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Commodification of Human Relationships in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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The term 'commodification' as deciphered and widely accepted by various economists, means — assignment of commercial value to something not previously considered in economic terms – and in this era of globalization, where almost anything comes with a price tag, makes everything money centric. People have adopted the habit of 'buying' whatever they please and can afford; and 'exchanging' commodities for personal benefits. Consecutively, they have slipped into the notion of behaving in the same manner even when it comes to relationship with other humans. In the current scenario, the importance of a person is not determined by its 'humane values' anymore, rather it depends upon its economic value or on the amount of benefits that can be procured from it.

In the novel, *The Edible Woman*, many such aspects have been showcased by Margaret Atwood. For instance, the ability of an organization to extract the much work potential it can from its employees and then simply terminate their services when they no longer can serve the purpose, or they become any kind of liability. It's not merely an issue of corporate companies' methods, rather how this insensitivity has seeped into individual level. How just for gratification of one's aspirations and needs, one is cleverly playing with others. And once the purpose is achieved, one leaves the other person like a *used commodity*.

The actions of Mrs Trigger, Ainsley, Peter, Duncan and other characters, clearly indicates, how humane essences and values have deteriorated to the extent where one has forgotten that the other is also 'a person', and in doing so have fallen from its own place of being human.

In the very first chapter of the novel, a reader meets the protagonist of the novel – Marian and her roommate Ainsley. And the mutual distances and the consensus are very much apparent. There is minimal emotional connect among them. They have just adjusted with each other to live under the same roof in a silent environment. Marian narrates:

“We get along by a symbiotic adjustment of habits and with a minimum of that pale-mauve hostility you often find among women.” (TEW. 9) She further says, “It's a see – saw arrangement and we both know that if one beat is missed the whole thing will collapse. Of course we each have our own bedroom and what goes on in there is strictly the owner's concern.” (TEW. 9)

There's not much left but to comprehend the survival mode of their relationship, where one is though living with the other but do not share any bond; it's just the easy mode with minimum possible difficulties and least interference in private affairs.

In the second chapter of the novel, reader gets familiar with the prevailing corporate environment – its tactics, its nuances, its work culture, its treatment of the employees, how humans are operating as small mechanical pieces of large corporate machinery, and many other similar details that are sketched skilfully. From the first chapter itself, a reader can sense the dryness and distance among the characters, even between those who share supposedly intimate relationship like that of Marian, the protagonist, and her boyfriend Peter.

A reader can witness that how a corporate machinery extract the maximum it can from its employee when reader sees Marian being assigned with many extra tasks to accomplish other than responsibilities related to her specific designation. Her job was more of a documentation kind but besides that she was asked to do “pure taste - test” by Mrs. Withers of artificially created flavours that can be used in meals and other official works became part of daily office schedule. Marian herself ponders on the subject:

“Sometimes I wonder just which things are part of my job, especially when I find myself calling up garage mechanics to ask them about their pistons and gaskets or handing out pretzels to suspicious old ladies on street corners. I know what Seymour Surveys hired me as – I’m supposed to spend my time revising the questionnaires, turning the convoluted and overly – subtle prose of the psychologists who write them into simple questions which can be understood by the people who ask them as well as the people who answer them.” (TEW. 12)

There are employees who get fired for most insensitive reasons and the bottom line of each case was they were *not useful* for the company in those circumstances. Quoting the case of Mrs. Doge:

“I’m afraid Mrs. Dodge in Kamloops will have to be removed. She’s pregnant.’ Mrs. Bogue frowned slightly: she regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company.” (TEW. 21)

Mrs. Ellis in Blind River was also removed because she “broke her leg” (TEW. 21), and that too while she was doing the office work, but gets no compensation or support from the company for which she has in words of Mrs. Bogue “always done a good work” (TEW. 21), instead was fired when she needed the financial support the most.

The most disturbing effects of this state of emotion-less and treating the other as the utility object for personal benefits only, have changed the dynamics of even most intimate relationships such as of lovers. Peter and Marian, who have ‘intimate’ relationship since many years, share a political gender relation instead of any such emotions that so called serve as the foundation of a love relationship. Peter likes Marian for two prominent reasons: first, she doesn’t demand marriage: The idea of marriage for Peter is that women trap men in the domestic hell and snatch away the entire freedom one enjoys being a man. Second, she caters the needs of his masculinity, which forms the core of his identity. Throughout the novel one can find Peter getting agitated whenever he feels that Marians defied his masculinity or in some way his masculinity was not treated with importance or to his horror was insulted.

Why Marian likes Peter is not much apparent but one can deduce, its possibly because of her parents, who were of the opinion that she would never marry or better to say, would not be 'settled' in life with a handsome man, who makes good fortune, and is cable of providing a normal life. Keeping these grounds in consideration they all approved for Peter.

Marian and Peter share social and sexual relationship but the absence of intimacy is clearly perceivable. They barely speak out there heart with each other throughout the novel. Both of them remain unaware of the emotional and mental state of each other despite sharing something as close and personal as sex. Marian's mental narration in their episodes of intercourse gave the clear and sore picture of the whole act, where mind, soul and emotions were entirely detached from both the sides, merely the bodily engagement was there. In the episode where Peter asks Marian to accompany him in the bathtub for the intercourse, she does not feel any sensuousness rather her mind begins to ponder why Peter has to do this in such uncomfortable ways that makes her uneasy but she never objects:

"I much prefer the bed and I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortable hard and ridgey, but I hadn't objected". (68)

In the next paragraph she encountered the prior acts narrating to the readers how "casual" and uncomfortable they were and reaches to the conclusion that

"Peter's abstraction on these occasions gave me the feeling that he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere, but I could never locate the quotations." (68)

The whole act of intercourse ended on the casual note with Marian narrating Peter's action,

"How was it for you?" he asked casually.... He always asked me that.

'Marvellous', I murmured; why couldn't he tell? One of these days I should say 'Rotten,' just to see what he would do... " (71)

It's visible that Marian is participating to save the relationship and Peter is taking control to gratify his needs without bothering genuinely whether Marian was comfortably involved or not.

This whole political dynamics among them culminates and Marian withdraws herself from this commoditized nature of commitment where she was voluntarily involved in serving his masculinity in every form in exchange of a relationship that was going to be converted into the 'arrangement' of marriage, after Peter proposed to her, realising he's the only one left in his male friend group unmarried and would end up alone if do not get married; and Marian was a tested 'option'.

There is a very powerful episode – where Marian bakes a cake in the shape of a 'sexy' woman – symbolizing many things that one may decipher; and one of the interpretations is the consumerist nature of a person, in here it's a man. After baking the sexy woman shaped cake, Marian speaks clearly to Peter:

“‘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,’ she added somewhat prosaically.” (344)

Besides Marian and Peter, there are other minor characters, who again reassert the consumerist nature of a person treating the other as a commodity.

Special attention here must be given to Ainsley, Marian’s roommate, who wants to conceive a child but do not want any father for the child. She just need someone whose genes are good and healthy that would be propagated in the child. The problem is not that she wants to bear a child alone, whereas from feminist’s perspective it’s a bold and welcomed step, but the problem is in the ideology and absence of sentiments and especially in the method of doing so, where the male is reduced to the identity of mere healthy ‘sperm donor’. She rejects the idea of father and his need in healthy development of a child. According to her too many parents confuse the child. She wants someone just good enough, who can be ‘tool’ for her pregnancy, without interfering in her own life or that of the child. She defines what precisely she wants in the man:

“... Actually I have been thinking about it. He’ll have to have a decent heredity and be fairly good – looking; and it will help if I can get someone cooperative who will understand and not make a fuss about marrying me.” (45)

Her selection of the father is much more like selecting a comfortable sofa to sit in.

Through the dynamics of different relationships among the characters in the novel, a sensitive reader will see how our habit of pricing everything has changed the course of human relationships. Though we have introduced these systems of commercialization, globalization, buying and exchanging commodities for personal gains, but with course of time we ourselves have become the victims of the same. With this excessive need and habit of buying and selling, and moulding everything to suit personal purposes and profits, we have forgotten to discriminate humans from commodities and in act of doing so we as humans have become commodities.

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