The Woman's Body and Consumer Society- A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Edible Woman*

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Since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men… This secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics, but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social traditions under the purposeful control of men… This has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievements in many a field but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women.

-- Simone de Beauvoir

In today's world, women are forced to occupy a secondary place in a male-dominated, consumer society. The woman is considered as the 'Other', and 'Second Sex.' She is used as a commodity for the carnal gratification of male desire. Feminists all over the world are striving to rectify the cultural setbacks, to efface the gender biased power politics so that women get equal rights in society. Besides, women writers, by voicing their opinion and defining their world, have been attempting to create new dimensions of space and new vistas of life for women.

This paper reads one such feminist novel The Edible Woman written by the celebrity Margaret Atwood which speculates the predominant feminist issues such as loss of identity, subordination of woman in the male-dominated, male-chauvinistic society, woman striving to establish an identity of her own , and her being exploited in the consumer society where woman's body is treated as a toy, as a consumable item- a symbolic representation of consumerism and consumer problems prevalent in the modern society.

Atwood depicts the malevolent maelstrom of male hegemony by her profound observation and by delineation of women characters especially, achieves her desire to diffuse her intention as a writer to the suffering mass, to the public and thoughtful people in totality.

The novel focuses on the problems at the work spot, gender inequality, pitfalls of patriarchal system and the uncongenial environment needed to be rectified with immediacy. Atwood postulates a

contextual discourse to examine woman as colony, her passivity and incapacitated stand against the male aggression in the patriarchal discourse, which by extension also represents the feeble and powerless status of Canada against devouring domination of America.

Atwood, referring to her debut, The Edible Woman written in 1969, states in the Introduction to the 1979 edition:

> The Edible Woman appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as proto-feminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965,and I am not gifted with clairvoyance though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors (370).

In The Edible Woman, Atwood's chief concern is to de-construct the gender politics. She rightly describes the novel as "proto-feminist", whereas John Lauber analyses it from the view point of "consumer society" (20). A s the title itself suggests, The Edible Woman is about a simple woman, the protagonist Marian McAlpin, who develops eating disorders called anorexia, later on feels she is being eaten once she consents to marry her boyfriend Peter. Gradually she sees a different ambience of approach much to her denigration and dismay.

Marian has a problem. A willing member of the consumer society in which she lives, she suddenly finds herself identifying with the things being consumed. Marian's gradual loss of appetite could possibly be ascribed to her negation of the self; one possibly can infer that it could also mean her loss of freedom leading her into chaotic wilderness. Her gradual loss of appetite, a physical disorder, developing a sort of anathema to a non-vegetarian food results into her psychological dismay.

Duncan, an important person whom Marian encounters during her survey in Seymour Surveys, aptly points out that her physical restlessness and refusal to take food, her eating disorders, called anorexia - -- is nothing but her revolt against domineering patriarchal society. Hence, Marian chances to see her true self in her meeting with Duncan.

Peter Hidalgo in her essay "The Female Body Politic: From Victimization to Empowerment" remarks on Marian's problem of anorexia thus:

> Marian's anorexia is a symptom of her fear of the kind of future society offers Women. In an episode which is fairly typical of the feminist novel of 1960's, Marian visits a former classmate, now a wife and mother, and is overwhelmed by

the purely biological existence of a woman with the three small children. That Marian is still free from the horror of enforced domesticity does not mean that she does not play a "feminine" role in her work place. The structure of market research Company where she has a job represents the power distribution between the sexes: on the top floor are the executives and psychologists, all men, who deal with the clients and have their private offices. The woman shares a large room and is supposed to take of human element, the interviewers. Marian, who has a degree in English, revises the questionnaires devised by the men so that they can be understood by ordinary people. That is, she is a mediator between masculine 'scientific' jargon and the daily experience of the housewives targeted by market research (291).

Atwood's innately critical perception reflects the status quo in the consumer society. Marian defines her place as above "matter" but below "mind". Salat aptly says in "A Delicious Fair: Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman," "Marian's problematic of "becoming" constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society..... The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mindless body" (96).

As the novel progresses, her interaction with the outside world, with men, we are given to understand that Marian's realization enhances intensely, a sort of awareness of the self, and the simultaneous apprehension of loss of Identity thereby inducing an urge in her to establish her own identity. The title is suggestive of the fact that the novel has symbolic overtones of meaning referring to consumerism, cannibalism, sex, woman's body and harrowing exploitation by men.

The Edible Woman, which spans a few months of Marian McAlpin's life, is told in three parts. In Part I, which is written in the first-person point of view, Marian becomes engaged to Peter and experiences an escalating paranoia as she is variously alienated by her work situation, co-workers, friends, and living arrangement. In Part II, the longest section of the novel, the narrative abruptly shifts into third-person point of view, and Marian gradually becomes more and more anorexic. Her anorexia nervosa is of a peculiar nature--she not only loses the ability to eat anything but is also haunted by the idea that she herself is being consumed.

At the end of Part III, Marian bakes and serves the "edible woman" to Peter as she rejects him as a marriage partner. Ultimately, Part III witnesses Marian's emergence from third-person anorexic space; she regains the ability to eat and is once more the speaker, the "I." Although

the novel's consummating act, the baked and served "edible woman," has generally been interpreted as either an act of defiance and liberation or as an indication of her re-insertion into the economic and social machine of capitalism. Nevertheless, it is a reflection of the fact that the heroine has found out her identity.

J. Brooks Bouson says in "The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Characters in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman" that " Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women" (230).

In the Peter–Marian relationship, there is a total transformation of self, body and psyche of Marian which she realizes once she is engaged to Peter. Linda Hutcheon in her "Afterword" to 1989's reprint of The Edible Woman says of Marian's transformation. "From this moment on (after getting betrothed to Peter) Marian finds increasingly alienated from her job, from her family and her past, and even from herself: she coolly observes her own actions; her very body becomes "it"; her personal motives become unclear to her."

As far as Maria is concerned, Peter sees in her a sensible woman and expects her to have individual thinking. He proposes to her and explains the reason for wanting to marry her. He says: "I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrain and you're such a sensible girl. You may not have known this but I've always thought that's the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife" (89).

Marian at first looks upon him as a "rescuer from chaos". Peter, a law graduates needs a wife to boast of his collection of guns, knives and cameras. He keeps referring to Marian's admirable qualities like her commonsense, independence and a few differences she has from typical woman as he views women to be inherently preposterous, parasitic and capricious. Peter intends to give Marian an identity which would conform to his norms. She feels robbed of her identity as a woman which is unbearable to her. She is expected to be different from other women in her behavior, thoughts and attitudes.

A woman as presented by male gaze, is dependent, emotional and at times fussy, but Marian is expected to be practical and sensible like a man trapped in a woman's body. She experiences a sense of alienation at the loss of female identity which will reduce her merely to victim's position, a saleable commodity in the consumer market. Her identity as woman is fully based on her sense of community, devoid of such basic identity as a woman would make her vulnerable even though she retains other identities like nationality, class, race, political ideology and language. In a patriarchal strategy, primary identity as being a woman is

necessary to create a space for woman, to defy herself from being thrown into the obliterating oblivion in the patriarchal space.

Brend K. Marshall's comment on Foucault's views on power politics is cited here. "When he [Foucault] says that these struggles (fought over power relations) "assert the right to be different", he is suggesting the not-too surprising impulse for women, for example to insist that they not only have equal rights, responsibilities, roles, that is 'subjectivity' in this world as men, but also that they have the right not to be men"(107).

When she speculates Peter as a hunter, hunter of rabbits, she loses respect for him, which is symbolic of her conscious awareness of victimisation. She envisages the hunter in him, where as she the hunted, she perceives herself sold, her body sold in the commercial market of consumerism.

Peter is gripped with the power of ego, male superiority to which Marian refuses to submit, she feels trapped, confined, her identity being lost. Atwood opines that the baneful system of power structure has been creeping both into national consciousness and female psyche where family harmony is jeopardised. Atwood writes in Second Words: "By 'political', I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how" (353).

In the light of this context it is but essential to know the French Philosopher Michael Foucault's notions of power in the context of contemporary Feminism. The notions of power, power structures in society, their relative merits and contributions depend on certain factors. In spite of so much of controversial debates on Foucault's innovative theories on Enlightenment, his argument on the concept of power holds water. Power relations, as Foucault notes, are dependent upon a number of meticulously designed strategies: the most important of all is the tendency on the part of the dominant to ceaselessly refuse to acknowledge individual identity.

Aurelia Armstrong articulates in her treatise "Foucault and Feminism" that the French Philosopher, Foucault's theory has shown alliance between Poststructuralism and Feminism which emerged as the two most influential political and cultural movements in the late twentieth century. His precept of the relation between power, body and sexuality has stimulated extensive feminist interest as analysis of power relations with respect to women's subordination- the central project of the feminists. Using Foucault's understanding of power as "something exercised rather than possessed", feminists challenge the accounts of gender relation in order to comprehend the role of power victimizing women in an attempt to transform it.

"There are a number of aspects of Foucault's analysis of the relations between power, the body and sexuality that have stimulated feminist interest. Firstly, Foucault's analyses of the productive dimensions of disciplinary powers which exercised outside the narrowly defined political domain overlap with the feminist project of exploring the micropolitics of personal life and exposing the mechanics of patriarchal power at the most intimate levels of women's experience. Secondly, Foucault's treatment of power and its relation to the body and sexuality has provided feminist social and political theorists with some useful conceptual tools for the analysis of the social construction of gender and sexuality and contributed to the critique of essentialism within feminism. Finally, Foucault's identification of the body as the principal target of power has been used by feminists to analyze contemporary forms of social control over women's bodies and minds."

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Marian's awakening projects feministic probe into the politics of power over woman's body in the consumer society, where as it is consciousness of power of male superiority, male domination over the female dominion of body that motivates Peter to subdue Marian that creates chasm between them. Further Peter with his camera episode in the novel serves as a turning point in the private life of Marian for it gives a clear picture of Peter, a "homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (246).

The obsession of the possession of the camera is viewed synonymous with gobbling her identity and autonomy. The camera focusing in the "zero hour" in the party on her red dress according to Marian is actually reducing her life zeroing into nothing. A subconscious fear eats her alive that she is regarded as a commodity in the matrimonial market. Atwood drives home the conviction that as long as woman complies to the male domination without having the power to resist, she suffers agony and physical subordination.

J. Brooks Bouson says: "As a realistic novel, The Edible Woman shows how female passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self" (231).

The cake woman image which Marian bakes with icing, symbolises her personification of woman, may be her own image, representing her own stand, adumbrating the ephemerality of life." You've been trying to destroy me you've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. That's what you wanted all along"(271).

When peter refuses to eat the cake , Marian eats it which means that she alludes no longer woman is to be treated as a base object in the

society in the consumer- ridden world; she knows her limitations. Now she knows her stand which means she regains her lost identity with full affirmation.

Marian eating the cake-woman, a substitute of her own-image in a fit of frenzied anger and angst of retaliation after Peter's refusal to partake it, shows that she would rather rebel and survive than subjugating to selfish male domination. Emma Parker comments: "By demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world" (350).

The cake which she bakes is at once a therapy, a solution, self discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. Atwood thus comments in an interview with Gibson: "Marian performs an action, 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"(25).

While scholars examine the evidence of baking the cake as a consummate image for the novel, critics tend to read it as either a symbol of Marian's liberation from or as her re-entry into the field of consumer capitalism. To Glenys Stow, the cake "is of course, a deliberate symbol of the artificial womanhood which her world has tried to impose on her," and with the "crazy feast" at the novel's conclusion "Marian breaks out of the expected social pattern" (90). Sharon Wilson concedes that Marian "returns to [the] society" that has oppressed her, but maintains there is symbolic agency in Marian's return: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food" (96).

The protagonist undergoes a traumatic journey in search of a viable route for survival, the female will struggles as a result of the flesh to be sold in the matrimonial market by selfish male will. Thus the novel The Edible Woman is a representative fiction focusing upon the themes of female suffering caught in the web of obnoxious male domination, being reduced to a consumable object when there is a reprehensible submission and self-willed subservience on the part of woman. Atwood implicates woman's complicity in the male hegemony.

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