Chapter II

The Edible Woman

Margaret Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman* deals with Marian MacAlpin’s predicament. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of this novel is a young graduate who works for Seymour Surveys for consumer products. She is engaged to a handsome, upcoming young lawyer, Peter, whose hobbies are collection of guns and cameras. At some point after their relationship, Marian loses hold on herself and becomes obsessed with the fear that she is just an object or a consumable item. Threatened with this fear, Marian runs from one relationship to another but these escapes do not quell her fears. Towards the end of the novel, she bakes a large cake in the shape of a woman and offers it as a woman substitute to Peter thus symbolically refusing to be a victim. This symbolic act relieves her of her irrational fear.

Marian’s condition has been variously explored by critics. Wayne Fraser sees it: "the difficulties for the women of the 1960s, of living within conventional norms." He views this as "the growing threat to woman’s identity by a male-controlled and increasingly consumer-oriented society." Annette Kolody finds it impossible to live
"authentically amid the self-induced delusions of consumer society." Others relate it to the central fact of victimization and explore this victim position as "occupied by women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, consumer society." To Gayle Green, Marian's position reflects the "similarity between woman's position in the alienated world of work and her sexual objectification," as representative of female experience in Canada. To Elizabeth Brady, Atwood's real achievement in *The Edible Woman* is to have examined the "inter-relationships between the various forms which male domination assumes in a woman's life, and then to have related these forms to the larger domination structure of consumer capitalism."

The consumer world which Marian inhabits, appropriates Marian's identity and reduces her to an "in between thing or mindless body." But there is something more to it. Marian's problem is one of 'becoming' which according to Erich Fromm is both a metaphysical and socio-political problem. "I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire-marking ladies, as that would be a step down" (*EW*, p. 20). At the metaphysical plane, Marian's quest is for a meaningful human identity; at the socio-political level, her quest is to become neither a man nor a machine but a woman with an absolute as against relatively defined
identity. In fact, Marian's mental, moral and emotional issues oscillate between two polarities of "yes" and "NO" to the involvement with Peter. But her final resolution to say "NO" to her meaningless existence is achieved after a prolonged period of intra-psychic and interpersonal conflicts. She shifts from compliance to rebellion, back and forth. Since she vacillates between changing strategies, her behaviour is inconsistent and leaves much scope for disparity between thinking and action. She lives in fear and grows increasingly alienated from the society. She has a problem in establishing a working relationship with the "real" world. Hence, it can be better understood in the context of Karen Horney's tenets of psychology.

To understand the psychological complexities of her adult character, we may as well consider her childhood since the narrator gives us sufficient clues to her childhood. We know that Marian was expected to measure up to the expectations of her parents. Marian takes a secret pleasure in the thought that her expected marriage will please her parents because this was what "they've been waiting for" (EW, p.103). Again, she gloats over the fact that they would feel satisfied that "she was turning out all right after all" (EW, p. 174). Her thoughts, turning again and again to the approval of her parents are not meaningless. They show her deep-rooted desire to measure up to the expectations of
her parents and aunts. A similar situation is depicted in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird.* Sarah marries an Indian much against the wishes of her parents. But, parental approval/disapproval, though disregarded initially in the heat of the first flush of love, suddenly acquires gigantic dimensions and Sarah feels miserable for having disregarded her parents’ wishes. In Marian’s case, she has not taken any step against her parents’ wishes, but she knows that her decisions would affect them. She has "led a sheltered life," and she conforms to this accepted social role of a "good" girl.

Her parents' "fears" about the effects of her university education are calmed but her process of alienation starts from this point. She is doing what she should, not what she desires. Raised in a stereotyped family, her attitude towards traditionally learnt sex roles is understandable. That is why she views a single parenthood of Ainsley with disapproving eyes. She is intolerant of any reversal of these parenting roles. She thinks of marriage and children in terms of legitimate or illegitimate. Ainsley calls her ‘prude’ when she discovers that Marian holds either/or attitude to career and marriage. Her familial atmosphere is not congenial for her healthy development. She does not talk of love of parents. She does not wish to visit them unless she has to say something
which would please them. This type of atmosphere leads to lack of personal involvement. Marian also lacks a sense of belonging. "Belonging... means a subjective feeling of one's personal involvement to the extent that one feels himself to be an integral and indispensable part of the system." He has neither love nor sharing of life with family, hence, she becomes more alienated. Erich Fromm maintains that by uniting himself with other person in the spirit of love and shared work, man can hope to end his alienation.

A way out of this is the adoption of some psychological prop. Marian desperately needs someone to belong to. Although she has made a workable "arrangement" with Ainsley, it is limited only to sharing of an apartment. It does not give her sense of security and belongingness. Peter is the first and only person to take her out of this growing alienation and insecurity. When we seriously enquire into the imperative of her basic need, we understand why her attitude becomes one of self-effacement. She herself admits that "I was being self-effacing on purpose" (EM, p. 71). Being a self-effacing person, Marian's wish is never to displease Peter. Since pleasing Peter is of great importance to her, it becomes her primary concern and subsequently her anxiety. In order to remain his adorned self, she leans more and more on him. She is dedicated to
Peter and does not want to assert her independent will. She sees him as "a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability" (EW, p. 89). Marrying Peter means having someone who would take over life and would make decision for her. It is clear when she coyly tells Peter that she would rather leave big decisions up to him and adds "The funny thing was I really meant it" (EW, p. 90). But this decision of marrying Peter is need-based and shows her basic anxiety. Seen from the perspective of her psychological compulsion, it is understandable why she has become passive and powerless. She is happy:

that it was my aura of independence and commonsense he had liked; he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life. He had recently had an unpleasant experience with what he called "the other kind." That was the assumption we had been working on, and it had suited me. We had been taking each other at our face values, which meant we had got on very well. Of course I had to adjust to his moods, but that’s true of any man and his were too obvious to cause much difficulty (EW, p. 61).

She is ready to take on the role of the subservient wife. Feminist scholars are rather critical of this attitude. Shannon feels that Marian, the "central female character remains confused in her identity and muted in her speech because she is defined in relation to "Americanized" males." According to Salat, Peter, Marian's fiance "with his unqualified desire to dominate and colonize Marian,
emblematizes the archetypical male principle." Marian herself fears this domination and his wish to possess her completely. She remarks "now that she had been ringed he took pride in displaying her" (EW, p. 176). When seen from Horneyan angle, we understand the reason behind Peter's wish to colonize and Marian's fear of domination.

To surrender to a stronger personality is inherent in a dependant character. Marian is a compliant character and allows this deal to materialize. She poses to be good without pride and hopes she will be treated well by Peter. The complicity, in case of Marian, is self-inflicted, reprehensible and undesirable. Linda Hutcheon remarks: "As both a Canadian and a woman, she protests any tendency towards passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow either Canadian or women to deny their complicity in the power structure that may subject them." It is not a healthy drive but a compulsive one; subservience is the need of the self-effacing character. This can be seen in Horneyan terms as her urgent need to lift herself above others. Discussing the need for self-glorification, Horney contends that if a person has "a sense of belonging, his feeling inferior to others would not be so serious a handicap. But living in a competitive society, and feeling at bottom—as he does—isolated and hostile, he can only develop an urgent need to lift himself above others" (NHG, p. 21). Keeping in
mind Marian’s panic at the prospect of becoming a spinster pensioner of Seymour Surveys, we understand that she has already subconsciously accepted this subservient wifely role as her ultimate destiny.

She looks up to Peter as her ideal choice. "He’s attractive and he’s bound to be successful, and also he’s neat, which is a major point when you’re going to be living with someone" (EW, p. 102). Marian admires him for his superiority and believes in his intellect. Through him she obtains the supreme confirmation of herself. She derives vicarious power from Peter. Her relation with him permits her to satisfy her self-effacing and her expansive drives. When she gives over the direction of her life to him, she satisfies her need for fusion and dependency. Her ability to attract such a person like Peter gives her a sense of great power and "triumphant elation" that Peter honours her qualities. Peter says, "I don’t know what I’d do if you didn’t understand. Most women wouldn’t, but you’re so sensible" (EW, p. 64). She enjoys "The sense of proud ownership she felt at being with him there in that more or less public way caused her to reach across the table and take his hand" (EW, pp. 146-47). Alan Howe calls The Edible Woman "a novel about choices" but Marian, cannot choose. She cannot choose either to be a "scheming super female" like Ainsley or the earthmother like Clara. She
cannot be like "office virgins" because this opportunism is self-destructive for her. In Marian's rejection of these choices, a scholar sees Atwood's attitude: "Atwood is neither a hard-core feminist nor an anti-feminist but a clear-sighted humanist." In fact, for a compliant character like Marian there is no choice but a compulsive drive to be good and self-sacrificing. Her identity and choice lie in keeping intact her idealised wifely image.

Marian establishes her uniqueness and self-importance by complimenting herself on her moral superiority to Ainsley and Clara. She maintains her separate identity by feeling superior to "immoral" Ainsley. "I've never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is. She's against it on principle, and life isn't run by principles but by adjustment" (EW, p. 102). She justifies her decision of marrying Peter, "it is actually a very good step to take. Of course, I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does" (EW, pp. 101-102). She is glad she "wasn't Clara" who "lets herself be treated like a thing!" (EW, p. 38). These assessments help her raise her self-esteem and realise her idealized image.

In this initial phase of relationship with Peter, she comes closer than she ever had to feeling that she is her
idealized self. Marian’s loss of individuality is indicated by the silencing of inner voice of ironic commentary. She begins to quote Peter to herself in private as an infallible authority and thus becomes "Her Master’s Voice." As Peter says: "you can’t continue to run around indefinitely." Peter says: People who are not married "get funny in middle age," according to him, they get "embittered or addled or something" (EW, p. 102). Thus, she gloats over his authority and sees herself as "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (EW, p. 83). This image conveys that henceforth she will strive to be the mirror reflection of the ideal that Peter imagines her to be.

As long as Peter honours the claims of her bargain, Marian remains "marvellous Marians." Peter’s treatment in Plaza restaurant deals Marian’s image a devastating blow. She feels hurt, rejected and neglected when Peter shows attention to Len and Ainsley. She feels ‘deflated’, her pride is crushed. She cannot afford his condemnation which is evident in his remarks: "Didn’t think you were the hysterical type" (EW, p. 74) as her self-esteem is all dependent on his approval. She has glorified Peter, transferred her pride to him, made him the measure of her worth. Describing the importance of love for a self-effacing person, Horney emphatically maintains that this type cannot stand being alone and ignored. As a result she
has very little defence-mechanism against his adverse judgement. She indulges in "passive externalization" which according to Horney "shows in her being accused by others, suspected or neglected, kept down, treated with contempt, abused, exploited or treated with outright cruelty (NHG, p. 255). When slighted, Marian suddenly becomes aggressive and accuses Peter of "being plain ordinary rude!" (EW, p. 80). She is overcome by rage, she feels the fury of rejection.

Now we are in a position to understand Marian's behaviour during her crisis: her sudden flight after drinks at Park Plaza and her hiding under Len's bed. They are her defence strategies to restore her dwindling sense of significance and to save her from self-hate. She has outwardly accepted the pattern of passive femininity expected by Peter but inwardly she is withdrawing from this version of womanhood. It is evident in the contention of Peter, "The trouble with you," is "you're just rejecting your femininity" (EW, p. 80). It would, however, be more appropriate to infer that she is desperately struggling to restore her pride first by refusing to accept that Peter is neglecting her, and then by exonerating him of all blame. "He was treating me a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline. He wasn't ignoring me, as perhaps I had felt-he was depending on me" (EW, p. 71). When this
posture fails to uplift her, she gains vindictive triumph by running along Plaza streets. She herself confesses, "it seemed an achievement, and accomplishment of some kind to put them one by one behind me" (EW, p. 72). She feels happy that Peter and his friends had to chase her. Christine Gomez sees in Marian’s refusal to accept her victim situation a clear case of her victimization. That Atwood is sensitive about victimization is evident in *Survival* where she deals with four stages in the victimization process. This shall be discussed at length in the next chapter.

Marian suffers an identity crisis when she wrestles with her growing awareness of her dual, if not multiple, personalities which surface after she has rejected her imposed image. The conflict between her compliant and aggressive trends produces much of Marian’s emotional and intellectual turmoil and drives her into inconsistent behaviour. Sometimes she runs away from Peter while at others she wants to be forgiven. "I was filled with penitence, but there was no outlet for it. If I could be alone with Peter it would be different, I thought: he could forgive me" (EW, p. 75). Then she goes to Duncan in order to feel triumphant and shows flagrant disregard for her involvement with Peter. She baffles Peter by her behaviour. She herself is aware of this inconsistency. "The way I went
about doing things may have been a little inconsistent with my true personality" (EW, p. 101). But she cannot help it. Her inability to arrive at a decision is expressed in the following remarks:

However it had left me in a sort of vacuum. Peter and I had avoided talking about the future because we knew it didn’t matter: We weren’t really involved. Now, though, something in me had decided we were involved: surely that was the explanation for the powder-room collapse and the flight. I was evading reality. Now, this very moment, I would have to face it. I would have to decide what I wanted to do (EW, p. 77).

The conflict between her expansive and compliant drives drags Peter and Marian apart making it difficult for each to comprehend the motive of the other. Peter has his own compulsions to deal with. He wants to marry Marian out of his need of profession where a single person is not taken seriously. Reflecting on his marriage he says, "It’ll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you’ve got a wife; people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you’re a queer or something." (EW, p. 89). He finds his job profitable and his common routine activities more fascinating and fulfilling. He is an expansive person who wants mastery over life. Individuals like him resent those who depend too much on them because, conversely, they are scared that such a person may not take over their life.
For Peter, Marian is a girl he can always depend on. The kind of girl who "wouldn't try to take over his life" (EW, p. 61). Peter shifts his energies towards his business so as to escape intra-psychic and interpersonal conflicts. He is a perfectionist who has ordered his thoughts, life, learning and career into a near-perfect pattern. He could be described as "ordinariness raised to perfection." Ainsley calls him "neatly packaged." He has his own standards and must strictly adhere to them. According to Horney, a perfectionist achieves "behavioristic perfection" and insists upon others "living up to his standards of perfection and despises them for failing to do so" (NHG, p. 196). Peter, therefore, cannot tolerate lack of control of Marian. He cannot understand her rebelliousness and does not understand her.

The breakdown of their relationship and with it the blow dealt to Marian's predominant solution expose her to terrible inner conflicts. With her real centre not at her command, Marian is torn by strange turmoil within and without. Her inner dictates come out with many exhortations: she should be a sensible wife, she should accept life. She should follow Peter blindly, she should not show rage, should not be involved with anyone. This is the "tyranny" of her shoulds which along with her neurotic claims on the outside world generates severe inner
conflicts. Problems multiply when her neurotic claims make unreasonable demands on others that all must attend to her. When they fail to follow her unuttered dictates, she is disillusioned with her friends. Her own failure to control her rage generates fear, its reaction is the anger of frustrations.

Self-hate is the logical outcome of this situation. The conflict between Marian’s pride system and her real self generates a war between the healthy and neurotic forces, between constructive and destructive elements. Karen Horney terms it "central inner conflict" (NHG, p. 112). Marian oscillates between expansive and self-effacing view of herself, human nature and human world. Her vacillations and confusions are reflection of her inner conflicts. She will never arrive at clear idea as long as her personality remains unintegrated. Marian shows "psychic fragmentation or compartmentalization" which is described in psychiatric literature as a disintegrating process. In it, a neurotic fails to see himself as a whole identity and experiences himself in piecemeal which saves him from conflicts and tensions created by inner-contradictions. The function of compartmentalization, according to Horney is to "preserve the status quo, to protect neurotic equilibrium from collapsing" (NHG, p. 180). Quite unawares, she experiences herself in fragments. For example, on one hand she cherishes
her image—Peter's image of what she should be. On the other hand, she is a rebel, feeling one with Duncan and sees him as her other self. Marian justifies her relationship, which "according to her standards" is "perfectly innocent." "After all, we're getting married in two months" (EW, p. 189), she justifies. By closing herself to reality she resolutely follows her fantasy. By participating in Duncan's world of fantasies, she keeps herself immune from the onslaught of her self-loathing.

Marian does not have a healthy person's concept of freedom. She resorts to the "mechanism of escape," as Erich Fromm terms it, to attain freedom from conflicts. Fromm points out that this mechanism is not conducive to integrity and self-realization. Rather, it is an escape from unbearable situation and is characterised by its compulsive character. She runs to Duncan to evade reality. His cynicism, "You know, I don't even really like you very much," (EW, p. 183) and his complete self-centredness are very reassuring to her in her situation when she is running from involvement. She does not find her life threatened whenever she is with Duncan. Here she is caught in an "eddy of present time: they had virtually no past and certainly no future" (EW, p. 184). Duncan's fantasies provide her the escape she is seeking from her inner conflict. Erich Fromm calls it the "other course" and writes that
The other course open to him is to fall back or to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world. . . . It assuages an unbearable anxiety and makes life possible by avoiding panic; yet it does not solve the underlying problem and is paid for by a kind of life that often consists only of automatic and compulsive activities.  

The compulsive nature of Marian's attitude discloses itself in her neurotic fear of violence and noise. She gets panicky at the raised voices of Peter. She fears her inner violent tendencies. The frustration of her claims intensifies her feeling of vulnerability and pushes her in the direction of expansive attitudes and values. She feels betrayed by Peter and even Ainsley and others. She has mothered Ainsley, and has looked after all her needs at home. Even she turns up in Plaza to manipulate Len into marriage. She feels psychologically responsible for Len who has allowed himself to be "led flower garlanded to his doom," he has also let her down. He has turned into a "white grub suddenly unearthed from its burrow (EW, p. 160). The control imposed upon her impulses and feelings is let loose; fear disrupts her mental equilibrium. She confesses that she is consumed by an irrational fear.  

An irrational dread because for one thing there was no reason, she told herself... She would be safe; but what she really seemed to fear was the destruction, not of anything in her relationship with Peter, but of one of the two by the other;
though who would be destroyed by whom or why, she couldn’t tell, and most of the time she was surprised at herself for having such vague premonitions. (EW, p. 185)

Tortured by self-accusation and stricken by unnamed and irrational terror, Marian goes through inner hell of self-contempt and self-torment. Marian’s crisis reaches a critical point when she identifies herself with the edible commodity. She fears herself being devoured, hence, she is unable to eat. She unconsciously transfers her sympathies from the eaters to the things that get eaten. She becomes aware of what happens to things that allow themselves to be eaten. "You look delicious." "Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you: that’s what you get for being food" (EW, p. 270). Her denial of food and meat becomes "reminiscent of the deaths of early Christian martyrs", (EW, p. 155). This denial is meant to continue her to suffer. Horney calls it "Schaden-feude" i.e, vindictive satisfaction at the self-inflicted pain. Marian’s decision to give up food is interpreted differently by different scholars. Jerome H. Rosenberg calls it "anorexia nervosa". To another critic, food metaphorically becomes the "subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role of being consumed and assimilated by Peter." It is Duncan who relates her inability to eat to an "inner rebellion." According to him, she is a representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system.
Ironically, Duncan whom Marian seeks as a sort of escape becomes the starting point of her perception. She symbolically meets her other self. Atwood reinforces the intended symbolism by making Duncan categorically emphasize the similarity between him and Marian: "you look sort of like me in that" (EW, p. 144). What differentiates the two, however, is that whereas Duncan only self-consciously plays the role of victim and works out the strategy of his dependence complex to exploit others, Marian is actually a victim and exploited by others. She is able to see herself as she is and not as seen by others. Duncan functions to reflect Marian's passivity and powerlessness. They are the result of her self-negating attitudes and results in her being exploited by others. This confrontation with the other self, analogous to the Jungian archetypal Margaret Lawrence employed in her novels, sets in motion the process of self-examination and reappraisal of herself in relation to others. M.F. Salat refuses to accept the archetypal interpretation. He sees the ironic and parodic intent in the text. He agrees that "Marian descends, but to the depth of ignominy and confronts not the Shadow Self but a shady self." Whether Duncan is alter ego or a shady self can be debatable but there is no doubt that he plays a significant role in Marian's fictive journey towards achieving self-hood in relation to herself as well as the world around her. It
enables her to examine the self-damaging implications and consequences of her passive acceptance of these power structures and gender roles. Marian's self-created illusion of helping "innocent" and virginal Duncan collapses and with it, her ideal image of starched nurse is also shattered. She discovers that Duncan's pose as a virgin was faked, it was, in fact, a ploy to seduce and sexually exploit her. She is not the first woman and sexual encounter with her "was fine; just as good as usual" (EW, p. 264). This revelation does not devastate her. Literally and figuratively Duncan shows Marian a way "how to get back" from his fantasy world where she has "escaped" with him to the real world of express ways. After reaching the real world, she is sure that she is going to make a decision.

In between also, we have a glimpse of her willingness to act after powder-room collapse and subsequent Plaza escapades but it was on verbal level only. But when she sees her reflection in the mirror she feels that something has to be done in reality to stop this lack of resolve. Earlier on she identifies herself with three dolls and sees herself reflected in these dolls. Now in the bath tub, she perceives herself differently and it intensifies her fear that she would disintegrate if she does not do something about it. "All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of
cardboard in a gutter puddle" (EW, p. 218). All this was only at an unconscious level. Till the night of Peter’s party, Peter continues to reshape Marian according to his own image of her. To measure herself "to his expectations," Marian plans to "have something done with her hair" and buy a dress "not quite so mousy as any she already owned." Though they meet with Peter’s approval "Darling, you look absolutely marvellous. . . . And I love you especially in that red dress" (EW, pp. 228, 231), Marian finds them oppressive. She experiences herself as "simply vegetable" and is overwhelmed by an obsessive fear of disintegration.

Two events bring Marian’s sub-conscious rejection of victim-role to the conscious level. One is Duncan’s frank question "You didn’t tell me it was a masquerade . . . Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (EW, p. 239). Marian realises that what she has so far believed to be an ideal image is nothing but a masquerade. She has lost her identity and in return, has got only an inauthentic appearance. And when Peter approaches her with camera she feels threatened; fears of disintegration grip her completely. She perceives Peter’s attempt to photograph her in that guise, a threat to her real self. As a time traveller when she looks into the corridor of future life, she finds herself missing from Peter’s life. John Moss in Sex and violence explains Marian’s fear of being photographed. According to him, "a
camera can steal the soul. . . Identity is clearly a complex living thing. A static literal image. . . on film destroys intrinsic vitality and dimension, the qualities ultimately defining the soul, which is thereby lost." 17 Fearing that she in red dress is a perfect target, she identifies Peter with the hunter and herself as a stalked victim. When she runs for very life, she rejects the image of woman which she has allowed Peter to impose on her. When she runs from Peter, Duncan seems to her "only solid achievement . . . something she could hang on to" (EW, p. 263). But she faces denial from Duncan that he has "done away with her." She is no more his "illusion:" "you aren't an escape any more, you're too real" (EW, p. 258). He completely refuses to assist her to deal with Peter:

Don't ask me, that's your problem. It does look as though you ought to do something. Self-laceration in a vacuum eventually gets rather boring. But it's your personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you'll have to think of your own way out (EW, p. 264).

This comes as a powerful jolt to shake off her passivity and crumble down the cardboard world of her fantasies. Marian is neither angry nor devastated when the starched nurselike image of herself crumbles "like wet newsprint." She is not disillusioned when Duncan refuses to satisfy her neurotic claims; "it didn't make that much
difference" she confesses. When seen from Maslowian angle, her behaviour is understood. Maslow observes that when our exemplary self-image which makes over-perfect demands on ourselves and others "breaks down under insight," it liberates the forces of spontaneous growth. So far, Marian's vision of world was disoriented. This insight gives her subjective and objective awareness which so far was blurred. Now she is alone but not vulnerable. She has insight and self-perception; she is strong, resolved and ready for self-actualization of her core. Her perception has become clear towards the final act of baking a cake which she offers to Peter as a woman substitute. It symbolizes her having the necessary self-knowledge. Henceforth, it implies she will not be Peter's (or anyone's for that matter) consumable commodity. Marian in this symbolic act of self-assertion finds a release from what George Woodcock in a nice turn of phrase calls "emotional Cannibalism." Marian is finally able to defy Peter's image of herself as a perfect female and a mindless body. The cleansing mania she displays in the final section of the novel, metaphorically, signifies her renewal and reformation, although it seems to her "miraculous" that she has "attempted anything so daring and had succeeded" (EW, p. 280). A scholar points out that after baking a cake for Peter, Marian is restored to her physical and mental health. She speaks in the first person.
singular which the critic feels is "a new and confident voice of a distinct being." What the critic maintains from a feminist angle can well be applied to our discussion here. Marian shows self-confidence in her self-assertion. The novelist has presented and assessed different ways of understanding a woman's psyche and has also tried various alternatives, integrating them in the main action of the novel. Marian is present throughout the dramatization either as an observer or as an active or passive participant. She is put to strenuous tests. After she undergoes various compulsive drives, her vision clears and she achieves a new consciousness of her self. The rhetoric is built up in favour of Marian's vindication but the mimesis leaves us open to doubt if the protagonist could really achieve transfiguration after being under the impact of self-alienating forces. However, when we explore Marian's psyche we realise that the end commensurates with the rhetoric and Marian's evolution is consistent with the rhetoric and the mimesis of the novel.

A scholar emphasises the negative connotation of the circular structure of the book and maintains that Marian returns to the "point from which she began." To another critic, "the novel's closing image is unsettling." These scholars overlook the positive elements in the conclusion. Atwood contends that baking a cake is "an action" which
"until that point she has been evading, avoiding."^{23} Lauber extends Atwood's reading and sees Marian's action symbolically. To him it "represents her unwillingness to be eaten." Atwood herself acknowledges that ideal would be "neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is productive or creative . . . although not actualized [in The Edible Woman] . . . it's seen as a possibility finally whereas initially it is not."^{24} In fact, Marian has finally been able to refuse to be The Edible Woman.

This fictive journey of Marian from an adopted posture of self-effacement to self-assertion is deconstructed by Atwood by using the narrative mode in which the journey motif is skillfully structured. It not only provides a map to her progressive evolution but also shows every single change in her attitude. The first twelve chapters are in first person narration and are not camouflaged by lies as in case of protagonist of Surfacing (which will be discussed later). It reveals Marian's story as candidly as the first person narrator of Kamala Markandaya does in her novel "Nectar in a Sieve"^{25}. Marian's loss of inner autonomy and self is accompanied by loss of the first person singular voice. Her story is narrated in the third person throughout Part II. The loss of individuality is indicated by the silencing of inner voice of ironic commentary. The last
chapter returns to first person point of view to imply a rediscovery of herself. "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his" (EW, p. 278).

The shift in narrative strategy, from first to third person or vice-versa gives the author more freedom to tell the story convincingly. I have here Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* in mind where the first and last chapters are in third person point of view; the entire novel, encompassed in between, is told by the first person narrator. Another work that can be cited is Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Deshpande adopts the style of telling the story alternately in first and third person. These references are not given to work out any comparison with Atwood's novel under discussion, but to establish the point that while first person narrator helps us to understand him/her subjectively, the third person point of view gives us an objective view. What the implied author wants to portray can thus be worked out by reading between the lines.

The psychology of characters, the events and the setting in *The Edible Woman*, coalesce with mirror imagery radiating through the narrative. The novelist highlights the theme of the novel with the help of the central metaphor that of a woman as food. The end signals for her an emergent
independent sense of self. This is her moment of inspiration, in it she establishes a contact with her authentic self. When self flows out in spirit of creativity and spontaneity, she grapples with her real self. Conflicts and awareness of conflicts are in themselves a sure sign of relative health. To some scholars, her presenting the woman substitute has done nothing to resolve her conflict. A reader points out that the "heroine ends where she began."\(^{28}\) However, her encounter with Peter does contribute towards the resolution of her crisis. She has been obsessed with wrong. She was eaten up with anger. She has shown aggressiveness. She has a vindictive triumph and is no longer bugged. This has enabled her to get free of Peter, she is also free from the need to be needed by Duncan. She has won a tremendous victory. She is proud that she has managed to do it. We do not contend that Marian has achieved self-actualization in a vacuum nor do we credit her with transformation overnight. Atwood has only shown that signs of self-assertion after a period of tormenting self-doubt can lead to release of tension. It remains to be seen how Atwood’s heroine progresses in her second novel, Surfacing. It may be clarified here that the unnamed heroine of Surfacing is not a sequel to Marian, but an independent creation. She, too, is an alienated character who gets over, to an extent, her crisis. The next chapter of this study focuses on her.
Notes and References


3. Christine Gomez, "From Being an Unaware Victim to Becoming a Creative Non-Victim: A Study of Two Novels of Margaret Atwood," in *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*, p. 76.


5. Ibid.


15. Christine Gomez, *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*, p. 82.

24. Graeme Gibson, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p. 17.


