

Social Dislocation in the Novel *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood

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The Edible Woman is an imaginative transformation of a social problem into comic satire as one young woman rebels against her feminine destiny as the edible woman. - Coral Ann Howells.

The Edible Woman (1969) is Margaret Atwood's maiden attempt at fiction writing that represents the women's liberation movement. It is a complex piece of realistic fiction an intelligent woman's guide to survival in the contemporary world.

The Edible Woman is the first published novel of Margaret Atwood. It can be called as a proto-feminist novel as it entertains and presents the most serious problems that women face. It depicts how women are objectified by conventional society as consumer products. It shows that there is no place for the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and opinions expressed by women, the central figures of Atwood's fiction. Even though the novel was published even before the emergence of the feminist or women's liberation movement, it successfully exposes the ideological and gender differences, thus proving to be a pioneering novel.

The Edible Woman is a 1969 Margaret Atwood novel that established her as a heavyweight writer. It tells the story of a woman who begins to identify with food so much that she loses the ability to eat. Atwood calls it a proto-feminist work, and many of the themes deal with issues of control and identity. The narrative shifts from the first person to third and back again to illustrate the main character's detachment from reality and her ability to regain control. The main character, Marian, works in market research; crafting survey questions and sampling products. She shares a top floor apartment with Ainsley and dates Peter, a dependable but boring man. She also keeps in touch with a college friend, Clara, who is now a constantly pregnant housewife.

One day, Ainsley declares that she intends to have a child without getting married. Marian is shocked, but Ainsley claims that fathers are what ruin families these days. She sets her sights on Len, a man who has no interest in having a family at all and is a serial bachelor. At work, Marian is given an assignment about a new beer. As she gathers responses about the beer,

she meets Duncan, a graduate student who charms her with his unexpected answers. Later that evening, she goes on a dinner date with Peter and Len. Ainsley arrives dressed as an innocent school girl, intending to seduce Len.

Marian begins to dissociate from her body as Len recounts a gory rabbit hunt. She is unable to finish her food and runs from the restaurant. Peter chases after her and, since he is unaware of Ainsley's plan, asks Marion why she couldn't behave more like her roommate. He proposes to her by the end of the night, and she finds herself unable to say when she would like to hold the wedding.

Ainsley succeeds in seducing Len, and when she tells him that she is pregnant, Len confesses his childhood fear of eggs to Marian. Marian is then unable to eat her usual breakfast of a soft boiled egg. Subsequently she loses the ability to eat vegetables and cake.

Marian decides to throw a party and invites the office virgins, Duncan and some of his friends. Peter tells her to buy a new dress, something less mousy, and she buys a red dress to please him. Before the party, Ainsley does her make up: red lipstick and false eyelashes. Duncan isn't pleased and leaves the party, but Marian follows. They go to a motel and have unsatisfying sex and then breakfast the next morning. She is unable to eat anything at all.

Marian realizes that Peter is metaphorically consuming her. She feels that after their marriage, she will cease to exist. To test him, she bakes a woman-shaped cake and offers it to him. She taunts him by saying that this is what he really wants. He is disturbed, and when he leaves, she eats it herself. The next morning, Duncan shows up at her apartment, and Marian returns to telling the story in the first person. She offers him the rest of the cake, which he accepts and enjoys. He eats the entire thing.

Atwood is chiefly concerned with de-constructing gender politics, indictment of male consumption over richness and over decoration of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, consumer society. Responding to the world defined for women in the 60s, Atwood envisages the passive, subordinate and vulnerable status of women and reshapes the dynamics of gender. It is a first published novel of Margaret Atwood, published before the emergencies of the feminist or women's liberation movement. It proved to be a pioneering novel as it exposes the ideological and gender differences. The title refers to the novel's central character, Marian Mac Alpine, who is so pre-occupied with food and interprets life around her in terms of food consumption. In her introduction to the novel, Atwood describes that her inspiration for *The Edible Woman* is the consumable figures of the bride and groom which are frequently placed on the top of the

wedding cakes. The title of the novel suggests a doll shaped cake cooked and consumed in the novel's conclusion.

So 'consuming' signifies a new resonance in the feminist and post colonial discourse in Atwood's fiction. The novel was written in 1964-65, when the feminists were not radicalized enough to focus upon erasing gender inequalities and challenge male domination. A woman is rendered more desirable to the extent that nature is more rigorously confined while women's reproductive functions are seen as emblems of their inferiority. Their bodies are also viewed as objects of beauty and desire. Women, in contrast to men, have been viewed as being ruled by their physical bodies and emotions. In general women spend enormous amount of time and money transforming their physical bodies into ideal methods. Thus the objectified body becomes a means of inferior bodies.

In today's consumer society, traditional approach to the gender and gender identity are no longer sane in the consumption and general behavior, it is always been one of the prominent variables and segmentations in consumption. As a convincing narrative of personal growth, *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, and how woman and her images are molded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man.

The Edible Woman offers a quest for self-identity by Marian, the protagonist She is a fairly sensible, intelligent young woman, decently liberal in her views and somewhat defensive about her own individuality. Facing an identity crisis she is confronted with various alternatives.

The first phase of the problem Marian has to face and overcome is at her work-place. The company Marian has to face and overcome is at her work-place. The company Marian works for has a highly stratified, three-tiered hierarchic structure. The top floor is occupied by men and is not accessible to her. The bottom is managed mostly by old housewives and she does not wish to go there: "On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists referred to as men upstairs, since they are all men ... Below us are the machines - mimeo machines." 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 was a "self ... waiting performed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward."

The story of Marian's self-discovery is the frightening vision of struggle for sanity. The proof of her sanity is that Marian has learned to live meaningfully. Atwood has presented a comedy of resistance to social myths of fecinity through the discriminating eyes of Marian, the

champion of feminism. As Howells puts it: "This is sociology translated into the private idiom of one fiction character" (14). *The Edible Woman* is an indictment of the male authority, hierarchy, competition double standards of morality and discrimination, the governing elements which victimized women for centuries. As Atwood says: *The Edible Woman* makes "a negative statement about society The complications are resolved, but not in a way that affirms the social order"(49). This novel helps us to realize how a woman is sought to be used, abused, and manipulated by the theory of unreality, pseudo-culture, biology and commercialization. The novel reveals that victimization of women is a reality of our system and the only way to resist it is through a revolt against it. *The Edible Woman* is a subversive rather than a confrontational novel. It is an attack on social script of gender ideology.

The image of the 'edible woman' is very crucial to the theme of the novel - the liberation of Marian. It paves the way to her recognition of her authentic self. In one of her interviews with Graeme Gibson she says, "... obviously she's acting, she's doing an action. Up until that point she has been evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, 6 withdrawing" (6).

Thus, through the vehicle of the food metaphor, Atwood shows us Peter as a master-chef and Marian in the grave danger of becoming puff-pastry. On the other hand, Ainsley, the self-proclaimed feminist and liberated woman comes to accept the traditional roles of wife and mother which Marian rejects. After listening to a lecture by a psychologist she wants to provide a father figure for her child. She asks Len to marry her but he refuses. She marries Fisher. She is horrified when she sees the cake shaped woman. Ainsley tells Marian that she is rejecting her femininity by eating that cake. No longer isolated and alien, Marian rejoins the society. By eating the cake woman she becomes a part of the society. In her newly found state of freedom, Marian who has been in the passive state prepares to take an active role in her life finds a new home, a new job, and presumably, a new boy friend. As culture defines women as passive objects, a conventional ending for the novel would have been the marriage of Marian with Peter. Hence in refusing to marry Peter Marian becomes a Victor and not a victim.

In short, *The Edible Woman* is "an imaginative transformation of a social obstacle or problem into comic satire as one young woman rebels against the feminine destiny⁵⁰ as *The Edible Woman*. Thus, *The Edible Woman* not only proposes hypotheses for solution to woman's exploitation and oppression in gender system, but also serves as a guide to feminist struggle. *The Edible Woman* also serves as "a prelude to all the novels of Atwood, as it establishes the broad thematic pattern in which her subsequent novels operate.

The Edible Woman is structured like a journey of a woman called Marian MacAlpin, a researcher who gets acquainted with several friends during her journey in life. Her interaction

with them brings in its wake a series of experiences, mostly unpleasant because in every environment she becomes the ultimate consumer product and her relations seems to be built on shaky foundations. It's true that women's physical beauty and sexual complementary with men make them particularly desirable in a commercial economy dominated by male relationship. At the time, when the novel was written, the issue of food consumption and obesity in women had not yet attracted wide attention for our feminist concerns, to particularly to the western feminism of the late 20 century.

Thus, Atwood lays bare the ruthless and hypo critic postures of patriarchy through the dramatization of identity crisis in the soul of Marian, who refuses to be *The Edible Woman* trapped in domesticity. So, the critical issues with which the novel is concerned are the consideration of various choices, alternatives and options available to working women in particular. In a way the play presents a mixture of flavors and the bland starchy texture of hopeless domesticity to balance out the arresting spice of illicit sexuality.

Atwood depicts male hegemony by her profound observation and by delineation of women characters. Especially she achieves her desire to diffuse her intension as a writer to the suffering mass, to the public and thoughtful people in totality. *The Edible Woman* focuses on the problem at the work spot, gender in equality, pitfalls of patriarchal system and the uncongenial environment needed to be rectified with immediacy. In spite of these learned responses; the main theme of the novel is inadequately focused upon and partially explored. Thus, *The Edible Woman* not only proposes hypotheses for solution to woman's exploitation and oppression in gender system, but also serves as a guide to feminist struggle. In short, *The Edible Woman* is "an imaginative transformation of a social obstacle or problem into comic satire as one young woman rebels against the feminine destiny.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Editors: Dr. V. Sangeetha, Dr. B. J. Geetha, Dr. K. Sindhu, Dr. S. Boopathi and Ms. S. Sneha Sri

Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019

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