

Female Predicament in *The Edible Woman*

C.Nithya,
M. Phil , Research Scholar,
Bharathiyar Arts and Science College (W), Deviyakurichi.

Abstract

Atwood in her first novel, *The Edible Woman* gave a vision of the society in which man has converted the whole of his environment into a commodity market so much so that even, man himself has become a commodity fit to be consumed. Marian finally regains her true identity which she has been searching for a long time. Marian declares that she can no more be exploited by males like Peter and Duncan. She therefore affirms that she is not an edible product. Thus Marian, becomes the modern woman who revolts against the patriarchal power structure, against the system of gender and its oppression and shows a path to other women like her to attain self-identity in this male-dominated society.

Key words: self-identity, freedom, search, suppression, liberation, independence

Margaret Laurence has been the most prominent contemporary Canadian woman novelist in English. She was born in the small town of Neepawa, Manitoba on July 18, 1926 to a middle class family of Lowland Scots and Iris Descent. Despite the fact that Laurence was raised by a loving aunt, who becomes her stepmother, her fiction is concerned with themes of disinheritance, dispossession, roots and orphanage testifies to the long-lasting effect on her parents' death had on her. Her literary career as a novelist begins with her maiden novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969). It is a novel in which themes of women's alienation are expressed by her as she does in her poetry. It is an early feminist treatise, a both funny and terrifying story about a young woman, who works for a consumer company. *The Edible Woman* deals with Marian McAlpin's difficult situation. Marian McAlpin, the woman protagonist of the novel, is a young graduate who works for Seymour Surveys for consumer products. During her life, Marian comes in contact with many male characters who exploit and humiliate her at every step. She realizes different male strategies of exploitation and causes of women's oppression. Eventually, she revolts against this male domination and refuses to be the edible woman. She tries hard to attain a human identity. In the edible woman Atwood exposes the hollowness of patriarchal structure of power and domination.

Marian McAlpin is a researcher working for a market research firm-Seymour Surveys. The organizational structure of the company is that its employees can be assigned any job at random. All important and responsible positions are held by men at Seymour Surveys. The top floor of the research company is reserved for men's only. While women work at the lower level. Since Marian's department consists of only women she speaks about the treatment of women at

the company. The men upstairs do the more important jobs and are responsible for decision making while an equally qualified woman like Marian works at the lower level, doing less significant works.

The sticky layer in the middle where Marian and other women are placed to work, itself indicates the inequality of this male-dominated society. The three layer system in Seymour Surveys represents the planes of reality that is mind and body. The men are mind and the women are bodies. Hence three layers of Seymour Surveys highlight the categorization of systems of patriarchal society. Marian's quest for a definite identity is reflected in her attempt to resolve the dilemma regarding the actual nature of her job at Seymour Surveys where she is expected to work like a machine. Marian soon begins to identify herself with the food she tastes and tests for the company. Just as the food product is tested before consumption similarly she experiences a test of her ability as she finds her employers evaluating the degree to which she can be exploited. In fact, they exploit her in every possible way. The woman as a consumer is also consumed, as a packaged product, like a cake prepared and edible for male consumption. The woman as an edible product becomes the overriding metaphor in the novel. What she strives to attain is human identity and she fights to free herself from the category of an edible community.

Moreover, Marian's company prohibits marriage and pregnancy of women during their employment. It regards marriage and pregnancy as acts of disloyalty to the authority of the company. Marian experiences an identity crisis in her company because of the discrimination against women. The consumer world, in which Marian lives, reduces her to being on in between thing or mindless body. She lives in fear and grows alienated from the society. But finally she turns from specified standards to rebellion. Marian becomes a victim in a patriarchal, capitalistic and consumer society. She finds it almost impossible to survive genuinely amid the self-induced impression of consumer society. Marian is attracted to Peter, a law graduate. She is attracted to him because of his lovely personality and impressive manner of talking. Marian, the female protagonist dreams that Peter, her would be husband, to be a caring and free her from disturbance in their relationship. On the contrary Peter proves to be "a homicidal maniac with lethal weapon in his hand" (255). He is man of attire who would be desired by all unmarried spinsters. Instead of Marian's aspiration he is interested in hunting and eating. Peter defines marriage as a social custom and wants to be married.

Peter gives the impression of a typical male principle. A high figurative worth is given to the apartment in which he lives. Peter seems to believe that he is in need of tough male friends with whom he can drink and hunt. His interests are photography and hunting so always he has a set of weapons which include two rifles, a pistol and many knives. He has a strong dislike towards marriage as he considers it as a factor of domestication. He is concerned that his friends get married one after another and are moving away from the relationship. Marian's hunt of a relationship by trust and love is assured to be an uncertain expectation by her fiancé which drives her to pursue Duncan for consolation. Instead of being a man of support he too manipulates her for his desires. When she asks Duncan not to leave her, he frowned at her. Though Duncan spends time with Marian, he is comprehensible that he is not interested in helping her in personal life. He too dominates her in her confused state. Though she is disposed to him it is also a futile relationship. All their encounters

resulted in sexual pleasure. So she gets engaged to Peter, a handsome and upcoming young lawyer, whose hobbies are collection of guns and cameras. What Peter wants is a partner who complements his collection of knives, guns and cameras. He likes Marian as she never demands anything from him. Peter decides to marry her as she is very meek and quiet.

In this way, Peter assumes great significance in Marian's life. She admires him for his superiority. She experienced in the imagination that Peter gives her a moral support. So she wishes to please Peter. Pleasing Peter is of great importance to her. Thus, she completely devotes herself to Peter. She has subconsciously accepted the subservient wifely role as her ultimate destiny. She strives to be the mirror reflection of the ideal that Peter has imagined. But, she remains confused about her identity. Peter imposes on her his image of a perfect woman. Marian herself is afraid of his domination and his wish to possess her completely. Marian comments on Peter's possessive nature who regards her no more than an object to be displayed before others. Peter took pride in displaying her. He said he wanted her to really get to know some of his friends, and he had been taking her around with him to cocktail parties with the more official ones and to dinners and evening get-together with the intimates. She had even been to lunch with some lawyers, during which she had sat the whole time silent and smiling. Marian tries her best to adjust herself according to Peter's wish. As she herself admits that she had to adjust to his moods, but that is true of any man and she conforms to his expectations from her. The very prospect of marriage makes her ready to take on the role of a subservient wife. Her inner self is subordinated to the role. As the time passes by, Marian understands the real character of Peter as a manipulator and exploiter and analyses her relationship with him. She feels that she has let herself become an edible commodity.

Peter's fearful description of hunting a rabbit terrifies Marian. She is shocked to hear of his hobby of hunting. She discovers that Peter likes the hunting of rabbits and other innocent animals. He is also very fond of eating non-vegetarian food. The image of Peter as the hunter and herself as the hunted haunts her mind. Once they attend a party together, there Marian is harassed by his excessive drinking and possessive attitude. She begins to distance herself from him. She realizes that he was using her for his own benefit and he was dominating her. So she begins to distance herself from him. She realizes that he was using her for his own benefit and he was dominating her both physically and psychologically. Peter wants to transform Marian according to his needs. He wants her to adapt to his ways of living and thinking. While she never wants to be trapped in a decorative life, where both of her identity and individuality would be crushed mercilessly. She does not want to get changed down by a marriage where she would be reduced to such a woman who has no distinct identity of her own. Thus, Marian becomes a victim of symbolic cannibalism. Peter seems to be all set to swallow up her personality and identity. Her mental inertia was the result of Peter being dominant and assertive. She had been rendered incapable by Peter's capability and authority.

Marian is subjected to the male gaze and seeks to understand, and thus erase, the female self. She is caught up in the masculine script which gradually leads her to a frightening sense of self-alienation indeed, Marian's character in *The Edible Woman* demonstrates how female passivity and submission in the traditional roles of wife and mother leads not to self-fulfillment but to an intensifying sense of self diminish. Marian realizes that such artificiality is very essential for

women if she wants to keep her market value alive for the marriage. Woman is treated like an object, only to please and attract the males. She feels that she has no independence. She lost the identity of her own and having only the identity of Peter's wife. The male gaze of Peter dominates and influences her appearance. She identifies herself as a victim in her red sequined dress. The image of Peter as the hunter and her as hunted becomes stronger in Marian's mind. In her relationship with Peter, she begins to recognize herself as a product and him as a threat. Peter is also a camera enthusiast. To him, camera is a substitute for gun. He wants to take some photographs of Marian in order to show them to his friends. It mentally upsets her because she feels as if she has become a lifeless statue, having no emotions at all. Peter aims his camera at her but she covers her face with her arm in order to register her protest against this act of Peter. She is threatened; fears of disintegration grip her completely. She screams loudly as she is shocked by the behavior of Peter.

Marian's inner consciousness does not allow her to live with Peter anymore. Marian's dream of living a happy married life with Peter is shattered as she understands the bitter realities of this male-dominated society. She perceives Peter as a victimizer. The image of Peter, holding a camera in his hands, upsets Marian emotionally. To her, Peter is a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hand. She feels that Peter is a threat to her identity. Being extremely frustrated, Marian decides to quit the place of Duncan. She realizes that she has been reduced to the state of a destitute girl. She also realizes the futility of starving herself to death. She finds that she has become a victim, a victim of symbolic cannibalism, in the hands of both Peter and Duncan who exploit her at every possible situation to satisfy their carnal desires. In the meanwhile, she comes to know various strategies, used by the males to exploit and seduce woman. Hence, through her bitter and painful experience, Marian finds that woman in this present society has been reduced to an edible commodity which is meant only for male consumption. She decides to wage a war against this male oriented society which creates various obstacles in the path of woman's freedom. She rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. She fights against exploitation of women.

In fact, Duncan plays a vital role in Marian's search for an independent identity. It is through her relationship with Duncan, she understands the self-destructive consequences of her passive acceptance of the male power structure and gender roles. It is Duncan who shows Marian a path of redemption from her miserable condition. When she sees her reflection in the mirror, she feels that something must be done to prevent this lack of resolve. Further when she sees the bath tub in the bathroom, she perceives herself differently and it intensifies her fear that she would disintegrate if she does not take an action soon, neglecting her passivity. Both Peter and Duncan exploit and oppress Marian but eventually it is their exploitative and oppressive nature which brings Marian's subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role to the conscious level. Marian, finally, refuses to be *The Edible Woman*. She bakes a cake, in the shape of a woman, to expose the shrewd character of Peter and Duncan. She bakes the cake in her own image, very close to her own artificial image at the cocktail party. By creating the cake, she symbolizes her traumatic experience with Peter and Duncan. The cake symbolizes woman as an edible commodity, an object for male consumption. Her perception becomes clear towards the end when she bakes a cake and offers it to Peter as woman's substitute. It implies that she will no longer be Peter's edible commodity. Thus, Marian's in this symbolic act of self-realization finds a release from emotional cannibalism. She finally

defies Peter's image of herself as a perfect woman with a mindless body. The cake baking act metaphorically signifies her renewal and information. After baking a cake for Peter Marian is restored to her physical and mental health. She speaks in the first person singular which is a new and confident voice of a distant being. Marian is put to strenuous tests, exploited and oppressed at various degrees. Finally she achieves a new consciousness of herself.

Marian finally regains her true identity which she has been searching for a long time. Marian declares that she can no more be exploited by males like Peter and Duncan. She therefore affirms that she is not an edible product. Thus Marian, becomes the modern woman who revolts against the patriarchal power structure, against the system of gender and its oppression and shows a path to other woman's like her-how to attain self-identity in this male-dominated society. As a woman, she has transformed from a meek, docile and traditional house wife to a bold, self-confident and rebellions feminist. She wishes to be neither a man nor a machine but a woman who quests for a meaningful human identity. Finally, her search for an identity is complete when she attains an independent human identity.

