

MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE EDIBLE WOMAN: A QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY

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Margaret Atwood is the first major novelist of Canada who attempts to focus on the new-woman as self aware, independent, seeking, to evolve an identity of her own. Her fiction provides a comprehensive review of the problems women confront in attaining full recognition and enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom. The basic premise of Margaret Atwood's feminist thought is survival which shows women the ways of struggle and the means of survival in an antagonistic, male chauvinistic, and sexist society. By 'survival' she does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Her fiction is a reflection on the violation of women's rights and it includes:

Any act, omission or conduct by means of which physical, sexual or mental suffering is inflicted, directly or indirectly, through deceit, seduction, threat [harassment], coercion, or any other means, on any women with the purpose or effect of intimidating, punishing or humiliating her or of maintaining her in sex-stereotyped roles, or of denying her human dignity, sexual self-determination, physical, mental and moral integrity or of undermining the security of her person, her self-respect, or her personality or of diminishing her physical or mental capabilities.¹

The Edible Woman is Margaret Atwood's maiden attempt at fiction writing. *The Edible Woman* is a quest for self identity by Marian, the main character of the novel. Facing an identity crisis she is confronted with various alternatives. Firstly, Marian has to face and overcome at her work place. In her company 'Seymour Surveys' all responsible and respectable positions are occupied by men and is not accessible to her. Marian soon realizes that she is literally and figuratively trapped. She remarks that her company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich with three floors; the upper crust, the lower crust and her department the gooey layer in the middle. Marian says:

The prospect of getting grooved into the fixed middle point of the office structure for the whole of her life with a pension at the end of her tenure of job, makes her feel that in front of her "a self was waiting, performed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. (21)

Marian's crisis, however, acquires a feminine coloration when she looks for alternatives to her present situation. These alternatives are represented in her office colleagues Emmy, Lucy, Millie, her friend Clara and her husband Joe, Peter and Ainsley, her roommate. Choices and alternatives presented by her friends apart Marian also feels outraged by the attitudes adopted by Seymour Surveys towards its women employees. The manager Mrs. Bogue regards the very act of marriage and pregnancy as offensive and disloyal to the company. Marian does not want live life without her identity. She seeks something different from life. She wants to live meaningfully

but she does not wish to change her society. She hopes that she would be able to lead a better life with Peter. She thinks that Peter is an ideal choice. He is attractive and bound to be successful. He seems to be a godsend to relieve her from her monotonous life at her company Marian says, “I was seeing him in a new light... a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability”. (189)

Marian believes that marriage is necessary in life and also that it is maintained by adjustments, but gradually she realizes that only wives have to adjust. In The Edible Woman, Marian struggles with her self-identity and seems losing her mind begins to ‘find’ herself. Soon she knows that Peter is a manipulator and gets insight into the truth of her relationship with him. She feels:

My mind was at first as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left me only the rind to think with. (83)

Marian realizes that her identity and interests can never be safe in the event of her marriage with Peter. She thinks that Peter is a destroyer of her individuality and identity. The image of Peter as a hunter upsets Marian emotionally. As the marriage approaches Marian suffers from apprehensions.

Marian’s mind gets crazed as she grasps Peter’s way of observing things. Marian being his latest target he becomes an acute analyst of her. This makes Marian feel that she is on a doctor’s examination table. Marian’s visualization of herself in Peter’s hands gets stronger when she watches Peter eating:

... The capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressure. How skillfully he did it; no tearing no ragged edges. And it was a violent action. (150)

Now Marian thinks that Peter was treating her in as civilized a way as he was handing the steak on his plate, devouring it with relish and style. It is this fear, which makes her a total vegetarian finally making her give up food.

When Peter arranges the cocktail party on the occasion of their engagement, Marian wears new red dress, heavy makeup and gold earring. She does all because Peter tells her to do this. She looks her image in the mirror, which seems to mock at her:

She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portions of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible...(229)

Marian feels that a woman’s primary market value in the marriage depends upon her charming image. In party when Peter aiming his camera right at Marian, the image of Peter as the hunter becomes stronger in her mind. She imagines Peter as the dark intent marksman with his aiming eye has been there all the time hidden by the other layers. He is waiting for her at the dead center, like a homicidal maniac with lethal weapon in his hands.

Now Marian thinks that Peter has ability to devour her in a civilized way and he has a strong motive to negate her individuality. He is expecting her to assume the roles of a traditional wife and mother. J. Brooks Bouson says:

As a realistic novel The Edible Woman shows how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self.²

Marian does not want to be trapped in a decorative life where her identity and individuality are likely to be crushed. Marian realizes that her destiny is to be another soap woman after marrying Peter. Her future image is clear to her and she recognizes her own self, a

tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space.

She needs fresh air, the freedom to grow and develop her personality. She refuses to be Peter's 'edible woman'. She refuses to marry him and runs away from the party, it shows her feminine valour and her potential for wholeness.

When Marian goes to Duncan's place with this hope that she find some kind of safety and shelter but Duncan takes advantage of Marian's innocent nature and she becomes the victim of Duncan's lust Marian is pained to realize she is not the first and "[T]he starched nurse like image of herself she had tried to preserve as a last resort crumpled like wet newsprint".(264)

Duncan tells Marian "You might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know"(100). By hunger he means the desire to feed on the emotions of others. After seducing Marian, Duncan remarks:

Its no use. I must be incorruptible ... I don't exactly know what's wrong. Party I don't like not being able to see your face ... (253)

This remark makes Marian stunned and she decides to stop eating. According to Robert Lecker Marian has been from the beginning a, "packaged product of a male dominated corporate society and rejection of food' is synonymous with her rejection of a culture which tends to exploit women and treat them as edible objects".³ Emma Parker says, "her no eating is physical expression of her powerlessness and at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness".⁴

Now Marian thinks that she is a destitute girl and feels dejected about future. She recognizes both Peter and Duncan in their true colours and understands how she has allowed both the men in her life to use and consume her, thus actually helping the process of victimization. This new awareness provides her a renewed strength and purpose in life. She rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. After she returns to her place, Marian bakes a cake that resembles her, "as a traditional woman's skill, the baking of the cake is her mute and 'feminine' act of protest which also bears the seeds of potential liberation: She will hence forth, refuse to be consumed"⁵, says Patriacia Waugh. It shows the role of women as servers and women as consumables. Although she speaks only through the marginal art of culinary decoration, rather than through the culturally approved channels of 'high art' and although her protest is ambiguous (Peter and Ainsley interpret the act in different ways), she has registered a voluntary and intentional protest which releases her body from its involuntary rejection of food. For although Marian has felt herself to be an independent agent in the world, college-educated and economically self providing, psychologically she manifests all the dependency traits of the 'classic' image of femininity what contradictoriness is finally voiced, involuntarily, through her female body. Marian offer baked cake as a woman substitute to Peter and says:

You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you wanted all along, isn't it ? (271)

At this behaviour of Marian, Margaret Atwood says that, "by doing so Marian is trying to depict: an action, a preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself".⁶

Peter leaves the place with embarrassment, now Marian feels hungry. She offers the cake woman to Ainsley. She says:

Marian ... You're rejecting your femininity.(272)

Marian looked back at platter. The Woman laid there, still smiling glassily, her legs gone. "Nonsense" She said. Its only a cake. She plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head. (273)

Marian can eat the cake because she no longer identified with the spurious “wholeness” which has been offered to her as “essential femininity” in a culture where women are in fact continuously anatomized for consumption.

The cake, which Marian bakes and eat, shows the development of her vision and her refusal to be a victim Marian claims that she cannot be manipulated by the people like Peter and Duncan. Marian is also able to destroy the society’s synthetic stereotype of femininity through the ingenuous mirroring device of the cake and free herself to realize her own true identity. At the end of the novel she proclaims that a cake is edible but a woman is not. The cake-woman represents woman as an object for male consumption. It is said to be gesture of defiance a way of saying no to a system that defines woman as commodity and devours them. It also seems a reflection a way of seeing herself in a mirror and it expresses a truth not before perceived. Further it signifies her recognition and rejection of the former compliant self, culminating in her new ability to respond to the own inner feelings. Sharon Rose Wilson says, “by baking, decorating, serving and consuming the cake-woman image... Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food”.⁷

She wants to become a woman who quest for a meaningful human identity. This is Margaret Atwood’s feminist perspective as found in *The Edible Woman* M. Prabhakar says, “Atwood has presented a comedy of resistance to social myths of femininity through the discriminating eyes of Marian, the champion of feminism”.⁸

Thus, we can say that Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* is about women and their relationships to men, to society and to food and eating. It is through food and eating that Margaret Atwood discusses a young women’s rebellion against a modern, male dominated world. The female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, struggles between the role that society has imposed upon her and her personal definition of self and food becomes the symbol of that struggle and her eventual rebellion. It seems that Marian has problems not only with food, but with her social relations and with her love life too.

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