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Marian's Search for 'Self' in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Dr. Mothe Prashant Subhashrao

Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Adarsh Senior College,
Omerga, Dist. Osmanabad (MS)

'The Edible Woman' is structured like a journey into the interior landscape of its protagonists, Marian and her association with several male and female acquaintances and friends. Through her close association with them, she realizes her real 'self'. The main action of the novel puts the various alternatives before Marian who is present throughout the novel either as an observer or as active or passive participants. The theme of the novel is acquiring a confident voice of her own, identifying her 'self'. In the first part of the novel, Atwood uses the confessional mode. Marian tells us about herself, her own voice, projecting different attitudes towards womanhood out of which the protagonist chooses one as her ultimate destiny and she looks for choices in terms of alternatives to her present situation. *The Edible Woman* is the first novel by Margaret Atwood, published in 1969. It is often discussed as an early work of feminism. She employs an eating disorder in her novel *The Edible Woman* as a metaphor of a revolt and protest.

Marian McAlpin is a researcher working for Seymour Survey Company, a highly stratified, three floors, hierarchic market organization where men hold all responsible and respectable positions. Exclusively men are the top floor of the research organization. It is not acceptable to Marian. While at the lower level are old housewives. This is received categorization in patriarchal discourse. Marian says:

"On the top floor are the executives and the psychologists-referred to as men upstairs, since they are all men. Below us are machines-mimeo machines." (p.19)

Marian gets grooved in to the middle point of the office structure for the whole of her life. Marian's predicament types the situation of women in male dominated society. Seymour Survey Company does not give freedom to women in their work. It also prescribes marriage and pregnancy of women in employment as an act of disloyalty. Marian experiences identity crises her place as researcher, because of the discrimination against women. She feels outraged at the comment of a man whom she interviews. He says,

"You ought to be at home with some big strong man to care of you." (p.48)

Marian's identity crisis acquires a feminine coloration when she looks for choices in terms of alternatives to her present situation. These are various acquaintances, which come in her contact, but no one male or female provides appropriate alternatives for her. Marian inhabits male chauvinistic society, where crisis of her identity.

In search of alternatives, Ainsley is the first woman alternative. Ainsley is the room-mate of Marian but there is difference between their natures. They differ on the issues of marriage and motherhood. Ainsley hates marriage and plans to have a child without marriage. She

searches biological father for her child and then looks for a father image. Ainsley offers this radical alternative to Marian's situation. But Marian rejects that role model because bearing an illegitimate child is a cold-blooded act for which woman has to pay her price. Marian says,

"Of course I had always assumed through high schools and colleges I was going to marry someone eventually have children, every one does...I have never silly about marriage the way Ainsley is." (P. 42)

The second alternative for Marian is the married life of Clara. She is not practical and sensible enough to marriage and run a well-organized married life. Marian realizes how Clara, her friend from college days has become a victim of biology, watches closely how Clara gets involved in succession of pregnancies and feels sorry for her. Clara has not taken precautionary measures through the reasonable practice of reproductive controlling of pregnancies. Marian is aware that the power of the wife declines as the number of children grows. Gradually woman becomes no more than a childbearing machine. She is totally dependent socially and economically upon her husband. Therefore, Marian emphasizes the importance of family planning.

"Birth control....all say, it's the population explosion not the atomic explosion that we must all worry about."(p.199)

Third alternative available to Marian is the three office virgins: Lucy, Emmie and Millie. They regard martial lives as their ultimate destiny. They evade sexual relation with men various reasons and that why they are known as office virgins. They are victims in a patriarchal society. Marian rejects these artificial blondes because they invite victimization. Hence, Marian accepts neither the radical and extremist feminist view point of Ainsley, nor self-destructive innocence and ignorance of the office virgins. In a nutshell, Ainsley, Clara and *Lucy, Emmie, and Millie* the three different role models fail to offer appropriate alternatives to Marian's identity crisis, she seeks male alternative in Peter, her boyfriend and Duncan to fulfill her objective.

Peter is the fiancé of Marian whom she sees as an alternative for her identity crisis. Marian looks upon him as not only rescuer from Seymour surveys but also a provider of stability. She is drawn to him because his pleasing manner and impressive way of talking. She thinks that it was all in order to win her. Peter a law graduate who is well known for his hobbies. Peter needs a wife to complement his collection of knives, guns and cameras. He likes Marian, as she never demands from him. He sees her as

"Girl who wouldn't try to take over his life (p.61)"

In course of time, Marian understands the true character of Peter as a manipulator and gets insight into the truth of her relationship with him. She realizes that she has let herself be sold as some kind of dispensable commodity. She identifies Peter with an anonymous caller who has introduced himself to ladies as a surveyor on underwear. Peter narrations of hunting spree shocks. Marian discovers that Peter enjoys shooting and killing of rabbits and other animals mercilessly as a matter of pleasure and pride. He is very fond of non-vegetarian food. The image of Peter as the hunter and herself hunted enters her mind. She

begins to distance herself from him. However, she is aware of that one has eaten to live. She chooses to eat very rarely and stops eating non-vegetarian food. This seems to be a form of her disapproval and protest against all that Peter represents. Marian realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe and secure in the event of her marriage with Peter. She begins look at him as a destroyer of her individuality and identity. The plot reaches its climax when Peter arranges the cocktail party. She is no longer herself but only the image of a wife of Peter and what the society cherishes. She becomes progressively divided and objectified in the marriage market. The cocktail party provides Marian with the perception that Peter has an ability to devour her in civilized way and he has a strong motive to negate her; individuality and autonomy thereby expecting her to assure the roles of a traditional wife and mother. She surrogate of her own artificial self she presented at the cocktail party, Marian offers Peter the cake as a substitute for herself when he comes to demand an explanation for her disappearance form the cocktail party; she says:

You've been trying to destroy me... you've been trying to assimilate me but I have made you a substitute something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along. (p.271)

Peter is embarrassed by the cake and Marian's behavior. He realizes that he can no longer play the game of deceit with her as a hunter; she begins to eat the cake ending her withdrawal from food as soon as Peter leaves the place. The cake, which Marian finally bakes and eats, is seen as symbolic evidence of the development of her vision and refusal to be a victim of male-dominated society. She comprehends that peter is a threat to her identity. So Marian does not want to be trapped in a decorative life where both her identity and individuality are likely to be mercilessly crushed. She feels the need for fresh air, the freedom to grow and develop her personality. She refuses to be this 'Edible woman'.

There is another male alternative that is Duncan. Marian takes her flight to Duncan. But it is like jumping into fire from pan. She hopes to find some kind safety and shelter at the place of Duncan. Instead she becomes a helpless victim of Duncan's lust. Duncan takes advantages of her credulous and simple nature. Marian may not be the first one to become the victim of Duncan's lust. Deceit is the very breath of his life and with meticulous planning he exploits many women. Marian encounters with Duncan shatters her completely. She decides to stop eating altogether until she finds a way out of to resolve the crisis and chaos in which she finds her. She understands how she has allowed Peter and Duncan to exploit and 'eat' her. Thus Marian is made up victim of symbolic, cannibalism.

In the beginning, Marian is submissive and passive woman. She accepts male-chauvinistic society. But at the end of the novel she finds with her 'self'. Marian partially reconstructs that new persona or concept of self through a renewed relationship to food. Non-eating in *The Edible Woman* is mainly a symbol of the denial of the patriarchal model of femininity. Although the protagonist is an educated bright woman who lives on her own, she feels manipulated and unable to take decisions for herself. Atwood in an interview says:

It's a human activity that has all kinds of symbolic connotations depending on the society and the level of society. In other words ,what you eat varies from place to

place, how we feel about what we eat varies from place to place, how we feel about what we eat varies from individual as well as from place to place. If you think of food as coming in various categories: sacred food, ceremonial food, everyday food and things that are not to be eaten ,forbidden food, dirty food, if you like- for the anorexic ,all food is dirty food.

In the essay, "*Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists*," Patricia Goldblatt states that "*Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive.*" In the second part of the novel Atwood employs the third person narrative mode to show a deep penetrative probe into Marian's psyche as she begins to realize that by agreeing to marry Peter is a denial of her womanhood. Marian at the end of the novel begins to talk in the first person narration. Thus, she gains her own 'self'.

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