



Literature in the Age of Commodities: A Baudrillardian Comparative Study of Margaret Atwood and Manju Kapur

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Abstract: In contemporary consumer societies, material objects rarely remain confined to their utilitarian functions; instead, they operate as symbolic systems through which identity, desire, and social relations are negotiated. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of objects, this paper undertakes a comparative reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006) to examine the gendered workings of commodification in everyday life. However, the novels emerge from distinct socio-cultural contexts—late-capitalist North America and post-liberalization India—both foreground consumer culture as a formative force shaping female subjectivity. Through close textual analysis, this article explores how objects mediate power relations, normalize patriarchal expectations, and sustain middle-class aspirations. While Atwood employs satire and allegory to expose the violence concealed within consumerist logic, Kapur's realist narrative reveals the quieter, more gradual internalization of commodification within domestic spaces. Reading through a Baudrillardian lens, these texts treat consumer culture not as a passive backdrop but as an active presence that structures emotional, bodily, and social experience. The paper contributes to feminist literary criticism by emphasizing material culture as a central narrative agent and by extending Baudrillard's theoretical insights within the study of contemporary women's fiction.

Keywords: Consumer culture; material objects, feminist literary criticism, commodification, Jean Baudrillard, contemporary women's fiction.

Introduction

In modern literary narratives, material objects are rarely passive or incidental. More often, they function as carriers of meaning that shape relationships, identities, and social hierarchies. With the expansion of consumer capitalism, objects have increasingly acquired symbolic value beyond their practical use, operating as signs through which desire, status, and belonging are negotiated. Literature, as a reflective and critical cultural form, has long engaged with this shift, registering how commodification permeates everyday life and alters the experience of subjectivity. The impact of consumer culture is particularly visible in the representation of gender. Women's bodies, domestic labour, and emotional lives have frequently been aligned with consumption—both as targets of market ideology and as objects circulating within patriarchal systems of exchange. Feminist literary criticism has examined these dynamics through sustained attention to domesticity, objectification, and identity formation. Yet the material objects themselves—the everyday things through which these processes unfold—have often remained at the margins of analysis, especially in comparative studies that cross cultural and national boundaries.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the symbolic function of objects and commodities in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006), using Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968) as its primary theoretical framework. Although Atwood and Kapur write from different historical moments and cultural locations, both foreground material culture as a critical site where gendered identities are produced, regulated, and occasionally resisted. In their novels, consumerist logic enters intimate spaces—food, marriage, domestic interiors—quietly transforming them into arenas of discipline as well as potential contestation. Baudrillard's theory offers a

particularly productive lens for reading these texts. He argues that in consumer societies, objects function within systems of signification rather than simple utility. They communicate social meaning, organize desire, and regulate behaviour, turning consumption into a kind of language through which individuals articulate their position within a social order. When applied to literature, this framework allows objects to be read not as background details but as narrative agents that shape meaning and expose underlying ideological formations.

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood employs satire and allegory to critique the commodification of women's bodies and relationships in a late-capitalist society. Food, consumption, and consumer goods become central symbols of Marian McAlpin's growing alienation from prescribed gender roles. Her refusal to eat mirrors her resistance—often unconscious—to being consumed by patriarchal expectations embedded in marriage, work, and social conformity. The novel repeatedly exposes how the rhetoric of choice and abundance conceals forms of control and violence.

By contrast, Manju Kapur's *Home* situates its critique within the realist portrayal of an Indian middle-class household negotiating economic liberalization. Here, domestic objects—furniture, clothing, household appliances—emerge as markers of aspiration, respectability, and authority. Kapur reveals how consumer culture reshapes family structures and gendered labour from within, particularly in the domestic sphere, where women's lives are regulated through material expectations. Unlike Atwood's overt satire, Kapur's narrative emphasizes the normalization and internalization of commodification as part of everyday life.

By placing these two novels in dialogue, this article demonstrates how consumer culture operates across distinct socio-economic contexts while producing comparable gendered effects. The comparative approach highlights both

convergence and divergence in the authors' narrative strategies and cultural critiques. Ultimately, the paper argues that Atwood and Kapur treat commodities not as neutral objects but as semiotic systems that sustain power relations and, at moments, open limited spaces for feminist resistance.

Theoretical Framework: Baudrillard and the Semiotics of Objects

Jean Baudrillard's theory of objects offers a crucial framework for understanding the transformation of material culture in modern consumer societies. In *The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard argues that objects no longer function primarily according to their use-value but instead operate within a structured system of signs. In advanced capitalist societies, objects acquire meaning through their relational position within a network of other objects, forming a semiotic code that organizes social life. **Consumption, therefore, is not merely an economic activity but a cultural practice through which individuals communicate identity, status, and desire.**

Baudrillard differs from older Marxist ideas about commodity fetishism by stressing sign value as a separate category, alongside use value and exchange value. Sign value means the symbolic importance or social meaning attached to an object, which often matters more than its practical use. In consumer culture, objects are bought not for what they do, but for what they mean. This change turns daily life into a constant symbolic exchange, where people are drawn into social roles through what and how they consume.

A crucial point of Baudrillard's argument is that objects help control how people see themselves. Instead of meeting human needs, objects increasingly dictate desires, turning people into consumers who try to define themselves through their

possessions. The spread of goods creates an illusion of choice and plenty, but it actually strengthens conformity and social control. Baudrillard calls this soft coercion, where people willingly accept consumer logic, mistaking symbolic differences for personal freedom. Baudrillard's analysis is especially helpful for literary studies because it allows objects to be read as active parts of stories. Objects act as signs that connect characters and reflect bigger societal ideas. In books, consumer goods often show conflicts between freedom and control, desire and discipline, surface and depth. By focusing on objects, authors can subtly critique consumer culture, showing its effects on emotions and identity.

In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard further argues that consumption works by manipulating desire rather than need. Desire is always put off, as objects promise satisfaction but instead create cycles of unhappiness. This endless cycle of desire fits with modern feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and fragmentation. Literature captures this by showing how characters adopt consumer logic, measuring their self-worth through possessions or social approval.

Baudrillard's idea of the body as the finest consumer object is very important for feminist literary analysis. He says the body itself becomes a commodity in consumer society, subject to rules of control, display, and improvement. This idea strongly matches feminist critiques of patriarchal systems, which have long looked at how women's bodies are objectified and controlled. When applied to books, Baudrillard's theory shows how female characters are seen as both consumers and commodities within patriarchal exchange systems. Feminist scholars have used his ideas to show how consumer capitalism affects gender, especially in private and intimate spaces. By seeing objects as symbolic systems rather than neutral tools, critics can uncover how power works subtly through daily practices.

For *The Edible Woman* and *Home*, Baudrillard's theory lets us compare how consumer culture appears in different social and economic settings. Atwood's novel reflects the worries of late-capitalist Western society, while Kapur's story deals with the rising consumerism in India after economic changes. In both cases, objects act as tools of normalization, shaping gender roles and controlling female identity. A Baudrillardian perspective thus offers a clear theoretical way to analyse these texts, showing how much commodification affects modern life.

Commodification and Female Identity in *The Edible Woman*

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* strongly critiques consumer capitalism and its connections to traditional notions of female identity. Set in a city rapidly becoming commercialized, the novel shows how women's bodies, desires, and social roles are shaped by consumer logic. Through Marian McAlpin's emotional and physical detachment from food, Atwood reveals the subtle ways women become consumable objects in both personal relationships and wider social systems. At the beginning of the novel, Marian seems to fit well into consumer society. She has a steady job in market research, takes part in social routines, and accepts what is expected of her as a young, educated woman. But her work itself—designed to study and control consumer behaviour—ironically places her within the very system that will later consume her. This professional involvement illustrates Baudrillard's assertion that individuals in consumer societies are simultaneously both **agents and subjects of commodification, participating in systems that ultimately regulate their identities.**

“I was reduced to a faceless thing, a mass of muscles and nerves that sent signals back and forth.”(Atwood 281)

Marian’s engagement to Peter marks a crucial turning point in the narrative. Marriage is shown not as an emotional bond but as a social deal, ruled by looks, respectability, and exchange. Peter’s focus on order, perfect appearances, and control reflects a consumer mindset that turns relationships into items for show. In this context, Marian increasingly sees herself as an object to be shaped, owned, and consumed. Her growing inability to eat meat, and later other foods, symbolizes her resistance to being swallowed by this system of traditional exchange.

“You look delicious,” Peter said.(Atwood 270)

Food acts as the dominant metaphor through which Atwood shows commodification. Drawing on Baudrillard’s idea of sign value, food in *The Edible Woman* goes beyond basic nutrition and becomes a symbolic system that reflects Marian’s place in consumer culture. As Marian becomes more aware of being an object, she starts to identify with the consumed rather than the consumer. Her refusal to eat means she rejects the idea that women are passive, always available, and self-sacrificing. The novel further explores the commodification of the female body as a site of social regulation. Marian’s bodily responses—nausea, loss of appetite, and dissociation—represent a psychosomatic rebellion against imposed identity. Baudrillard’s assertion that the body is the “**finest consumer object**” is particularly relevant here, as Marian’s body becomes a battleground where consumerist and patriarchal expectations collide. Her physical refusal to conform exposes the violence masked by the rhetoric of normalcy and choice.

The climactic episode involving the woman-shaped cake serves as the novel’s most explicit symbolic gesture. By baking

a cake shaped like a woman and offering it to Peter, Marian shows outwardly the consumer logic that has shaped her relationship. This act reveals how absurd and cruel it is to treat women as consumable objects, while also reclaiming her agency. Marian then eats the cake herself, which shows a cautious reclaiming of her own identity and self-definition, though Atwood leaves this ending open to interpretation.

Through *The Edible Woman*, Atwood demonstrates that commodification operates not through overt coercion but through everyday rituals, objects, and expectations that normalize women's objectification. By linking Marian's personal crisis with the structures of consumer culture, the novel shows how female identity is built, controlled, and resisted within capitalist society. Reading through a Baudrillardian lens, the text emerges as a powerful feminist critique of consumption, exposing the **psychological costs of living in a society that consumes its women while disguising exploitation as choice.**

Domestic Objects and Middle-Class Aspirations in *Home*

Manju Kapur's *Home* subtly explores the Indian middle-class household as a place where consumerism, tradition, and gender meet. Set during India's economic liberalization, the novel examines how objects within homes become symbolically important, shaping family dynamics and individual identities. Through its detailed descriptions of household routines, possessions, and room arrangements, this novel shows how goods act as signs of hope, respectability, and control, especially concerning women's lives. The home is full of objects that represent middle-class status and moral uprightness. Furniture, clothes, appliances, and decor are not just functional; they act as signs within a cultural system that values stability, order, and social conformity. Using

Baudrillard's theory of objects, these household items can be seen as parts of a sign system through which the family communicates its place in a quickly changing social and economic setting. **Owning and displaying material goods becomes crucial for keeping the family's sense of order and continuity amidst modernization.**

"A woman's place was in the home, and the home was her responsibility." (Kapur 94)

For female characters in the novel, domestic objects play a dual role: they offer a sense of belonging while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal regulation. Women are seen as keepers of the home, responsible for its material and moral integrity. Household objects thus become tools through which women's labour is made to seem natural and their identities confined to home roles. Baudrillard's idea of consumption as a form of social control is very relevant here, as collecting and managing objects puppets women to act out ideal versions of middle-class femininity. Unlike obvious displays of luxury, the objects in *Home* stress practicality and respectability, reflecting the hopes of a class seeking to improve its standing without breaking social rules. Clothing, for instance, shows proper behaviour and gender roles, controlling women's movement and visibility in public and private spaces. Similarly, home appliances symbolize progress and efficiency, yet they often increase women's household duties rather than making them easier.

The home itself becomes a central object in the novel—a structured space ruled by rules of access, authority, and observation. Women's movements and choices are limited by room arrangements that prioritize family unity over individual freedom. Through Baudrillard's ideas, the home can be understood as a system of objects that organizes social relations, embedding power within daily

routines. The promise of comfort and safety offered by home space hides the unequal sharing of work and freedom.

Middle-class hopes in *Home* are closely linked to consumption, but these hopes are marred by worry and restraint rather than excess. Objects symbolize the family's attempt to balance tradition and modernity, showing the tensions in India after economic changes. While consumer goods suggest progress and wealth, they also reinforce traditional gender norms, making sure that modernization does not upset patriarchal authority.

"Everything had to be kept in its place; disorder invited criticism." (Kapur 112)

Kapur's depiction of domestic objects ultimately shows the contradictions of middle-class consumerism. Material possessions offer stability and recognition, yet they demand conformity and sacrifice, especially from women. Reading through Baudrillard's ideas, ***Home* shows how consumer goods support ideological structures by placing power within ordinary and familiar things.** The novel thus offers a quiet but sharp criticism of consumer culture, revealing how objects shape female identity and keep gender inequalities going.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Comparing *The Edible Woman* and *Home* shows important similarities in their criticism of consumer culture, along with significant differences shaped by cultural context, storytelling methods, and historical period. Despite their different social and economic settings, both novels show how commodification acts as a gendered force, shaping female identity through everyday objects and expectations at home. Reading through Baudrillard's ideas, these texts show that

consumer culture goes beyond national borders while adapting to local social structures. A main similarity is how **they show women as both consumers and commodities**. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian's body becomes an item to be consumed in a late-capitalist society that sees women as available and passive. Likewise, in *Home*, women's identities are shaped by their relationship to domestic objects and managing the household, placing them as functional parts within the family system. In both texts, commodification is felt internally rather than imposed externally, fitting with Baudrillard's idea of 'soft coercion', where people willingly follow consumerist and traditional norms under the illusion of choice.

Another similarity is the symbolic role of objects in maintaining social order. Atwood uses food, consumer goods, and marriage customs to show how relationships are structured by market logic. Kapur, in contrast, focuses on furniture, clothing, and home space to show how middle-class respectability is kept through material order. In both cases, **objects act as symbolic systems that make power relations seem natural, putting ideology into ordinary and familiar things**. However, the two novels differ quite a bit in their storytelling style and cultural focus. The cultural backgrounds of the novels further shape how they show consumerism. *The Edible Woman* criticizes a society where consumer choice is plentiful but empty, revealing the loneliness beneath material wealth. *Home* deals with a society balancing modernization and tradition, where consumption is about aspirations and anxiety. While Atwood shows consumerism as overwhelming abundance, Kapur presents it as controlled accumulation, showing how middle-class hopes act as both a promise and a restriction.

Despite these differences, both texts ultimately show how commodification affects women's lives. Atwood hints at symbolic resistance through Marian's reclaiming of agency,

though vaguely. Kapur's novel, in contrast, suggests enduring rather than changing, emphasizing the limits of resistance within home settings. Together, these stories show that while consumer culture appears differently in various contexts, its gendered effects remain strikingly similar.

Conclusion

This article has examined the symbolic use of objects and goods in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Manju Kapur's *Home*, using Jean Baudrillard's ideas about the semiotics of objects. By seeing material culture as an active system of meaning rather than a neutral background, the analysis has shown how consumerism shapes female identity, controls desire, and keeps traditional power structures going across different cultural settings. Despite their different storytelling methods and socioeconomic backgrounds, both novels reveal commodification as a widespread force built into daily life. The comparative approach in this paper highlights both similarities and differences in how commodification is shown. While Atwood focuses on disruption and symbolic rebellion, Kapur emphasizes endurance and adaptation, reflecting the cultural and structural limits on female resistance. Together, these texts show that consumer culture, though influenced by culture, produces strikingly similar gendered effects by placing power within objects, routines, and home spaces. By applying Baudrillard's ideas to feminist literary analysis, this study adds to ongoing discussions in material culture studies, comparative literature, and gender theory. It stresses the active role objects play in stories and broadens where Baudrillard's ideas can be used beyond Western contexts. Ultimately, *The Edible Woman* and *Home* show that consumer goods are not just consumed but also play a part in consuming women's identities, desires, and labour. Literature's engagement with objects, therefore, remains a

strong way to show the subtle ways modern societies control gender and keep inequalities going.

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