Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

An Interpretative Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* from Foucault's Concept of 'Statement'

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Abstract:

This paper aims to make an analytical study of Foucault's concept of 'statement' as the functional principle of 'discourse' and how the functions served by statements can be traced in our study of fictional narratives (here Margaret Atwood's "The Edible Woman" has been selected for this study). "The Edible Woman" narrativizes Marian's story – her living in a consumer society, working for an organisation that promotes consumerism and having a relation with the consummate consumer Peter. The novel shows a continuous conflict in between Marian's self and the society she lives in. The societal forces become embedded in the actions and behaviours of the characters. This paper seeks to unfold the manifold ways through which discursive practices intervene and influence the fictionalised lives of the characters in the said novel.

Keywords:

Discourse, Statement, Consumer Society, Foucault, Atwood.

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Discourse as a literary term is overused. Even Michel Foucault used the term "discourse" with polysemic significations. Discourse in Foucault's oeuvre becomes a cardinal tool enabling him to understand and analyse one of the operational and structuring strategies through which the world comprehend reality. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault has defined the term in a number of ways. While commenting on the polysemic nature of the term "discourse", Foucault categorically mentions his adoption and application of the term with the following words:

> Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault, *of Knowledge* 80).

Foucault's concept of 'discourse' is laced with his concept of 'statement'. In fact, statement has been viewed as the building block or 'atom' of discourse (80). According to Foucault, a statement is not a sentence, a proposition or a speech-act though statement may sometimes assume the form of any of them. In case of a sentence, a proposition or a speech-act we observe that they are always conditioned by rigid grammatical, structural, logical or referential principles but a statement is more than mere sentence, proposition or speech act. According to Foucault:

> In all three cases, one realizes that the criteria proposed are too numerous and too heavy, that they limit the extent of the statement, and that although the statement sometimes takes on the forms described and

> adjusts itself to them exactly, it does not always do so: one finds statements lacking in legitimate propositional structure; one finds statements where one cannot recognise a sentence; one finds more statements than one can isolate speech acts. As if the statement were more tenuous, less charged with determinations, less strongly structured, more omnipresent, too, than all these figures . . . (84).

For Foucault statement may be constituted by any "series of signs, figures, marks or traces" if they inhere four statement defining factors. In fact, instead of defining 'statement' in terms of its structural base, Foucault lays stress on the functional criteria of 'statement'. For Foucault the structural unity of a 'statement' is not what we search for but it is the very function of the statement. Thus Foucault writes:

> One should not be surprised, then, if one has failed to find structural criteria of unity for the statement; this is because it is not in itself a unit, but a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space. (86-87)

The function that 'statement' performs is described as 'enunciative function' and according to Foucault, "enunciation takes place whenever a group of signs is emitted" (101). So statement is always linked with signs in spite of being different from signs by virtue of its four distinctive features.

The first distinctive characteristic feature of 'statement' is its 'referentiality'. This referential quality of 'statement' is unlike sign (signifier) referring to some signified inhabiting in this phenomenal world. Rather 'statement' refers to the "laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated or described" through signs (91). Foucault elaborates:

> The referential of the statement forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals or objects, states of things and relations that are brought into play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation of that which gives meaning to the sentence, a value as truth to the proposition. (91)

Secondly, a 'statement', according to Foucault, "possesses a particular relation with a subject" (92). But we should not reduce the subject of a 'statement' to the grammatical subject of a sentence in that a sentence without a subject may be treated as a 'statement' and it can be assigned to a specific subject-position. Again the author of a 'statement' is not the same as the subject of a 'statement'. A novel bears the name of its author but within the novel we may locate a number of statements which can be assigned to multiple subject-positions. The third characteristic of the statement is that it always brings a collateral space into operation. A 'statement' becomes a 'statement' only with reference to other 'statements'. Its borders are always peopled by other 'statements' or what Foucault calls the 'associated field' of statements (97). A sentence or a proposition has significance even when they are in isolation but a statement gains importance only with reference to other statements. Foucault elaborates the point with the following words:

> The statement is not the direct projection on to the plane of language (*langage*) of a particular situation or a group of representations. It is not simply the manipulation by a speaking subject of a number of elements and linguistic rules. At the very outset, from the very root, the statement is divided up into an enunciative field in which it has a place and a status, which arranges for its possible relations with the past, and which opens up for it a possible future. Every statement is specified in this way: there is no statement in general, no free, neutral, independent statement; but a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network statements, in which it has a role, however minimal it may be, to play. (99)

The fourth feature that a 'statement' must have is its material existence. Indeed, a statement is not possible without its materiality. Foucault calls the materiality of the statement as 'repeatable materiality' and shows the difference between statement analysis and the conventional methodologies of analysing signs as it is undertaken in case of a sentence, proposition or an enunciation. While the traditional methodology of analysing sentence is conditioned by abstract linguistic rules or phenomenal materiality, the 'repeatable materiality' of the statement being conditioned by institutional forces leads us to the world of discourse. To elucidate Foucault gives us example of a text reproduced several times or a book with several editions. In each case what we have is the same set of statements put in different spatio-temporal co-ordinates. Thus Foucault claims "the materiality of the statement is not defined by the space occupied or the date of its formulations; but rather by its status as a thing or object". And that "status", according to Foucault, "is never definitive, but modifiable, relative and always susceptible of being questioned" (102). Thus Foucault maintains:

> The rule of materiality that statements necessarily obey is therefore of the order of the institution rather than of the spatio-temporal localization; it defines *possibilities of reinscription and transcription* (but also thresholds and limits), rather than limited and perishable individualities. (103)

So what we find is that the 'statement' is a function and it is characterised by four principles—referentiality, relation with subject positions, associated field and repeatable materiality. These four factors that characterise the operative principles of 'statements' function in diametrically opposite direction: whereas the 'referentiality' and the 'associated field' are factors that are linked with possibilities of originating meanings based on sign systems, the relation of the statement with subject-positions and the fourth factor i.e. 'repeatable materiality' have made it more than mere 'signs' by means of linking it with human agency. Thus the statement remains in between the world of abstracted meanings and materiality. The 'statement' may be viewed as an effective tool that "men produce, manipulate, use, transform, exchange, combine, decompose and recompose, and possibly destroy" (105) to serve their purposes. Thus Foucault opines that "the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry" (105).

The statement analysis is just one among other interpretative methodologies that treat signs as signifying systems and accept its relation with material world. Dreyfus

and Rabinow explain that different utterances may constitute a single statement as it happens in case of an airline steward making announcements in different languages. The subject's entering into the world of 'discourse' is made possible through its encounter with different statements. In fact statement analysis and discourse formation are interlinked with each other. Foucault defines 'discursive formation' as follows:

> The discursive formation is not . . . a developing totality, with its own dynamism or inertia, carrying with it, in an unformulated discourse, what it does not say, what it has not yet said, or what contradicts it at that moment; it is not a rich, difficult germination, it is a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions. (119)

Foucault opines that the purpose of describing statement is not meant to "rediscover the unsaid" but to focus on the conditions that make the appearance of the statement possible. Foucault has elaborated the relation of discourse formation and the statement analysis with the following words:

> To describe statements, to describe the enunciative function of which they are the bearers, to analyse the conditions in which this function operates, to cover the different domains that this function presupposes and the way in which those domains are articulated, is to undertake to uncover what might be called the discursive formation. (115-16)

The relation of statement to discursive formation is similar to what a sentence is to a text. On the basis of the relation of statement and discursive formation, Foucault has also defined 'discourse' and 'discursive practice'. Discourse, according to Foucault, may be defined as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" (117). Foucault also points out that discourse "does not form a rhetorical or formal unity" and its "appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained)". Discourse is constituted by "a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined". But to consider discourse an ideal and timeless form is wrong since it is "a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time" (117). Now let us move to Foucault's concept of 'discursive practice'. Foucault defines 'discursive practice' as "a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function" (117). Foucault has used the phrase 'discursive practice' as a collective noun that stands for "a body of anonymous, historical rules" which are specific to a given period. But Foucault has also warned that discursive practice "must not be confused with the expressive operation by which an individual formulates an idea, a desire, an image; nor with the rational activity that may operate in a system of inference; nor with the 'competence' of a speaking subject when he constructs grammatical sentences" (117). In an article "Politics and the Study of Discourse", published in 1968, Foucault has mentioned that his project is to offer a "history of discursive practice" which he calls in the same article as the history of "things said". Now this phrase "things said" as it has been used by Foucault does not lay stress on the content of what people express but it aims to unravel the relation of what is expressed and what remains unexpressed. In

Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault has elaborated the point with the following words:

> Our task is not to give voice to the silence that surrounds them [statement or things said], nor to rediscover all that, in them and beside them, had remained silent or had been reduced to silence. Nor is it to study the obstacles that have prevented a particular discovery, held back a particular formulation, repressed a particular form of enunciation, a particular unconscious meaning, or a particular rationality in the course of development; but to define *a limited system of presences*. (119) [emphasis mine]

Thus any attempt to analyse the 'discursive practice' of a specific culture in a given period must include the focus on the "body of anonymous, historical rules" and the complex relations of the statements with discursive practices. Now let us make an analytical study of Margaret Atwood's "The Edible Woman" to lay out the functions of the 'statements' and how these 'statements' are intrinsically related to the societal discursive practices.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, her first written novel, narrativizes Marian's struggle with her 'self' to stand against the delimiting forces of society. The novel set in a consumer culture explores the complexities of consumerism and its corollary effects on individual subjects. The novel being a critique of consumer culture reminds us what Baudrillard has said about the very culture:

> Consumption is an active, collective behaviour: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values, with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions. The consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption. That is to say, there is a new and specific mode of *socialization* related to the emergence of new productive forces and the monopoly restructuring of a high-productivity economic system. (Consumer Society 81)

Consumerism is discursive practice. Most of the characters in *The Edible Woman* are the by- products of consumer culture. The consumer culture functions in the novel through its multiple allies and the shared dynamic in between consumer culture and patriarchy govern the fictionalised lives in capillary fashion. Marian, Ainsley, Peter and Len shared one common platform—all of them have a sustaining relation with consumer culture. If Marian is obsessed with food, Ainsley is found to be vying for her look. Whereas Peter delights in hunting with the collection of his weapons like rifels, pistols and "several wicked looking knives" (Edible Woman 67), Len excels in seducing the girls as Clara informs "anything over seventeen is too old for him" (32). Like the consumer class the characters are in pursuit of "the accumulation of the signs of happiness" (Consumer Society 31). Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is not merely a critique of consumer culture, it effectively deferred any passive consumption of the text. The novel has been purposefully left with 'gaps', as Helmut Reichenbacher has an insightful observation in this regard:

> A systematic analysis of Margaret Atwood's revisions to her first published novel, *The Edible Woman,* reveals a gradual elimination of

> material from six extant drafts. This process results in gaps which the reader is expected to fill while interpreting the text. The consequence of this strategy is what Wolfgang Iser calls "an interaction between text and reader" (Iser, 168). This technique appears to have been very conscious. . . . Gaps necessarily encourage the reader's more active participation (Works and Impact 266).

The 'gaps' that the reader is left to discover are mainly centred around the actions, situations and behaviour of Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of the novel. It is Marian who narrates her story in the opening part of the novel, loses her voice in the middle part as the third person narrator takes hold of the narration and regains her voice in the final part. No doubt the novel registers the journey of Marian's self. Marian appears to have been at ease with her life as the novel begins but gradually she realises her vulnerability as an independent individual with her fiancé Peter and gradually she begins to suffer from anorexia. The novel ends with the ending of both her relationship with Peter and anorexia. With Marian's courageous decision to outrun the conventional solution of getting married with Peter as most of the women characters are fated to choose so, Margaret Atwood disrupts the possibility of a romantic story ending with a happy marriage.

A closer inspection of the socio-cultural and economic paradigms of the novel helps us to locate the multiple 'statements' operating in the fictional world to form the discourses of consumerism and patriarchy. Marian as an individual bears the pervasive influences of both – consumer culture and patriarchal society. The most important statements which can be located in the novel are 'food consumption', 'advertisement', 'hunting', 'love', 'marriage', 'sex', 'motherhood', 'Seymour Survey'. All these statements individually and collectively have strong bearing on the formation of discursive practices to sustain consumer culture and patriarchy alike.

Food consumption in the novel has assumed metaphorical significance. Marian's obsession with food at the opening chapters of the novel, her anorexia and getting rid of anorexia are invariably linked with the process of her self- actualisation. There are multiple references to 'advertisements' and their appeal to human minds. Advertisements do not end up in capturing eyes rather they induce minds to share the alluring bliss of the malefic world of simulacra. In the novel, Peter's fondness for hunting has assumed broader significance. The very act of hunting opens up a relationship of struggle in between the hunter and the hunted person or animal. In Park Plaza episode, Peter's account of hunting a rabbit causes disjunction in Marian- Peter relation. Marian began to view her relation with Peter and Ainsley's efforts to ensnare Len in terms of the 'hunting' metaphor.

One can hardly overlook the political shades of love relation in the novel. Marian's relation with Peter, Ainsley's pretentious affair with Len resonate how the symphony of love gets regulated by discursive practices. In PART I of *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood placed two sets of relations — Len and Ainsley's courting each other and Marian's troubled journey of love with Peter. Peter is a student of law and he loves hunting. Before his appearance in the narrative, Peter has been indirectly presented by Marian and Ainsley. Marian narrates how she adjusts herself to Peter's mood and Ainsley has an acerbic observation on Peter when she informs Clara that Peter has "monopolised" Marian.

Marian ruminates how she meets Peter "at a garden party following" her graduation (70). Their friendship gradually turns to a relationship. Peter believed Marian "wouldn't try to take over his life" (70) and Marian liked Peter as he was good looking. Marian's consumerist nature comes out when she describes Peter with the following words: "People noticed him, not because he had forceful or peculiar features, but because he was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads" (69).

Marian's journey of love collides with Ainsley's search for a partner who will be the biological father of her desired baby. She is in search of a partner with "decent heredity", "fairly good looking" appearance and she "would prefer an artist" (45). In their visit to Clara's house, Marian came to know about the presence of Len Slank in the town. When Ainsley asked Marian about him, Marian's initial response was "Oh, no-one you'd be interested in" as she "couldn't think of two people who would be worse for each other". Marian's response turns out to be ironical in course of the novel. Len is introduced to Ainsley and to readers as an old college friend of both Marian and Clara. Clara's observation about Len bears significance as she describes him with these words: "A nice type though, but he's horrible with women, sort of a seducer of young girls. He says anything over seventeen is too old" (32). Ainsley met Len and gradually trapped him to fulfil her wish. Thus the relation of Marian –Peter, and Ainsley –Len are fraught with implicit political struggle of domination.

The concept of 'marriage' overruns the fictionalised characters in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. For both Peter and Ainsley, at the opening chapters of the novel, 'marriage' delimits liberty whereas for Marian 'marriage' provides secured life of love. Clara's married life and the marriages of Peter's friends appear as examples to them and each of them inferred different meanings of married life. In Chapter 3 of the novel, Peter calls Marian while she is in the office and informs her about the marriage of his last surviving bachelor friend Trigger. Peter thinks marriage engulfs liberty and makes man subservient to domesticity. Peter accused Trigger's bride as a malicious predator who is going to confine him in domestic void. Clara, Marian's college friend invited Marian and Ainsley to have dinner with them. Both of them visited Clara's house but they differ in their opinions about Clara. Clara got married with Joe while she was pursuing graduation and failed to complete her course. In spite of her zestful and determined beginning, she ended up in bearing three children – one after another.

While Marian is sympathetic to Clara's situations, Ainsley thinks that it is Clara who is responsible for her present miserable life. According to Ainsley, Clara should have to "do something" as a "token gesture" as her inability to finish her graduation is the result of her passivity and her succumbing to the situations since "Lots of pregnant women finish their degrees". Their reactions to Clara's situations reveal the fundamental differences of their attitudes to life: whereas Marian considers circumstances as the binding forces of human life, Ainsley views circumstances as challenges that can be surmounted by human efforts.

In *The Edible Woman*, we have three episodes of sexual relation and each episode conveys different significances. Trigger's marriage has left Peter in more insecure position since he remains the only surviving bachelor among his friends. Marian perceived Peter's feeling and decided to visit his apartment. When she visited Peter's apartment, Peter was taking shower. Peter made love with Marian in the bathtub.

Though Marian prefers bed, she does not protest as she thinks "I should be sympathetic because of Trigger". Peter's making love in the bathtub is an assertion of his virile bachelorhood that becomes extinct, as Peter thinks, with wedlock. Thus Marian aptly assesses Peter's psychology in this regard and correlates this incident with other two occasions:

> I thought back to the other two unfortunate marriages. After the first, it had been the sheepskin on his bedroom floor, and after the second a scratchy blanket in a field we'd driven four hours to get to, and where I was made uneasy by thoughts of farmers and cows. I supposed this was part of the same pattern, whatever the pattern was. Perhaps an attempt to assert youthfulness and spontaneity, a revolt against the stale doom of stockings in the sink and bacon fat congealed in pans evoked for him by his friends' marriages. (68)

Here 'sex' has become a tool to justify one's position. Peter's act of asserting youthfulness prompts readers to view the political shades latent in the very act of love. Then there are Ainsley's planned sexual relation with Len to have a baby and Marian's sex with Duncan to liberate herself. In all these cases, sexuality has become fraught with purposive political intention to meet one's goal.

Atwood's reading of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Freidan has certainly influenced her to demystify the age old euphoria about motherhood. The novel has projected motherhood as detrimental to the individual interest of woman. Except Ainsley's longing for becoming a single mother, which can also be viewed revolutionary from patriarchal standpoint, the novel shows mothering as an obstruction in the portrayal of Clara's pitiful state and how it causes matrophobia in Marian. The following disparaging observation of Marian reveals as if Clara wishes to disembody her motherhood:

> "The babies had been unplanned: Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her, and her second with dismay; now, during her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism. Her metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock. (37)

When Marian visited Clara to meet her after her childbirth, the third person narrator describes Marian's feeling as "She was glad she wasn't Clara" (161). Again, when Marian was suffering from anorexia, she visited Clara to share her feelings but began to think of Clara as a perpetual invalid and connected her with meals carried on trays. Even Joe, Clara's husband feels how marriage has robbed of Clara's individuality as he says:

> 'I think it's a lot harder for her than for most other woman; I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university. She gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded . . .' (296).

For Marian Joe clarifies what he means by the word 'core' – "the centre of her personality, the thing she's built up". Joe also observes that "her feminine role and her

core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her" (296). However, Marian herself capped with the fear of a definitive fixture that married life causes regresses to her habitual nature of fleeing from Peter's party.

Marian lives in a consumer culture and works for the promotion of consumerism. Her relation with Seymour Survey, the organisation that conducts researches about consumption of various items rests on her necessity. "The company" Marian describes, "is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle" (13). Seymour Survey as an institution is the best example that shows the alliance of consumer culture and patriarchy. While describing about the company, Marian mentions how the women are structurally sandwiched in between the men and the machines. Marian's observation is worth quoting in this regard:

> On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists – referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men – who arrange things with the clients; I have caught glimpses of their offices, which have carpets and expensive furniture and silk – screen reprints of Group of Seven paintings on the walls. Below us are the machines – mimeo machines, I.B.M. machines for counting and sorting and tabulating the information; I have been down there too, into that factory – like clatter where the operatives seem frayed and overworked and have ink on their fingers. (13)

Though she was against the very institution and its programme like Pension Plan, she did never raise her voice against the organisation. She only thought that her marriage with Peter would provide her scope to get herself free from the organisation.

Thus Seymour Survey assumes significance as an institution that fosters consumer culture. We may view Seymour Survey, along with the other symbolical thematic threads like 'consumption of food', 'hunting', 'marriage', 'motherhood', 'sex', 'advertisement' etc. as qualifying for what Foucault has termed as 'statements' since the four distinctive features of 'statements' which are already mentioned earlier may be found operational in these thematic issues. The 'referentiality' of these 'statements', the first distinctive feature of 'statement', in *The Edible Woman* may be traced in their relation with consumer culture and patriarchal society.

All these statements like 'consumption of food', 'advertisements', 'love', 'sex', 'marriage', 'motherhood' etc. assume significance only with reference to the text's dealing with the living experience of inhabiting a consumer culture and patriarchal society. In the novel every statement may be linked to subject positions. We may link 'hunting' with Peter and Ainsley, 'consumption of food' with Marian, 'advertisements' with Marian and Peter, 'sex' with Ainsley, Len, Peter, Marian and Duncan, 'marriage' and 'motherhood' with Clara, Ainsley and Marian. Again, these statements share an associated field of consumer culture and patriarchal society with which these statements are interlinked and inter-referential. The 'repeatable materiality' which is the fourth qualifying feature of a statement can also be ascertained in the aforementioned statements of *The Edible Woman*. Though Atwood's novel has specific spatio-temporal horizon, the very issues which have been considered as qualifying for 'statements' may have their material existence in different culture with varying materiality.

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