

A delicate balance: gender and "women as writers"



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How far have we, as women, come – politically, economically, and socially? With a female nominee for president, a tightening of the gender pay gap, and a push towards more family-friendly maternity/paternity leave, a cursory glance would reveal astounding advancement in comparison to our twentieth-century female counterparts. But delving more deeply into our concerns and our futures, there's a troubling repetition of themes that, despite our advances, haven't evaporated, merely transformed: gender equality, identity, and motherhood. Three books examined in WNMU's "Women as Writers" course demonstrate these concerns: *The Edible Woman* (1969) by Margaret Atwood, *Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman* (1996) by Nuala O'Faolain, and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) by Mary Wollstonecraft. These books provide an exceptional method used to compare the experiences of the characters with how contemporary women view their place in society, in the workplace, and in their personal relationships.

" Trapped" By Relationships

Gender equality concerns figure prominently in all three books. *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Women*, published a century-and-a-half prior to *The Edible Woman*, is dedicated to the struggles women face and is considered a radically feminist work (Pryce). In the book, Maria has been committed to an asylum and has lost custody of her child, not through the courts, but through an arranged abduction by her husband with no recourse. Although she left her husband on grounds of cruelty and adultery, she never managed to fully escape. She describes the experience, saying " After leaving, what the law considers as my home, I was hunted like a criminal from place to place,

though I contracted no debts, and demanded no maintenance—yet, as the laws sanction such proceeding, and make women the property of their husbands, I forbear to animadvert” (Wollstonecraft ch. 17). Maria ruminates on her fate while she stays imprisoned in the asylum, and it is strictly because of her husband that she is there.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian, the main character, feels a similar sensation of being “trapped,” although not literally as in Maria. Marian begins to look at her relationships differently, learning more about herself through her romantic liaisons. As her roommate Ainsley refers to her relationship with eligible lawyer-on-the-rise Peter: “He’s monopolized her” (Atwood 29). Peter, from the very beginning of the book, is shown to be self-centered and dominating, to the point where Marion actually attempts to escape two times from Peter in social settings, once at a bar and another time at a party. In the first circumstance, Marian begins to run and states: “I could hear the fury in [Peter’s] voice: this was an unforgivable sin, because it was public” (74). Her hysteria mounts as Peter takes chase in her car, but when she’s finally caught, she merely thinks: “The relief of being stopped and held, of hearing Peter’s normal voice again and knowing he was real, was so great that I started to laugh helplessly” (76).

Mental Instability And Relationships

The claim of mental instability has been used as one of the most common ways to control women. Divorce was highly uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in Great Britain, it wasn’t until the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 that introduced divorce through the court. At that time,

only men were allowed to “petition the court” for a divorce based on their wife’s adultery. It wasn’t until 1923 that either spouse could petition the court for a divorce based on adultery (BBC). A member of the Tennessee Genealogy Society described the confusing approach to women’s mental health, stating “I was visiting a courthouse and noticed the term ‘lunacy’ on a lot of the women’s forms. I asked the court aide about this. She showed me where a woman could be quite often divorced for reasons of lunacy. Her husband would put her in the insane asylum and then file for divorce. A few months later, his marriage records to a younger bride usually showed up” (Sansone).

Maria may have been held in an institution, but for her, it’s not because she was mentally unstable or sick. Because of her role as a wife in the 1700s, she’s completely at the mercy of her husband. Her marriage was a contract – a near unbreakable one – and her commitment to an asylum was a means to an end for her husband. In *Maria*, the main character describes her husband’s wrongdoing: “Neglected by my husband, I never encouraged a lover; and preserved with scrupulous care, what is termed my honour, at the expence of my peace, till he, who should have been its guardian, laid traps to ensnare me” (Wollstonecraft ch. 17).

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian finds that her issues escalate as Peter begins to treat her more and more like a wife, and she also begins to change her day-to-day routine, eschewing steak, rice pudding, eggs, and vegetables as she questions her sanity and her relationship. Men exert power over Marian, and while she examines that relationship, she also struggles with the implications of those relationships. As she reminded herself while preparing

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for a dinner party: " She was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, and had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed and tempted it, but it was adamant" (Atwood 193).

Nuala O'Faolain describes her breakdown in *Are You Somebody?* In her memoir, she discusses her father and his death. Because she was drinking heavily and unable to mend on her own, she asked a friend to help her recuperate in a hospital. Her friend agreed, and " I wept for the millions and millions of anonymous women who might never have been, for all we know of them. I wrote a sort of paean to them. I still couldn't sleep" (167). Unlike Maria and Marian, however, Nuala's instability is calmed by her primary relationship with Nell, whereas the other main characters regain composure through their secondary relationships: Marian and Duncan, and Maria and Darnford.

Today, we no longer face the same issues with divorce - in the Western World, that is. According to Life, the current cohort divorce rate, calculated through a group of people marrying at the same time, is 40 to 50 percent (Stanton). Interestingly, the same source indicates that only 27 percent of college graduates will divorce by middle age. While some women enjoy the freedom to leave an unsatisfactory marriage, we still hear stories like that of Mwende, a Kenyan woman punished for not bearing children by having both hands removed by her husband (Kyama). The L. A. Times' Kyama noted that " Her impoverished parents advised Mwende to leave Ngila, but she didn't want to go back home to burden them. She sought advice from her pastor, who advised her to persist and to do her best to save the marriage." An <https://assignbuster.com/a-delicate-balance-gender-and-women-as-writers/>

article a few years ago highlighted the change in divorce rate, stating “ In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, however, divorce is both an indicator of and force behind social changes that have improved prospects for women, reduced gender inequality, and fueled development. All of which suggests that the more people are able to get out of bad marriages, the better off their societies are likely to be” (Kenny).

Employment

While Maria views work differently than a mid-century woman in the 1960s, she does discuss the inequity of lower class labor. Through her exchanges with Jemima, she becomes intimately acquainted with the world of working women - and the complications that arise as a result. Jemima, upon her mother's death, was forced to become a servant in her father's house, surviving mistreatment such as physical abuse and rape. Thrown out of her own home, she became a prostitute, and later, an attendant in an asylum. Even though she experiences the “ freedom” of her own wage-earning potential, she still suffers from mistreatment by men in her own profession. In some ways, ironically, the asylum is the “ safest” place for her.

Marian also feels trapped by her job, describing her role at a marketing agency called Seymour Surveys. The “ c-suite,” as we would call it today, is men-only, leaving her in a position in which the best she could hope for is a managerial role. She comments, “ I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire-marking ladies, as that would be a step down. I might conceivably turn into Mrs. Bogue or her assistant, but as far as I could see that would take a long

time" (Atwood 14). As soon as she discusses a retirement plan, she starts to reevaluate her choices, envying her roommate, Ainsley, for her less stable, lower-paying position that offers one thing - freedom to leave because it's not a "career."

Now, we no longer argue whether or not women should have jobs, but rather, why more women are not leaders. In *Barriers and Bias: The Status of Women in Leadership*, published by the American Association of University Women, researchers present statistics that indicate the higher up the corporate ladder we climb, the fewer women we see. AAUW reflects, "There is no lack of qualified women to fill leadership roles. Women earn the majority of university degrees at every level except for professional degrees, and more women are in the workforce today than ever before. There must be something inherent in the system that's working against them" (AAUW). And in middle-income countries, we see a marked gender gap in entrepreneurial activities; however, in developing countries, the gap narrows again as women choose to start their own businesses out of necessity (Minniti, Naude). Again, there's work to be done.

Escape

Whether these women - Maria, Marian, or Nuala - were in the eighteenth or mid-twentieth centuries - they still coped through escapism, managing their circumstances by reading, writing, or simply daydreaming.

Maria, or *The Wrongs of Woman*, establishes the escape of a numbing identity - books. Mary Shelley Wollstonecraft states that "the books [Maria] had obtained, were soon devoured, by one who had no other resource to

escape from sorrow" (14). Maria concentrates on writing letters to Darnford, which also helps her move beyond her uncomfortable current state in the asylum. Maria also daydreams, because she "was not permitted to walk in the garden; but sometimes, from her window, she turned her eyes from the gloomy walls, in which she pined life away, on the poor wretches who strayed along the walks, and contemplated the most terrific of ruins—that of a human soul" (Wollstonecraft, ch. 2).

The Edible Woman's Marian indulges in her own escapism. Marian is a thoughtful, perceptive woman who continually analyzes what she wants out of life, how to get it, and what is in her way. Through this analysis, she identifies that she needs to escape from whatever it is that plagues her – escape from Peter, escape from her job, and, most likely, escape from Ainsley, who has made it clear that she is changing her own life direction through her single mother status. Marian begins her escape through her unusual, evolving relationship with food, humanizing it to the point where it becomes unpalatable. This occurs shortly after her engagement in the book. She describes her first meal after she becomes engaged to Peter: "I inspected my egg, which was sending out a white semi-congealed feeler like an exploring oyster" (Atwood 88). It's also at this time that Marian begins her relationship with Duncan, escaping simultaneously into an unsustainable romance. Her unsustainable relationship, paired with her unsustainable issues with food, point towards a temporary need to leave her current self behind.

O'Faolain escapes much like her mother (and Maria) did – through reading. She states, "I must have picked it up from my mother – that reading is a <https://assignbuster.com/a-delicate-balance-gender-and-women-as-writers/>

defence. That ' they' can't get to you when you have a book" (25). She describes withstanding immense tests of personal fortitude purely through her ability to weather a storm through the written word: " I lived in a hotel in Tehran for a few months in the 1970s. [...] Men with machine-guns patrolled the lobby in front of the elevators. [...] I didn't care. Every evening I'd hurry back [...] and settle with perfect happiness into wherever I'd go to in Remembrance of Things Past" (28).

Today, we see a similar form of escapism presented as stories surface about the Muslim world's reading habits - it seems that the pastime has evolved to reflect a more thorough consideration of women's rights. In *The Clandestine Adventures of Alice in Saudi Land*, author Jasmine Bager reflects " Public libraries supposedly exist in the country, although nobody I know has ever visited one. It's an unspoken rule that women are forbidden inside anyway" (Bager). She describes the experience of finally having the green light to share experiences in a discreet book club, despite the fact that " The book club could be shut down and the café's employees might face deportation if a person who finds the club objectionable reports its existence to the authorities." The book club serves as the perfect method for the women to connect, and yet the participants must still proceed with the utmost caution. As one woman states, "' We believe that book clubs are incredibly relevant. Where else would we discuss Machiavelli, The Big Bang, and Wonderland? This is the start of social change'" (Bager).

Pregnancy

Atwood identifies women as captives, even in their own homes – a theme we see in *The Edible Woman*, in which Clara Bates is shown to have succumbed to a more traditional role, a role that Marian rejects for its limitations. As Marian describes when she visits Clara, “ I felt now that there was nothing much I could do. I was to be only a witness, or perhaps a kind of blotter, my mere physical presence absorbing a little bit of the boredom” (Atwood 28). Marian continually depicts children as being complicated, enjoyment-disturbing creatures, making references to a child as a “ leech” or “ octopus” (28). When Marian first visits Clara, she notes “ We found it difficult to talk: everyone’s attention was focused on the baby, who was whimpering, and for some time it was the only person who said anything” (28). When Marian later has a dinner party, it is Clara’s baby who spoils it: “ Conversation had ceased. [...] Marian hovered about, handing diaper pins [...] but secretly wondering whether it would be bad taste to go down and get one of the many odour-killing devices from the lady down below’s bathroom” (194).

With this identification of child as complicated and attention-sucking, *The Edible Woman* pits the professional woman’s role against that of the homemaker or mother figure. Marian’s friend, Clara, has moved beyond her academic life and now dedicates her time to raising her children. Marian looks at Clara with a combination of fascination and pity, not envious of her choices. As a working woman, it makes sense that Marian is so critical of pregnancy. She looks at Clara with “ a wave of embarrassed pity” (34) and stated that, at Seymour Surveys, “ pregnancy [is viewed] as an act of disloyalty to company” (21).

Marian's relationship with Ainsley best shows her discomfort for motherhood and how it affects a woman's options. Ainsley is set on becoming a single mother, embracing it as an alternative to Clara's role, which seems tired, messy, and too much of a departure from the lifestyle that both Ainsley and Marian have embraced. Ainsley's choice, while certainly looked down upon by Marian, is a stunningly modern one that fits her needs, not the needs as dictated by society. Ainsley states " How is society ever going to change if some individuals in it don't lead the way? I will simply tell the truth. I know I'll have trouble here and there, and some people will be tolerant about it, I'm sure, even here" (40). Unlike Jemima in *Maria*, Ainsley does not see pregnancy as an issue; she has been afforded far more freedom to make choices without the support of a man.

In *Are You Somebody?*, we see a similar disdain for motherhood as Nuala O'Faolain describes the struggle she has with wanting freedom versus the maternal instinct. She blames herself, and her siblings, for contributing to her mother's downfall, stating " My mother didn't want us. She hadn't felt wanted herself [...] It wasn't marriage that did her in [...] it was us" (O'Faolain 213). O'Faolain emphasizes the choices women must make, and the implications of those decisions. She later discusses her yearning for children, commenting " I would have been a very bad mother, during most of my life. But I'd be a good mother now. Too late. Sometimes I have to look away from small children [...] They are too beautiful to bear" (O'Faolain 181). Much like Darnford strikes a chord with *Maria*, so does Duncan with Marian. Marian's suffocating relationship with her fiancé leads her to seek fulfillment in another place. Unconventional and unusual, Duncan provides fresh

perspective to Marian's damaged relationship with Peter. She tells Duncan "' I'm going to get married, you know'" to which he replies "' But you are here. [...] You're just another substitution for the laundromat'" (Atwood 56).

Marian's shocked response is "' I wonder what you're a substitute for, then'" (56). Duncan refers to himself as "' very flexible'" and "' the universal substitute'" (56). Marian continues to see Duncan throughout the book, eventually finding herself in a situation in which she needs to introduce Duncan and Peter. Duncan declines, disappearing as quickly and as strangely as he was first introduced, "' One of us would be sure to evaporate,'" he comments (263).

O'Faolain also discusses sex as a distraction, much like Marian, stating " People say without thinking, ' Oh what she needs is sex.' That would be a fine distraction. But the longing is in the head as the heart as well as the body" (O'Faolain 182). Marian struggles with sex not filling the void, and Duncan's impotence emphasizes that. After a particularly unfulfilling encounter, Marian comments " What she really wanted, she realized, had been reduced to simple safety. She thought she had been heading toward it all these months but she hadn't been getting anywhere. [...] At the moment, her only solid achievement seemed to be Duncan. That was something she could hang on to" (290).

In some ways, Maria demonstrates the feelings Wollstonecraft had about her own relationships – she once said that becoming a wife was the only way to avoid burdening her family (History. com). All three books present a similar thought. Ainsley was at first completely set on her single parenthood, and yet, by the end of the book, we see her happily engaged and moving on: "

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She had given me to understand in a few sentences she time for that they were going to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon and that she thought Fischer would make, as she put it, ' a very good one'" (308). Maria is buoyed by thoughts of Darnford; alternate endings show Maria committing suicide after Darnford leaves her - as if the possibility of living alone yet again is too much to bear. Nuala comments " Is this what I must settle for, then? I thought. That I can have love - but the love of people I can't see or touch?" (212).

In *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women*, we see how pregnancy can deeply affect a woman's opportunities. On the site's website, the authors elaborate: " The risk of dying in childbirth in sub-Saharan Africa is 1 in 22, while in the United States it's 1 in 4, 800" (Kristof, WuDunn). Global spending in healthcare, the authors note, has long been dedicated to other sources besides maternal care, such as AIDS or malaria. Redistributing funds or shifting concentrations will save lives - and will change maternal mortality rates that mimic that of the 1700s in the Western World (Helmuth). As Helmuth states in her piece, *The Disturbing, Shameful History of Childbirth Deaths*, " Bearing a child is still one of the most dangerous things a woman can do. It's the sixth most common cause of death among women age 20 to 34 in the United States."

The Question of Compromise

It's been said that struggle makes us stronger, and regardless of print date, Nuala O'Faolain, Margaret Atwood, and Mary Wollstonecraft show us how complicated it is to be a woman - in several different time periods. Balancing

our sense of selves with what we're told we should be or how we should act, it's easy enough to bend to these intense pressures. But we're strong, and in the same places we've struggled, we continue to define and refine our roles.

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