrupt the narrative, creating prose of shimmering complexity” (78). Massad does not mention the monologues that Soueif also includes in her writing, which allow for the author to delve into the narrator’s innermost thoughts and reveal them. It is through these monologues that the reader is able to realize how Asya has internalized her husband’s male judgment of her as “melodramatic.” Again, this is reminiscent of Cixous’ statements on women and the need to unleash their writing capabilities, as well as Kristeva’s idea of the circular versus the linear.

The other interesting point in Soueif’s writing is the linguistic game she plays while writing an English novel about an Arab female protagonist. The fact that Soueif uses English and not Arabic, but still adapts the language in a way that is very particular to her, as if she is creating her own language, is reminiscent of Cixous’ suggestion that when women write through their bodies, they will make

the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language... Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse. (886)

Arab and English scholars alike have lauded this linguistic feat-- i.e., creating an English that is infused with Arabic. Massad calls it “transform[ing] English into Arabic and Arabic into English in revolutionary ways. This is not limited to her rendering of Arabic phrases into English without any syntactic compromises... but also in the very narrative structure of the novel, in its very affect” (75). Jenine Abboushi Dallal describes Soueif writing in *In the Eye of the Sun* as “writing in translation... [which] imparts a strangeness to the English” (8).

It is interesting to note that Soueif has passed on her linguistic feat to her protagonist Asya who has a special relationship with language, which feminist critics Cixous and Kristeva considered to be a particularly patriarchal realm. Asya’s inability to relate to this patriarchal realm becomes clear in her relationship to linguistics as she approaches her PhD work. Asya is more connected to the emotional side of language: poetry and her decision to try to decipher the dynamics of poetry as a topic for her PhD proves to be a difficult one. Soueif describes how lost she feels: “She had looked up two items in the list the professor had given her... And she had understood nothing. Nothing at all. It was as if they were in a different language. A different idiom, anyway.” (*In the Eye of the Sun* 331) The confusion and disconnection from this linguistic approach continues for another eight months: “I don’t quite see what all this has to do with what I want, I don’t understand these articles, I hate reading them, they seem to be assuming things that I know nothing about and making a huge fuss about others which are quite obvious.” (*In the Eye of the Sun* 338) Then when she finally understands, she finds herself analyzing the metaphors in a rational and systematic way, completely removed from her starting point of loving the emotions stirred in her by poetry. She has succumbed to a very rational and practical relationship to language: “(t)oday she will start on the ‘simple to complex’ paradigm... One

occurrence of a transfer of linguistic features from a vehicle to a tenor: simple metaphor. Another occurrence of a transfer between the same items: extended metaphor. An occurrence of a transfer from a different vehicle on to the same tenor: complex metaphor.” (*In the Eye of the Sun* 430)

In addition, Asya’s language is a hybrid of English and Arabic, this is also evident when she attempts to translate Arabic songs and sayings for an English audience. She is only able to do this in very long sentences. Ultimately Asya is able to employ the language – an originally patriarchal tool – for her self-expression. But hers, and more specifically that which Soueif creates, is a hybrid language, one that she has created for herself rather than merely take up the everyday language used by everyone else.

Examples of this are: “Congratulations bride... May he be your man and your partner and above you in this world and the next” (*Eye of the Sun* 250), “The talk went in Sayyida’s hearing, and no doubt out of it” (*Eye of the Sun* 272), and “There is the road of safety. There is the road of regret. And there is the road that permits of no return” (*Eye of the Sun* 348). In these instances, Soueif transforms Arabic into English without compromising the grammaticality or smoothness of the latter or losing the effect and tone of the former. Soueif’s syntax in some cases, particularly when she is narrating scenes that take place in Cairo, either with her nurse or family member, becomes complex, with longer sentences and complex structures, similar to Arabic syntax itself.

Of course, Soueif has been pressed by critics to offer explanations on why she opted to write not in her mother tongue but rather in English. The obvious assumption might be related to the sexually daring nature of her novel, as Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim attests that “Soueif is the only Egyptian novelist who has dared to treat the topic of sexuality with such courage and

clarity, sparing nothing and describing everything in the minutest detail” (qtd. in Malak 145).

However, Soueif herself explains,

Writing in English definitely gives me more freedom because I can use English in literary terms better than I can use Arabic and so I can make the language do what I want with more ease. I suppose the question of language arises because there are passages in [my] book[s] which are sexually frank. One might ask if I used English so that I could write all those sexy passages which I couldn't write in Arabic. My response would be no because when you translate my work into Arabic or rather ‘Arabise’ it, I would still keep those passages. (“Two Writers Speak”)

Although Soueif claims that the Arabic language is capable of facing confrontations and of breaking codes, critics have argued against this. Amin Malak suggests that Soueif’s “hybridized English” has in fact enabled her to “infiltrate taboo terrains. Removed culturally and emotionally from the local scene, the English language accords a liberating medium to the author to broach and delve into issues such as feminine sexuality, politics of power and gender, and the disfranchisement of the poor” (161).

Conclusion

Whilst writing their works they seem to engage and respond to feminist discourse of the time -- both Anglo-American second-wave criticism related to marriage, as well as French Feminist theories about women's writing – Atwood and Soueif also problematize it by raising questions about it in a way that anticipates post-feminism.

Sarah Gamble describes post-feminist debate as being generally about

issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility. Because it is critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives, it is inclined to be unwilling to condemn pornography and to be sceptical of such phenomena as date-rape: because it is skewed in favour of liberal humanism, it embraces a flexible ideology which can be adapted to suit individual needs and desires. (36)

In this way, it can be seen to be in opposition to second-wave feminism, which has been labeled “victim feminism, as it projects aggression, competitiveness, and violence unto men or patriarchy while its devotees are blind to those qualities in themselves” (Wolf qtd. in “Sucking the blood” 51). This flexible ideology of post-feminist discourse also allows for more individualism and diversity, which are also a departure from the sisterhood and unity values of the second wave.

By insisting on presenting female main characters that are neither innocents nor victims, Atwood and Soueif seem to depart from second-wave perception of women. For Atwood, victimhood is a recurrent theme upon which she elaborates in her critical guide to Canadian literature *Survival*. She explains the different positions of victimhood and how one is able to move beyond them. The fourth position, which is that of a creative non-victim, is the one she seems to mostly depict in her fiction: women who acknowledge victimization within an oppressive system but do not

accept it as inevitable and find the sufficient insight and means to overcome it. And these are the types of women that Atwood often portrays in her novels. Similarly, Soueif's protagonists are neither powerless nor helpless. The two novelists create protagonists who might experience themselves as victims at the beginning of the plots but they reject this state and create new identities for themselves in which they are no longer victims. Marian, Elaine, Asya, and even Zeina have all moved away from the victim status by the time their stories come to an end. In addition, Atwood presents female characters such as Ainsely in *Edible Woman*, who preys on men, as opposed to the traditional second-wave stereotype of women as helpless. In addition, in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine declares that she does not blame her husband for what happened to her, and acknowledges that she hurt him as much as he hurt her: "I don't feel overmatched by him. Whatever he did to me, I did back, and maybe worse" (*Cat's Eye* 276). Asya does not feel victimized when her husband physically attacks her because she takes responsibility for hurting him just as much if not more. At no point in the stories by these two writers does the reader feel sorry for the main female characters; nor does one sense that they are victims who lack control or responsibility over their lives.

In addition, the two novels I examine here by Atwood cover two decades during which feminist discourse had developed beyond the bodily essentialism of French Feminists to the anti-essentialism of Judith Butler's gender theory. *Cat's Eye* in particular seems to shed light on the tensions between the two schools. Tolan says:

Atwood produces a text that begins to bridge the gap between the bodily essentialism of the feminisms of the 1970s and the acculturated body that predominated in the 1990s as a consequence of Butler's work. (*Feminism and Fiction* 175)

In this way, Atwood rejects universalist feminist discourse, and refuses to endorse one particular school of thought over the other. She combines the essentialist approach with her strong focus on the body in writing *Cat's Eye*, but she also emphasizes the gender formation aspect by demonstrating through the story of Elaine that gender roles are constructed and not the true essence of human beings.

Like Atwood, Soueif, too, rejects universalist or absolutist feminist discourses, particularly ones that are exclusivist. However, Soueif's elite, liberal status as an intellectual raised in England makes her an outsider to the mainstream Arab Muslim feminist discourse. Critic Leila Ahmed describes the Islam of Asya as one that "differs from the Islamic habits and attitudes of other classes," and she adds that Soueif should have "shown some awareness of Asya's class biases" (Ahmed quoted in Malak 151). This is particularly evident when later in the novel, Asya is faced with a female student who declares that she would not participate in class because it is forbidden for her voice to be revealed. While Asya is surprised at and critical of the student's attitude, which is also shared by the majority of the class she is teaching, Soueif does not make a point of making this class bias apparent.

By combining different strands of feminism, essentialism and constructionism, Anglo-American and French, second-wave and post feminism, Muslim and Western, Atwood and Soueif demonstrate how literature can interact with theory in a more malleable way, each adapting it to their own particular culture and being influenced by it, but also influencing it and anticipating developments or changes in its course. The way Atwood and Soueif interacted with second-wave feminism is a demonstration of the possible interaction between literature and theory. Fiction writers are not merely concerned with imitating or representing life, nor in fiction's relationship

with theory does it merely record its influence passively; rather, fiction writers can be “instigators of theoretical debate.” (*Feminism and Fiction* 3) By responding to theories that have already been expressed and elaborated upon by scholars and critics of the second-wave movement, whether directly or that have been disseminated through culture, in addition to concerns and ideas that these authors may have detected simultaneously within society, fiction writers enter into a two-way relationship with theoretic and academic discourse.

This relates to the general debate on the function and nature of literature; i.e. whether it can be considered as only having entertainment or aesthetic value or if it can be a vehicle of change in societies. Wellek and Warren argue for the latter in *Theory of Literature*, explaining that “literature is not philosophical knowledge translated into imagery and verse, but that literature expresses a general attitude toward life, that poets usually answer, unsystematically, questions which are also themes of philosophy.” (113) In this way, fiction writers such as Atwood and Soueif can be seen as something of philosophers or commentators as they write about women’s issues and problems in their societies. Not only have they absorbed the discourse of feminism within their cultural milieu but they also contribute to its making and further development through their fictional writing, by responding to ideas that are already formed or in the process of being formed. Wellek and Warren state that “the writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it.” (97) Tolan also argues that “fictional discourse and the theoretical discourse do not simply coexist, but enter into a significant and mutually beneficial relationship.” (*Feminism and Fiction* 8) This is particularly clear in the way these two writers express a feminist theme prior to it being tackled by scholars and theorists.

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