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Aitana Moreira Vitzthum

"Nobody's Meat: Cannibalism as a Symbol for Female Sexuality in Contemporary Literature."

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Abstract: Throughout Christian-colonial history cannibalism has embodied the basest human proclivities, recognized as "the other". In this paper, the unleashing of women's sexuality is depicted in three vastly different representations of cannibalism, thus illustrating the misogynistic misconception of female sexual desires. Highlighting the deep-rooted undercurrents of misogyny within a capitalistic system and how it has influenced and affected women and their relationships with sex, has, as of late, led feminist writers to explore the most daring side of female sexuality: Cannibalism.

In this article I will be analysing the motif of sexual cannibalism through three feminist texts: "The Company of Wolves" from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber (1979)*, *The Edible Woman (1969)* by Margaret Atwood, and *A Certain Hunger (2020)* by Chelsea G. Summers. In this paper, I will seek to further investigate and understand how each author broaches the subject of women's sexual desire, and cannibalism as a symbol for female sexuality.

Keywords: Cannibalism, Feminism, contemporary literature, female rage, oppression, sexuality.

Aitana MOREIRA VITZTHUM

Nobody's Meat: Cannibalism as a Symbol for Female Sexuality in Contemporary Literature.

0. Introduction

Cannibalism has been repeatedly used by the West as a symbol of primitive, subhuman, ancient impulses in dire need of cleansing and renovation. It was one of the many excuses used to rationalize colonialism, on the grounds that the savagery of those who were being colonized fully justified the methods used to subjugate them. Cannibalism was, and still is, perceived as an act of extreme cruelty. Something that turns those who partake in the ritual into animals or at the very least humans closely connected with their more animalistic side: ""Cannibalism," as Robert Stam has suggested, "has often been the 'name of the other,' the ultimate marker of difference in a coded opposition of light/ dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage"(qtd. in Stam 125).

Cannibalism being such a taboo subject, worthy of repulsion and judgement, makes it even more fascinating that, in less than the last century, there has been an upsurge of feminist literature that uses cannibalism as a motif for women's sexuality. This phenomenon began in the late 1960s, with authors such as Margaret Atwood and her novels *The Edible Woman (1969)* or *Lady Oracle (1973)*, and continues to our days, with Carmen María Machado's collections of stories *Her Bodies and Other Parties (2017)* and, of course, Chelsea G. Summers' *A Certain Hunger (2020).*

In the recent century a change has occurred in the understanding of feminism; it is now recognized within circles such as that of Intersectional Feminism, that at the core of our inherently sexist society, one may find capitalism. Capitalism allows men to view women as objects which are meant to be handled, dominated and, more importantly, consumed (a reoccurring word used throughout this essay). Women's sexuality may be bought and sold for profit within the sex industry and their image is toyed with and dehumanized in media. Throughout history, women's value has relied upon what pleasures—both physical and non-physical—they have been able to give men. In essence: women have grown accustomed to being one more item which is traded, used, and consumed within a capitalist society. This idea has been subject of feminist study, such as that done by Sabala and Gopal in "Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging" (2010):

> The consumption of the body for male pleasure forms the basis of the market manipulation of women's bodies. Whether it is the wife at home or the sex worker, women dancing in bars or women depicted in serials and films, the objectification of women's bodies for male gaze has been a part of the body agenda. In an era of globalisation, the images around us of "ideal" feminine beauty and the pressure to emulate these ideals operate as reflections of patriarchy and capitalism. (Sabala and Gopal 44)

20th century third wave feminism explored this idea of femininity in a consumerist society and, unsurprisingly, found that many women had been moulded by their environment to present themselves as objects to be utilized. This, in turn, ignited a new anger within many women. There was and always has been, an irrefutable desire by all to be seen not as a 'thing', but as human being.

This last point is a focus of Kristen Ghodsee's new book *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism (2018)* as mentioned in Amanda Arnold article "Capitalism Is Ruining Your Sex Life" (2018). In it, she argues that capitalism is based on exploitation, and women disproportionately suffer under it; this suffering extends to their sex lives. Because women's labour is systematically undervalued and frequently underpaid, their survival tends to be dependent on men. Thus, women's sexuality becomes a commodity under capitalism. This isn't an explicit exchange, though, but rather a "set of shifting social expectations," as Ghodsee is quoted in Amanda Arnold article, in which women can make certain demands (emotional or financial support, for example) in exchange for access to their sexuality, usually within the confines of monogamy or marriage. Capitalism has fundamentally shaped and warped the ways we relate to each other, sexually and otherwise (Arnold, n.p).

This afore-mentioned desire, when repressed, turned into a profound sense of fury and resentment towards society and, more particularly, towards men, as it was primarily they who enforced these roles upon women. From such anger was also born a need for revenge, in which women sought to be the predators instead of the prey in a male-dominated society. Scholas have postulated that the metaphorical act of cannibalism is a way for women to gain back power: "Githire posits the view that 'cannibalistic consumption' can be viewed as a 'transformative act of eating' situated in a specific context to problematise 'questions of power, incorporation, and counter tactics" (qtd. in Shames 97).

What is more, the act of sex itself can be construed as cannibalism. Within most cultures there is an already established idea that 'eating someone' has sexual connotations and refers to oral sex; however, this idea can have greater implications. The intertwining of bodies, the strong emotions that flow, the animalistic ritual of undressing, fighting for dominance and the exchange of bodily fluids. All this and more conjures up an imagery of an animalistic if not cannibalistic act. Sex can be tender and kind, yet it can also be vicious and unrestrained.

Paired with women's feeling of resentment towards men, the release of repressed desires and a newfound freedom to express their sexuality, it is easy to understand how sex may venture into a violent act which might be compared consumption of human flesh and end metaphorically, in the violent act of cannibalism. The idea of feasting on one's lover in a metaphorical way via sex is seen on Summer's work of *A Certain Hunger (2020):* "When we have sex, we ravish our lovers, nibble their ears, lick their vulvas, or swallow their cocks. Gleeful, we banquet on flesh" (Summers 129).

Throughout this paper, cannibalism as a symbol of female sexuality is analized. It will be described in various manners, as it may be depicted as a bargaining chip which allows women to maintain power over their own body. Or, on the other hand, female sexuality and desire may be so intense that the subjects will fear it, while still viewing themselves as the

victim meant to be consumed by men. Lastly, it can also be portrayed as an explosive and violent reply to the repression suffered by women over centuries at the hands of men.

> If the opposition did not itself draw upon violence in some way, if some violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits authoritatively enough. Only unreasoning dread and terror could survive in the teeth of the forces let loose. This is the nature of the taboo which makes a world of calm reason possible but is itself basically a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is. (Bataille 62-63)

This article will delve in and analyse "The Company of Wolves", from Angela Carter's book of short stories *The Bloody Chamber (1979)*; *The Edible Woman (1969)* by Margaret Atwood, and *A Certain Hunger (2020)* by Chelsea G. Summers. Each text deals with the symbolism of cannibalism in different ways, yet all within relation to female sexuality; whether it is through women who feel they are to be cannibalized by men, or those who wish to cannibalize them.

Within these three stories as readers we shall encounter three different approaches to sexual cannibalism: Little Red Riding Hood, a girl who sees sex as an equalizer in which she may give herself to a man, yet not allow him to own nor consume her, thus she is able to hold on to her individuality and neither are cannibalized. The second, Marian, woman fears being consumed by men and thus losing her individuality through sex and marriage and therefore sees herself as the one being eaten or rather consumed or absorbed. Finally, Dorothy, who serves as an example of a woman who, instead of being consumed, chooses to consume men and as such takes on the role of prey and cannibal, proudly displaying and using her sexuality as a weapon.

1. Contextualizing female sexuality

First, women's sexuality has, throughout history, been viewed as something worthy of fear. Religions such as Catholicism have manipulated sacred texts so that a great part of their doctrine is based on the idea that women—especially those who express their sexuality freely—must be shunned. This is clearly true, especially in religious narratives such as those of Adam and Eve where a woman is blamed for leading Man into committing the original sin, or Jezebel, who uses her sexuality to spread the influence of Baal; a deity belonging to a pagan religion with ritualized sex and prostitutes instead of priests "[t]here was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife" (1 Kings 21:25).

Society has based female archetypes such as the Femme Fatale or the Fallen Woman from the Victorian era on the idea that women can weaponize their sexuality and, that, ultimately, this is a threat to the established order. Science, philosophy, and psychology have been preoccupied with the notion that women who are in touch with their own sexuality are either doomed or intrinsically evil.

> In the 17th century, women were often seen as more lascivious than men, their passions ruled by nature rather than reason. Nineteenth-century physiologists clung to this notion that women were governed more by nature than by civilized thought. (Dyhouse 30)

These views of wanton female sexuality have pervaded Western society well into the twentieth century and beyond. However, one thing which has changed in the last century is that now women, especially feminists who promote sex-positive ideas, have seen this as empowering rather than a cue to repress their sexual impulses.

Historically, it is because of this fear of empowerment that society, initially, opted to repress women's sexuality until its only use was that of reproducing or for men's pleasure. Women had no freedom to express their desires, and instead had to wait to be 'awoken' by men who, in turn, viewed it as a possession. Women were taught that sex was equal to their own consumption. This led many women to fear intimate relationships. It was to be expected that, upon further investigation, relationships were, in many women's minds, equated to having their individuality metaphorically devoured by men. This feeling of being eclipsed provoked an extremely aggressive reaction, in which women sought to dominate men before men could eradicate their uniqueness or, as is said colloquially: "eat or be eaten".

Over time, authors have given voice to their profound desire to not be consumed, but rather to consume. Until recently, women's carnal desire was feared as an uncontrollable and savage aspect of nature and was inherently linked with the imagery of blood and even gore. The concept began being touched upon in the 80s, with feminist philosophers such as Julia Kristeva, who had this to say about the relationship between desire and horror:

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (Kristeva 1)

It is, thus, neither surprising nor unexpected that cannibalism eventually became a symbol of women's extreme desire. It represented a lust so profound that led to madness, which is a common literary theme used as a cautionary tale for women not to allow themselves to be swept away by unbridled passion, such as that illustrated through the character of Bertha in *Jane Eyre (1847)* or Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina (1877).*

It is this fear of female sexuality that these three authors explore in their respective stories, yet still in greatly different ways. Some lean towards more primitive impulses, while others shy away from them.

2. Cannibalism in "The Company of Wolves"

In "The Company of Wolves" (1979), Angela Carter critiques classical fairy-tales through a re-imagining of "Little Red Riding Hood". Fairy-tales have been, since their creation, a way of warning children—little girls in particular—to always keep to within the social confines. For young girls, such tales told them to fear their sexuality, to keep their virginity until marriage, and to only use it when it was meant for reproduction.

> It is through these archetypes portrayed in fairy-tales that female sexuality is something that should be feared. In fairy-tales, though usually centered around a beautiful young woman, she is never a sexual creature but rather a demure beauty who needs to be rescued. (…) The Princess is always virginal and pure, something that has been untarnished by society or another man. Fairy-tale's often, always, end in marriage, meaning that sex is an underlying concern yet is never bought to the forefront in fairy-tales, all the reader is given, is that the Prince and Princess lived happily ever after, the mention of female sexuality always quickly pushed aside. (Mcwilliam, n.p)

No fairy-tale is a clearer example of this than "Little Red Riding Hood", where the young girl must, literally, never stray from the path or talk to strangers; and hides herself behind her red hood along with all the implications that come with it. Mcwilliam offers a closer look as o what exactly those implications are: "Even the colour red that is featured predominately in fairy-tales is a fear of female sexuality … All these symbols are agencies of female desire; menstruation, giving into temptation and the idea of sex occurring". Red, the colour of passion and blood, seems a strange colour for an item meant to shield Little Red Riding Hood from the dangers of the forest, especially if the tale is meant to scare young girls away from yielding to their sexual impulses. What Carter suggests is that red is a symbol of the little girl who has now reached maturity and is wearing her newfound womanhood literally on her sleeve; something which society shuns. Instead, Carter chooses to lean into this new sexual desire and accept it alongside its somewhat violent side. The protagonist of the story is never shamed for her lust, but rather applauded for it, and the exploration of her own sexuality goes hand in hand with what can only be described as bordering on cannibalism. From the detail description of her own menstruation to the death of her grandmother, savagery and blood are prominent symbols within the tale. Even the werewolf with whom the young girl has her first sexual encounter is more beast than man, being in wolf form when he has sex with the girl.

> … so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer, had been indulged by her mother and the grandmother who'd knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the

> ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow. Her breasts have just begun to swell; (…) her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month. (Carter 215)

Readers may question why the author chose to introduce the repetition of such imagery. As previously stated, this is encounter with the wolf is the girl's first sexual experience, and, she releases all her desires which society would deem inappropriate and even dangerous. The wolf's lust is described as carnivorous, but in response, so is the girl's desire. Instead of allowing herself to be a piece of meat, the protagonist demonstrates that she too has these same impulses, almost aggressive in nature, and often associated with the male libido. Sanda Mehulić states in her Master's thesis:

> Angela Carter uses metaphorical cannibalism to represent her characters' desire for sexuality, love, food, and violence. Her characters in *The Bloody Chamber* are vulnerable young females who are on the quest to find their sexuality and maybe even love for the first time (Mehulić 28).

Rather than being a passive figure in her first sexual experience, the girl matches the wolf's vigour and objectifies him in a similar way. Thus, she demonstrates a desire to not only be consumed but also to consume. She is in control now that she has accepted her body as something men may want to possess yet knows that none of them will be able to own her. Only she has control over her body and flesh, and simply because she is allowing him to enjoy it does not mean that she belongs to him. Despite partaking in such an intimate act, she will remain an individual throughout; she will now allow him to 'devour' her, "The girl burst out laughing: she knew she was nobody's meat" (Carter 225).

In this tale, cannibalism is intertwined with the girl's first sexual encounter; when referring to her, the narrator repeatedly speaks of her as a piece of meat the wolf desires to eat. This occurs because she is a virgin, as if that somehow would be the only thing that could satiate his hunger, "Carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh appeases him" (Carter 225). Instead of this making her more vulnerable, this makes the girl stronger, for she knows he desires her, and she knows how to use her sexuality against him. She is as ready to use him as he is to use her , but he will never be able to own her. She wears her virginity as a badge of honour because of the following :

> She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing. (Carter 216)

This understanding of what she possesses and how she may use it is what saves her life and, more interestingly, gains her the respect of the wolf. He does not eat her as he had originally planned, and instead they learn to enjoy each other. The only one the wolf ends up

cannibalizing is "granny" who, unlike her granddaughter, fears her own sexuality due to her religious upbringing. Granny represents the repressed women who were taught to be ashamed of their sexuality and never act on it, thus making them bend to men's rule and eventually be consumed by them or, in granny's case, be eaten by them:

> (…) you can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin ... now call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won't do you any good. (Carter 220)

In other words, Carter's "The Company of Wolves" (1979) presents cannibalism as what may happen to women if they do not properly know themselves and their body. It warns women to keep their individuality within a relationship and to not view sexuality as something to fear or be ashamed of, but rather the opportunity to create balance within the power dynamics of men and women's interactions.

3. Cannibalism in *The Edible Woman*

Turning away from this tale and looking at *The Edible Woman (1969)* by Margaret Atwood, a different approach to the issue of women's sexual oppression and cannibalism can be observed. Here, the protagonist, Marian, becomes unable to eat because she continuously sees herself as the food being consumed by her fiancée, Peter. This is very clearly an example of a woman who is afraid of losing her individuality and being 'absorbed' by a man. Something else that propels this fear of eating is the appearance of a new man in her life, Duncan, whom she is greatly attracted to, further exemplifying a woman who is not only worried about losing herself, but who also lives in fear of her own sexual desires.

Marian's fear of food begins with meat. She watches Peter eat a steak and, to her horror, she finds herself imagining he is instead devouring her. The thought alone is enough to put her off meat entirely. What makes this experience unique is that it occurs after he has proposed to her and they are meant to be married; it is as if her body is warning her that, were she to marry this man, she would lose herself completely and be nothing more than a piece of meat for him to consume. Additionally, this also happens shortly after she kisses Duncan for the first time. In other words, her body is not just warning her of her fear of marriage to Peter, it is also making her aware that a new sexual desire has awoken in her and that she does wish to be devoured by someone, just not Peter.

> Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks. (…) She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. (…) But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it. (Atwood 225)

Her wanting to be consumed by Duncan is notable when, during their first sexual encounter, he claims to feel like "some kind of little stunted creature crawling over the surface of a huge mass of flesh" (Atwood 385). The metaphor comes fully to life towards the end of the novel when Marian finally confronts Peter. There she states that Peter wishes to make her an unwilling victim of his 'cannibalism'. Marian's issue does not inherently stem from the fear of being 'destroyed', but rather from being destroyed by the wrong person. She wishes to find someone who can consume her as she pleases, and who allows her to set the boundaries of her own femininity, unlike Peter, who simply does not understand her:

> (…) she used to think he didn't often look at her, didn't often really see her; (…). These days however he would focus his eyes on her face, concentrating on her as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through her flesh and her skull and into the workings of her brain. (Atwood 223)

Throughout the novel, Peter continuously tried to push Marian into a role she did not fit into; he wished her to present herself more like the virginal schoolgirl, dress in less 'mousey' clothes and to wear sexier items. Peter is not the only one who views Marian's refusal to dress according to status quo as something negative, there is also Ainsley, who this as a rejection of her femininity: "'The trouble with you is,' he said savagely, 'you're just rejecting your femininity.'" His approval of Ainsley was a vicious goad. "'Oh, SCREW my femininity,' I shouted. 'Femininity has nothing to do with it'" (Atwood 118).

Marian complies and purchases a red dress she knows will be of Peter's liking. Here it is once again see the repetition of the colour red, "I'm going to marry you, aren't I? And I love you especially in that red dress. You should wear red more often" (Atwood 349). Only Duncan realizes she is putting on an act to make Peter happy, rejecting who she truly is and playing along to Peter's wishes.

> He stood for a moment peering silently at her from under his hair, examining every new detail. "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade," he said at last. "Who the hell are you supposed to be?". (Atwood 362)

An uncomfortable form of femininity is forced upon Marian. Yet, it is Duncan's acceptance of her as she is and his understanding of how uneasy she feels what makes Marian desire him over Peter.

Different forms of femininity and female sexuality are presented to Marian once again through the aforementioned archetypes: Clara, an old college friend, takes on the role of the Angel in the House. "'Every woman should have at least one baby.' She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair dryer. 'It's even more important than sex. It fulfils your deepest femininity'". (Atwood 56).

Ainsley is the Femme Fatale; Emmy, Lucy, and Millie, who Ainsley calls "the office virgins" (Atwood 25) fulfil the archetype of the Spinsters. Marian feels she must choose between these three options, thus reducing her value to how she interacts with men, again

making her a passive object rather that an active subject, much like a piece of meat being eaten. She may choose between being a mother and housewife, an emotionally unattached and hypersexualized woman, or a virgin destined to be alone or at the very least, lonely. Marian does not want to conform to any of these archetypes and resents Peter for trying to enforce one upon her. She does not wish to be a passive object, and hence empathizes with the food eaten by Peter.

Finally, having had enough, Marian confronts Peter, and vocalizes her fear that he has been trying to 'destroy' her against her will by shaping her into someone she is not. To do so, she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and tries to goad him into eating it:

> "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork". (Atwood 412)

Peter is horrified, and walks away, no longer willing to consume her now that the act would be done on her own terms rather than his. Since he has lost control and can no longer impose his ideals onto her, it is as if he has lost his appetite. Yet it is then that finally Marian recovers her own hunger: she is no longer under Peter's control or expectations; she is free from being consumed by someone who she doesn't wish to consume her. Upon the return of her appetite, she begins to devour the cake. When Ansley sees Marian eating the cake, the message becomes clear: Marian has embraced her own form of femininity and sexuality, thus no longer playing into the role assigned to her by society and Peter, "'Marian!' she exclaimed at last, with horror. 'You're rejecting your femininity!'" (Atwood 414). Now, comfortable with her own desires and body, she asks Duncan to come over, and thus they both eat the cake together. Marian has no issue with him eating the cake and therefore her own self, metaphorically, because this is who she has chosen to do so. He accepts her sexuality and femininity, seeing her for who she truly is, which is why she consensually allowed him to, symbolically, cannibalize her.

> "You mean that stuff about Peter trying to destroy you?"
> I nodded.
> "That's ridiculous," he said gravely. "Peter wasn't trying to destroy you. That's just something you made up. Actually you were trying to destroy him."
> I had a sinking feeling. "Is that true?" I asked.
> "Search your soul," (…) "But the real truth is that it wasn't Peter at all. It was me. I was trying to destroy you."
> I gave a nervous laugh. "Don't say that."
> "Okay," he said, "ever eager to please. Maybe Peter was trying to destroy me, or maybe I was trying to destroy him, or we were both trying to destroy each other, how's that? What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer."
> "Incidentally," I said, remembering, "would you like some cake?" I had half the torso and the head left over.
> He nodded. (Atwood 422)

Consumerism plays an essential role in the book, once again touching upon the themes of female objectification in capitalism, and Marian's fear of being devoured by Peter. Marian works in market research, creating surveys and sampling products. Her job is devoted to consumerism and publicity, and it is through her employment that she meets Duncan, who intrigues her with his answers. He is not like others whom she interviewed in the past and seems to 'put up a fight' when answering, refusing to give a straightforward response, and thus not partaking in the consumerist ritual of whittling everything down to numbers and statistics.

Perhaps the clearest example of Marian's preoccupation with consumerism is also her fear of not being able to eat. The reduction of what foods she can digest worries her, and what worries her even more is that her options may grow increasingly smaller:

> The quiet fear, that came nearer to the surface now as she scanned the pages (…) was that this thing, this refusal of her mouth to eat, was malignant; that it would spread; that slowly the circle now dividing the non-devourable from the devourable would become smaller and smaller, that the objects available to her would be excluded one by one.(Atwood 228)

Logically, one might assume that her fear stems from the possibility of starving to death, but the truth is exposed when Duncan finds out that she can now eat again, "What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer" (Atwood 422). Thus, revealing that Marian's true panic was rooted in the thought of not being able to partake in consumerist society anymore. She did not want to be an object for consumption (or at least not without her consent), but she did want to be able to consume.

4. Cannibalism in *A Certain Hunger*

In the novel *A Certain Hunger (2020)* by Chelsea G. Summers, cannibalism is also present. Unlike the other two protagonists who slowly find a way to be men's equals sexually and within a consumerist society, this book's protagonist, Dorothy, seeks to take on the role typically assigned to men. She is an active subject, often objectifying and belittling men to mere pieces of meat meant to be enjoyed both sexually and cannibalistically. There are resentful tones in the way Dorothy views men, making it abundantly clear she herself has felt the sting of a society that views women as toys for male pleasure: "I see them, the guards, terrifying the vulnerable inmates. They're bullies, these men living their fantasies of power, as if their squalid teenage dreams cracked open and spilled incarcerated candy at their feet" (Summers 23).

The protagonist understands the imbalance between men and women and that many men have a sadistic way of interacting with women. What makes Dorothy extraordinary is that she turns this attitude on its head and gives men a 'taste of their own medicine'.

There are many clear examples of the role reversal between men and women in the novel. Not only is Dorothy the predator instead of the prey, but also she is the one who does the consuming and even the 'penetrating'. In the first explicit kill within the story, Dorothy

stabs her lover in the midst of the sexual act. While he is still penetrating her, she changes the dynamic, being the one in power, by penetrating him:

> My left hand found the handle of the ice pick warm, weighty. I held it, appreciating its vintage heft, its history, and its design. I knew what to do. In an arc as perfect as a fifteen-year-old girl's breast, I plunged the ice pick deep into the right side of Casimir's pale throat. I felt it pierce his skin, his meat, and his cartilage (Summers 19).

Furthermore, the metaphor seeps into both Dorothy's job and her best friend Emma's profession. Dorothy is a food critic, a famously male-dominated job. The same goes for Emma, a painter. Although Emma's employment is more forgiving towards the fact that she is a woman, that does not change the fact that it takes Emma gender bending great male historical figures for her to reach her fame:

> The agoraphobic painter Emma Absinthe, most famous for her series of oil self-portraits portraying herself as the great men of history. Emma Absinthe as Napoleon, one hand clutching a roasted chicken, the other on a sword hilt, grease shellacking her carnivore's lips. Emma Absinthe as Winston Churchill, fat cigar, impeccably tailored gray flannel, sly erection draped to the left. Emma Absinthe as George Washington crossing the Delaware, surrounding soldiers a battalion of lesser Emmas, the river faintly and ominously reminiscent of menstrual blood. Emma Absinthe as Socrates, folded linen, beetle brow, a flock of languorous Emma-boys lounging at her feet, and a cup of hemlock. Emma Absinthe as FDR, pince-nez, cigarillo, wicker pushchair, cross-dressing Eleanor behind her. (Summers 46)

Throughout the novel there is an interesting blend between sexuality, food, and femininity. Food is described almost sexually, while sex is described in culinary terms, making the impending cannibalism that takes place even more logical. The narrator's deep hatred for men seems to stem from the fear of losing her own femininity. She had, throughout the entirety of her life, placed great value on her sexual appeal and how she presents herself to the world as a woman, "From my mother, I learned that beauty was armour. From my teenage friends, I learned that femininity was junk. They were both right" (Summers 73). However, in her older age—51, to be exact—and menopause slowly approaching, Dorothy fears slipping into oblivion: now that men do not see her as sexually desirable or as a 'real woman' since she can no longer reproduce, she has grown to resent men and male-dominated society for making her feel like she is worthless. Furthermore, her status as a single woman dedicated to her work, although once empowering, now seems empty given that Dorothy feels she has nothing to show for so many years of hard work. This anger, the fact that she still feels like a sexual human being, and that she spent the entirety of her life performing femininity, brings about a new need to consume men:

> The goddess of femininity is cruel to mature women, crushing our brittle bones in her silken, youthful grip. As a girl, when you grow up, you become delectable. As a woman,

> when you grow old, you turn immaterial—unless you bear children, unless you make art, unless you leave a legacy. As she slouches toward menopause, Emma has her paintings to stave off irrelevance. My legacy is somewhat more fraught. The choices that we have, the choices that we make—these choices condemn us, constrain us, and create us. This is life at its most essential, a series of decisions that leads to your inexorable end and your desperate, muffled hope that you may be celebrated when it comes. I can live with my choices, as I will live with my legacy. I write this knowing that I will grow old and die in this prison, and I write this so that no one will forget me. I have carved my place in your memory, cut to the quick of American consciousness. How many women—hungry as we are for immutability—can say the same? (Summers 326).

As a food critic, her job essentially consists of constantly tasting food and offering one's opinion of it to the world. It is this talent that Dorothy uses when interacting with her male sexual partners. She dehumanizes them, deciding they are only good for sex and, when she is done with them, eats them. In other words, she is treating them as pieces of meat. The protagonist is virtually doing to men what they have been doing—on a more metaphorical level—to women for centuries. She speaks of what she does almost as a sacred act, a form of retribution for what has been done to her: "It's such an intimate thing, to witness another's death. Orgasms are a dime a dozen. Any old human woman can see a man orgasm. We so rarely get to see them die; it has been my greatest gift and my most divine privilege" (Summers 20).

Dorothy views her violence as second nature—which will be discussed in more depth further ahead—but more importantly, she claims that this aggressiveness lives within every woman, and that what she is doing represents the female gender. She is letting go of all the imposed gender attitudes towards life and sex and unleashing the feminine trait of violence which society refuses to recognize exists within women:

> Culture refuses to see violence in women, and the law nurtures a special loathing for violent women. Unfettered violence, anger unleashed, the will to destroy, the need to undo—these acts run counter to everything we like to think we know about the feminine nature. Yet women weren't always the angels in the house, and angels weren't always benevolent beings playing harps on the tops of trees. We like to forget that men imprisoned women in the house and expected gratitude in return. (Summers 295)

What is unique about Dorothy is that violence comes more naturally to her than the classical idea of femininity. Her entire life, femininity was something she was forced to learn, including a non-aggressive presentation of her own sexuality. Yet she explains clearly that said aggression has always lived within her. She blames—and thanks—society for imposing and teaching her femininity. It is because of it that later in life she was able to have better access to the men that would eventually be her victims. However, it was also due to this femininity that she had to repress her true nature.

> I have reasons to feel forever grateful to my fake teenage girlfriends, for aside from teaching me about junk food, they taught me how to be feminine. Snuggled in their blossoming Love's Baby Soft-scented bosoms, I learned to approximate a female—how to talk, how to walk, how to dance, how to flip your hair. How to part your lips as for a kiss but not for a bite of food. How to end your declarative sentences in a question. How to twitch your hips as you left a room. Why you laugh when you feel like screaming. Over trays of Bonnie Bell Lip Smackers and mountains of cooling fries, I learned that being female is as prefab, thoughtless, soulless, and abjectly capitalist as a Big Mac. It's not important that it's real. It's only important that it's tasty. (Summers 41)

Now, I would like to focus on where cannibalism fit into this forced role of femininity, as it is a representation of Dorothy's true nature. Perhaps not literally, but her cannibalistic tendencies showcase her true self: a more aggressive, assertive, and non-capitalistic side of her femininity. Everything she learnt was so that she would be more docile and pleasurable to men, and it is not until she is free of the constraints of trying to please men that she truly understands herself, her anger, and her desires. Although an unconventional desire, cannibalism in this novel not only represents revenge against men, but it also embodies all the impulses and lust she had been repressing for so long, ever since she was taught what femininity ought to be, "Junk food was rebellion, rebellion was femininity, femininity was junk. Adolescence immersed me in an ouroboros of desires, and it was ecstasy" (Summers 42).

Dorothy very openly views sex and sexuality as a violent act; as a clear example of the Femme Fatale, she takes her impulses to extremes. Everything she does is with the utmost passion: she enjoys food as it were her last meal and views every bite as a work of art. When she hates she does it so fiercely, similarly to how she views love and passion. This protagonist is not a moderate woman and has a lot of rage that she wishes to release. Sex to her is an implosion of built-up lust and anger towards men. After growing up in a house where love and anger went hand in hand, "Some men need to witness female anger to believe in that woman's love. Some women need to get angry to experience that love" (Summers 65) she has a very aggressive understanding of what emotional and physical intimacy means. She does not believe one can exist without the other, and that some form of either sadism or masochism is essential for there to be desire. Eventually, this perception of love and desire will turn into real violence that culminates in cannibalism.

> Of these groups, we love the sexual cannibals the most—so easy to anthropomorphize. Who hasn't lain in bed next to her lover and wished that, coitus concluded, she could turn her head a balletic one-eighty, unhinge her jaw, and snap off the head of the man lying insensate next to her. Beds, for all their vaunted symbolism of rest and peace, are sites of strife. Show me a human who hasn't silently, stealthily, lain in bed and wished for the sudden horrible death of the person lying next to them, and I'll show you a liar. (Summers 257)

5. Conclusion

To conclude, we cannot understand cannibalism in literature as a symbol for female sexuality without first grasping the concepts of fear and consumerism in relation to women's sexual desire. Cannibalism, as a symbol, has been used to emphasize the abuse women have suffered at the hands of men for centuries. It has also been a symbol of quite the opposite, where women have used cannibalism as form of revenge upon men for the abuse that they have suffered throughout history. Society has feared women's sexuality from the beginning of time, which has made them in many ways repress their sexual desires. Now that women feel freer to express their lust, it comes out as explosive and sometimes even violent because, after centuries of oppression, they have grown to resent men for making them feel ashamed of their basic human impulses. What is more, it is because of the capitalistic society that women were turned into passive objects and now wish to become active subjects. Become predator instead of prey and wish to be consumers instead of consumed. Due to this, cannibalism can also be seen as women's fear of men 'devouring' their individuality through sex and marriage.

Drawing ideas from the concept of cannibalism as a symbol for female sexuality, this article has looked at three texts by different writers—"The Company of Wolves" (1979) by Angela Carter, *The Edible Woman (1969)* by Margaret Atwood, and *A Certain Hunger (2020)* by Chelsea G. Summers—and argued the different reactions female characters may have towards their sexual desires. What can be taken from this research is that cannibalism is a counter-reaction to prolonged oppression over the course of history, at the hands of the patriarchy, capitalism and religion.

As I have seen through these three different stories cannibalism and sex can have three different interpretations. "The Company of Wolves" (1979) demonstrates how the devouring of each other's bodies has a balancing effect on the couple thus allowing for more sexual and emotional equality. The second text, *The Edible Woman (1969)* is an example of fear, where sex represents the giving over of the flesh to be consumed by one's husband and in doing so, the relinquishing of oneself to a man and his whims. Lastly, *A Certain Hunger (2020)* is a story of revenge, in which the woman makes the men victims of a violent end, thus underscoring the fury she feels as a woman.

On a final note, I would like to leave the readers with one last quote from a poem that embodies female rage, rooted in the misogyny's oppression, and manifested in an animalistic way. Although not explicitly cannibalistic, it exemplifies the same impulses analysed in this article:

> He says he loves feminine women.
> (…)
> Comes when she's called but doesn't call too often.
> Not too bitchy.
> Submissive. Subservient.
> I tell him he has mistaken
> obedience for femininity.
> I suggest getting a dog instead,
> but I caution that both bitches bite back. (Mateer 170)

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Bioprofile of the author

Aitana Moreira Vitzthum (New Hampshire, 2000) is a graduate student from Universidad Complutense de Madrid who got her Degree in English Studies, and who hopes to one day achieve her goal of getting a PhD. Her academic interests span from Renaissance theatre and Romantic poetry, to Contemporary literature and Postmodernist poetry. Her personal literary interests tend to revolve around the understanding and study of complex female characters throughout the ages, with special attention to how women interact with religion, anger, sexuality and other taboo subjects.

Contact: < aitamore@ucm.es >