Chapter III

Split ‘Self’ and Identity Crisis in

The Edible Woman
In *Survival* (1972) Margaret Atwood grapples with her ‘personal unconscious’ and ‘experience of nothingness’ in order to be able to “reject conventional solutions” and question “the meaning of life” so as to acquire “the revelation of deeper source of power and value”.¹ Marian acquires this kind of awareness by delving deep into the social conditions of her ‘archetype’ and in the process researching ultimately at the ‘individuation’. Atwood labels this sort of feeling as “the Rapunzel syndrome” and asserts that in Canada “Rapunzel and the tower are the same”. As a result of which the heroines in the novels have “internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they become their own prisons.”² Marian needs to break the dragon cage of her socialized self and live her own life as a human being without any rift between her social and inner self. Having yielded to the demands of her society, Marian struggles to survive in “seemingly sane but actually insane society”, which is predatory and suffocatingly sexist. The novel is a critique of what George Woodcock calls “emotional cannibalism”.³

Marian struggles between the role that society imposes upon her and her personal definition of self, the food becomes symbol of that

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struggle and her eventual rebellion. Marian shows her powerlessness through her attitude towards food. She stops eating, because of her lack of control and autonomy and as a protest against capitalism. In other words, her eating disorder is her response to her social pressure, displaying a co-relation between eating disorders and social pressure on an individual. Marian's eating disorder acts as a metaphor of a revolt and protest; she discusses her rebellion against a modern, male dominated society. Marian interprets the world in term of food and negotiates her way through life using it. Towards the end she reconstructs the new persona or concept of self through a renewed relationship to food. As Sarah Seats says:

> By looking right across her work it is possible to put together a picture of how food, eating and appetite in her fiction relate to ‘how people order their societies’ on micro (individual, interpersonal) and macro (cultural) levels, not just in specific instances, but woven into an overall political analysis or vision.⁴

Food becomes a metaphor of character revelation and has varied significance in the novel. Through eating habits of Marian, Atwood exposes differences between culturally constructed roles of women and experienced realities.

Marian in the early part of the novel thinks of herself as a perfectly normal, well adjusted and even superior to all other women surrounding her. She believes that the lady down below considers her more dependable than her fellow tenant Ainsley. She considers herself more superior to all the other women of her age: Emmy, Lucy and Millie are absurd for their desire to be consumed, and Clara and Joe “have no sense at all of how to run a well organized marriage”. (125)

Marian works for a marketing company called Seymour Surveys, managed by Mrs. Bogue. The top floor of the research organization is manned exclusively by men and is not accessible to Marian. At the lower level are housewives but Marian does not wish to be there. Through the imagery of three layers, the novelist seems to suggest a metaphoric parallel for women's place/space in the society. “The three layers”, according to Salat, represent the “three planes of reality: mind, body and matter. The men are minds; the women are bodies.” Marian’s dilemma is caused due to the hierarchical distribution of Seymour surveys which defines her place above “matter” and below ‘mind’. Her

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predicament typifies the situation of women of her society and reduces her to being an “in-between thing and mind-less body.”

At Marian's work place all responsible and respectable positions are held by men, and women have no freedom because marriage and pregnancy are proscribed by them in employment; “pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to company”. (21) Marian feels furious at the comment made by man when she interviews him" you ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you."(52)

The choices open to woman in such a society are very little. Although she works, she has to face the capitalist reality and the role that society offered to feminity. She does not want to work all her life and experiences as a kind of "Superstitious Panic." (17) When Mrs. Grot asks her to sign pension plan papers she was scared of turning into an old maid “some where in front of me a self was waiting, pre-formal, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour surveys and was now receiving reward”. (17) Atwood, through Marian, lays bare the hypocritical postures of patriarchal society and attempts to “expose

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and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women”.  

Marian's family has fears that she would turn into a “high-school teacher or a maiden aunt or a dope addict or a female executive, or that she would undergo some shocking physical transformation, like developing muscles.” (174) The family endorses the dominant dualistic ideology that oppresses women, the loneliness of modern life, which has been drawn into the vortex of the feminine self. In traditional sense Marian represents the imbalance in society as inevitably as the whole society is sick. She decides to take a fixed social identity as the wife of Peter: “of course I'd always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does either two or four” (125) because the only way to fit into society is to adopt its values. However, Marian gradually loses her identity as an independent, active self and drifts towards her metamorphosis into the societal expectations. At the office party, it is made clear to her that she is expected to leave her job regardless of her own preference, because that “Mrs Bogue preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies”. (107) Marian

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feels unconsciously the need of a masculine guide: “I probably wanted to marry Peter all along” (101) but as soon as she decides to marry Peter, she perceives herself as a fabric of Peter's opinion. She accepts the role traditionally foisted upon woman: “explained and defined with reference to marriage whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or Indifferent in regard to that institution”. When Peter proposes her she sees herself as “small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (99) because, as Bouson points out, she is “subjected to the male gaze, which seeks to assimilate, and thus erase, the female self which would culminate in loss of her identity”. To Kenneth Hermansson, the image of herself that Marian saw reflected in Peter’s eyes resembles an egg, which implies that like egg she is going to be consumed. Marian's problem with eating an egg for breakfast on the following morning is virtually her ‘inner’ refusal to loose her independence and free will by marrying Peter, who in her opinion is trying to consume her. The very prospect of marriage, therefore, forces Marian to take the role of subservient wife, assigned to female by society. The words saying "I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you" (109) come to her as a shock because it is “loss of autonomy coming back.” (109) She represses her true self from which she is

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alienated from the day of her engagement and creates false self based on the expectations of Peter, using language to create and sustain the mask of societal expectations. She turns out to be “Frieden's helpless dependent women” who, according to Howells, “had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home, they wanted the men to make the major decisions.” When dining with Peter at a restaurant she can see her upside down reflection which reveals that she has moved from a state of certainty to that of uncertainty and her initial solid Identity is in a state of flux: she is losing her identity and is controlled by someone else rather than herself. It is Peter who places an order and “chooses her order in the restaurant and this is the moment from which Marian can no longer tolerate food.” Peter reduces her position to that of a child who needs someone to take decisions for her and is almost a dependent entity: “Peter smiled and chewed, pleasantly conscious of his own superior capacity.” Atwood showed her anxiety and infirmity through her attitude towards food and her lack of appetite which finally leads her to an eating disorder which is similar to anorexia nervosa.

Food and body becomes the language with which Marian communicates her resistance to dominant and reductive conventions of society. Throughout the novel Marian's alienation permeates; it is patent in the disrupted narrative, which shifts from first to third person in order to convey Marian’s increasing distance from her self. By erasing the body Marian can erase the patriarchal control of the society but she comes to realize that body cannot be disposed off. Through the position of Marian, Atwood seems “to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women.” Through her disturbed relationship with food Marian, explicates the feminist tendencies that help her to protest against the dehumanizing tendencies of the society and simultaneously save herself from any fabricated label. When she goes to a restaurant along with her colleagues, she finds it difficult to eat: “Marian was surprised at herself she had been dying to go for lunch, she had been starving and now she wasn't even hungry.” (138) Emma Parker rightly believes that in Margaret Atwood's novels:

Food functions as a form of female self-expression eating and non-eating illustrate resistance to the system of oppression. Atwood's protagonists are unendingly oppressed by parents, partners, peers or by society as a whole.

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They try to protect their selfhoods by psychic distancing of their selves from their bodies and by physical loss or increase of weight.\textsuperscript{14}

Her body refused anything that may at one time have been alive. Her horror at the act of consuming flesh coincides with her alienation and detachment from the society. She felt she had become a passive individual watching society with shocking vision and not playing any active role. She comes to view eating as a violent action, the planned cow, planned sheep, pork chops are crossed out of her list of eatables, she is afraid even to try chicken.\textsuperscript{(192)} The more disturbed she becomes, the more her mental strain weans her away from food and she feels more and more reluctant to eat anything. She felt, as if “she had let herself be sold as some kind of a desirable commodity”. According to N. Rama Devi, She was:

Identifying herself with lower forms of life, she refuses to eat, which she equates with preying upon-first steak and all meats, then eggs, then carrots. She reaches a stage when she is unable to destroy the lower forms of life, mould.\textsuperscript{15}

She hides her non-eating from others when organizing a dinner party for friends. Marian plans a menu that will allow her eating habits to go

\textsuperscript{14} Emma Parker “You are what you eat”, op. cit. p. 11.
\textsuperscript{15} N. Rama Devi, “Edibility and Ambiguity in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman”, \textit{Canadian Literature Today}. Published by Prestige Books, 1995. p. 113.
unnoticed. She settles on a Mushroom- and- meat ball casserole, “which would disguise things effectively” by allowing, eat the mushrooms, and roll the meat balls under one of the lettuce leaves”. (229) When presented with meat shish-kebabs at a dinner party, Marian considers hiding them under the table cloth, in her purse, down the front of her blouse or up her sleeves. Eventually, she scrapes the sauce off the meat chunks and tosses them across the table to her friend Duncan.

Marian's behaviour shows remarkable similarities to the anorexic patients. She does not eat in front of others, and often drops food on her plate under the lettuce leaves. Sometimes it is dropped into a convent handing or receptacle of some kind situated on her lap. She becomes extremely adept at flicking food here and there and according to Sarah Seats this type of eating and appetite

Relate to how people order their societies on micro (individual, Interpersonal) and macro (cultural) levels, not first in specific instance, but woven into an overall political analysis or vision.  

In fact, Atwood shows how food and eating extend into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics, and explicates how these activities assumed gender roles of the late 1950's and 1960's Canadian

society. When Marian meets Duncan she decides to stop eating altogether and her “non-eating is physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness”.\(^{17}\) Marian enjoyed preparing food for others although she restricts her own intake she becomes preoccupied with food but unable to eat it. When Len Slank her old college friend wants to visit Marian she asks him if he wanted anything to eat “she wanted to prepare something for him, if only a bacon-and-tomato sandwich”.\(^{196}\) She took delight in watching other people eat, and most often it seems that her mind “has lost control over it.”\(^{18}\)

Atwood shifts narration from first person to third person, according to Hart, in order to distance “the reader from main, just as Marian’s body distances itself from food.”\(^{19}\) Right from the first pages of the novel there are references to food, eating and cooking, and the entire novel is permeated by food metaphors. Marian is immersed in the "Soup", and her company is layered like an ice cream sandwich. The hair of accountant Mrs Grot is "the colour of a metal-refrigerator tray",\(^{16}\) Mrs Bogue recites office interviewers breaking legs in meat-

\(^{17}\) Emma Parker, “You are what you eat: the politics of eating in the novels of Margaret Atwood’s ‘The Edible Women’” Style 24. 2(Summer, 1990) p. 10.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
cleaves encounters and being smeared blood red in tomato-juice taste tests. (20) A chair is said to have a cover like “egg yolk yellow” dust "like chunks of mouldy bread" (29) and the person's face is resembled with "the flat whitish grey colour of uncooked pie crust.” (12) Pamela S. Bromberg rightly argues:

Throughout part first she is hungry and eating . But in part second she begins to identify herself with the objects previously ingested and consumed. As she turns from subject to object, consumer to consumed, she looses her capacity to eat, to take the world into her self. This anorexia also reflects the division of her body.

Peter characterizes a random conglomeration of what T.S Eliot calls “heap of broken images.”21 He is a law graduate who represents male chauvinism of the society at its best. Ainsley calls him, “nicely packaged”(184) as he enjoys, throughout novel, the privileges of being man and being part of patriarchal structure. He is drawn to Marian because she is unlike the other women of his acquaintance: “a girl who would not try to take over his life.” (71) Peter finds man meek and docile but Peter is speaking of choosing a life partner as if he chooses a packet of noodles based on its package which is attractive. When he

proposes Marian, she sees him as a sinister Gothic figure; his face is “strangely shadowed, his eyes gleaming like an animal, his stare, intent, faintly ominous”. The image of his firm as a balloon reveals that Peter is made up of only surfaces and has no core. He repressed inner self and one can see, in Marxist terms, that his worship appearance is part of the societal structure. He is compulsively tidy and well organized and conscious of society to such an extent that he cannot even dress with “genuine carelessness”. Like his apartment, he is a model of a modern successful man apparently. He is very courteous as long as Marian is submissive: “the mid Victorian Ruskinian image of passive and dependent woman”, as T.N. Dhar believes. Peter is a threat to Marian's identity and regards her a mere thing, rather than a person. We find that most often she is suppressed to such an extent that it seemed as if she is being ruled and measured before being slaughtered spiritually. The feeling marks the onset of Marian's inability to eat meat products which grows until she breaks off engagement with Peter. When she was dining with Peter “he was sizing her up as he would a new camera.”(189)

In this way ‘camera’ is transformed into an instrument of lover's manipulation. In the novel, Camera plays as a device of torture, and

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through it Peter make Marian a perfect target of his designs and directs technological assault on her by trying to fix her in an image.

Peter even puts his collection of weapons – which comprises “two rifles, a pistol” and several wicked looking knives on a peg board – in his room to reveal his allegiance to masculine mystique offered to him by society. He wants to take picture of Marian as if she was among his collection of weapons and rifles. He views Marian as his property, and even a reflecting Mirror, by imposing societal identities on her which satisfy his male-ego. According to Shannon Hengen, Peter “matches exactly Lasch’s descriptions of the narcissistic personality as one who cannot live without admiring audience and for whom the world is a mirror.”

He assumes a proprietarily air over her and imposes on her his image of a ‘perfect woman’ and wanted to reshape Marian according to his own image of her.

Peter, it is important to note, is a macho hunter and enjoys shooting and killing of rabbits and other animals mercilessly. He describes to his friend Len how he gutted the animal after killing it. He reveals the incident in such a way that Marian unconsciously identifies herself with the rabbit; the image of peter as a hunter and herself as hunted entered Marian's mind. J. Brooks Bouson believes that:

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Peter's gristly hunting story about killing a rabbit prefaces his pursuit of and proposal to Marian underlines the narrative's view of the sexual hunt as a form of predation.24

The closer she gets to Peter the more she comes to know about the multifaceted nature of his personality. She imagines that Peter's attempt to have spontaneous sex with her on a blanket in a field and on the sheepskin rug on his bedroom floor are enactments of mass culture fantasies found in men's magazines. Her thoughts on why Peter feels the need for these sexual escapades is similar to her thoughts why women would respond to the girdle ads “perhaps an attempt to assert youthfulness and spontaneity.” (69) She even believed that he might have borrowed the idea from ‘Escape literature’. (70) She wanted to ‘read’ Peter's motive to have sex in the bathtub, but despite “her many guesses and attempts and half-successes, she was aware she had still not uncovered”. (146)

However, ironically towards the end of the novel Marian views Peter not as an enemy but a normal human being and delves deep into his character in order to get the insight into his real self. (314) She could see him as “a time traveller Peter, forty five and balding but still...
recognizable as Peter.”(314) As she breaks off her engagement with Peter, she views him with fear and imagines him as an alienated man. She comes to a conclusion that Peter is a man who does not have real or inner self; although he appears normal, he is unaware of the predatory side of his personality. Peter sometimes seems normal through the societal structure to which he belongs. However, what seems normal need not be good, and according to Eric Fromm:

> The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, but fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.²⁵

Duncan, an English graduate student, is shown as Marian's alter-ego and functions as her double throughout the novel. When Marian puts on his grey dressing gown, he comments “you look sort of like me in that”.(181) Duncan is described as “cadaverously thin” with ribs that ‘stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval wood cut’ he is also likened to “a starved Buddha burning incense to itself”.(58) Marian had met Duncan when she was doing a survey for Moose Beer and had been comprehensively duped by his feigned innocence and wilful eccentricism. She meets him again at the Laundromat where she is

involuntarily drawn towards him and allows herself to be kissed by him. This encounter of Duncan and Marian seems irrational and mystifying because their desire to apprehend the truth finally “collapses in a welter of commas and shredded footnotes.” (117) Thus, though an English student, he does not derive any intellectual satisfaction from his work and feels the need to escape from it. Duncan is an enigmatic figure and his role is ambiguous, as more of a symbolic than a real character. At times he seems to represent hidden aspect of Marian’s self and so acts as a link between Marian’s fantasy world and her real one. He appears mysteriously in illogical places where Marian least expects him. (334) George Woodcock calls Duncan:

>a more insidious kind of Parasite, a lamprey battering on her [Marian's] compassion to feed his monstrous self pity.\(^{26}\)

Since in Atwood's fictional world nothing is there by chance and without planned significance, Duncan plays a significant role in Marian's journey towards achieving selfhood, by enabling her to see her ‘self’ in relation to herself as well as the world. Peter functions to reflect Marian's passivity and powerlessness – his dependence-complex is a consciously worked out strategy to exploit others – but Duncan's duplicitous stance enables her to critically examine the self damaging implications and

consequences of her passive acceptance of imperialistic power structures and received gender roles. Duncan does not view Marian as his reflection and does not want to conform to expectations created by romantic desire. He acknowledges ‘otherness’ and ‘separateness’ by telling Marian that she’s first an escape “you known I don't even like you very much”. (234) He has broken mirror in his apartment but he doesn't reflect back to Marian like Peter.

When Marian goes to bed with him he tells her that the sexual encounter with her “was fine first as good as usual.” M.F. Salat believes that:

the Marian-Duncan encounter parodies the Jungian archetype of descent into and confrontation with the other/shadow self and re-emergence and new knowledge about self. 27

Marian descends, but to the depth of ignominy and confronts not the shadow self but a shady self. She re-emerges with new knowledge, too but rather than it being about self, it is about the other. In a profound sense, even Duncan, literally and figuratively, show Marian a way of getting out of the fantasy-land where she plays being the nightingale to nurse back the Duncan's to health. It is through Duncan

that she is able to see herself as she is and as seen by society. Thus her ‘confrontation’ with the other self analogous to the Jungian archetype sets in motion the process of self examination and reappraisal of herself in relation to others and allows her to acquire a new perspective. It is Duncan who makes her realize the inauthenticity of her appearance – when he tells her “you didn't tell me it was a masquerade ... Supposed to be.” (309) – and he acts as a catalytic agent who brought about modification and change in her behavioural pattern. When she tells Duncan that ‘Peter was trying to destroy me,’ Duncan points out that it may be equally true that she was trying to destroy Peter. (362) It is Duncan who teaches Marian that “hunger is more basic than love” (122) and leads her to grasp some sort of understanding about her sense of self as victim. After her engagement party he conducts her through the twisted maze of Toronto's streets and revivers; and brings her finally to a great open pit, a “gigantic hole scooped into the ground.” (34) It is Duncan who allows her to be on her own and she sees, “Her image was taking shape” (347) and by baking a cake and addressing the cake women: “you look delicious, very appetizing, and that's what will happen to you; that's what you'll get for being food.” (351) Marian invites
Duncan over tea and offers him cake and, unlike Peter, he says, “Thank you … it was delicious” (363) and does not take notice of the shape of the cake and its possible significance. (363) Duncan’s reaction to cake confirms the problematization of the established norms of society. According to Pamela S. Bromberg:

The novel's closing image is unsettling .... The reader is left to wonder whether he [Duncan] will then devour her. 28

By presenting characters and social groups in solid scenes and settings in her novel, Atwood is able to give us live touch with work environment, sociologically and historically Canadian facts. The society depicted is socio-culturally verifiable and even the characters reflect aspects of Canadian society. Atwood herself in Second Word says:

Fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects. 29

Marian's colleagues nicknamed as “Office virgins” Clara her friend, Joe and Ansley are largely dependent on society for their insights; and their movements explore experiences form both sociological and psychological angles. These “office virgins” were, what Betty Frieden

29 Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. p. 346
calls, the “happy suburban housewife.”³⁰ They have blonde hair, since it was considered as one of the charms by society and they want to travel extensively before they get married and settle down. They believed that the person to whom they marry will give them the identity and rescue them from Sermon surveys. When Marian tells office virgins that she is engaged, Lucy asks her “how on earth did you ever catch him.” When they were invited to Peter's engagement party at Lunch: “They were so excited, they were each expecting a version of Peter to walk miraculously through the door, drop to one knee and propose.”¹³⁸)They were made to believe that “truly feminine women do not want carriers’ higher education” and every woman was made to dream of being a happy suburban housewife and find “true feminine fulfilment” in her career as a wife and mother.³¹ Clara who is Marian's friend has been everyone's ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement feminity, during her high school days. She had fallen in love with Joe Bates and had been swept into matrimony and motherhood in a state of unawareness. Repeated pregnancies had reduced her to the state of exhaustion and inertia, almost to a vegetable: "She just lies there and that man does all the work! She lets herself be treated like a thing

³¹ Ibid. p.13.
… she should do something if only a token gesture.” (39) Marian sees Clara as a “swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead” and considers her to have succumbed to the demands of the body and thus forfeited her mind. (142)

Clara has been dragged slowly down into the “gigantic pumpkin like growth that was enveloping her body” and characterizes her pregnancy “a kind of parasitic growth”. (141) Clara describes her younger child as a “little leech all covered with suckers” (31) and her children as “barnacles encrusting a ship and ‘limpets clinging to a rock’” (37) Clara's house is disorganized and is managed by her husband Joe because Clara does not feel inclined to do any work. When Clara's husband Joe suggests that she should go to night-school she just gives him a ‘funny look’ as if that were impossible.

The attitude of Clara’s husband to women is patronizing and gentle. He tends to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection. (36) He sees women victimized in another sense also; and firmly believes that there is an opposition between women's self image or 'core' and her feminine role as a wife and mother: “her feminine role and her core are really in opposition to her feminine role.” (304) Accordingly, Joe’s analysis of the core or the inner self
being destroyed by the role is followed by the startling conclusion that for women the best course is to get adopted unawareness. In other words, Joe is a kind and considerate husband but he recommends unawareness as the sole strategy of survival. It leads to assert, like Lauber that “the novel insistently ask whether and how anyone can achieve identity in the artificial society.”

Ainsley, Marian's room-mate, negates genderized social constructs as she is a victim of the discipline which she does not even know. Although liberated and unconventional, she follows the conventional mind set towards the end which manifests itself soon after she conceives. Initially, Ainsley repudiates the role assigned to women and her rejection of marriage as an exploitative relationship stems from this. She wants to give birth to a child because she believes “Every woman should have at least one baby”. Ainsley turns out into a “scheming super female and sets out to lure a male with healthy genes to impregnate her.” Her strategy is to turn the tables on man and exploit him for her own need to become a mother. It is Len who falls prey to her machinations, as she makes Len believe that he is the hunter stalking the prey. When Len discovers the truth that he had been used by Ansley

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he is filled with shock and anger and rails at all women: “All you clawed scaly Bloody predatory whoring fucking bitches can go straight to hell.”(276)

A psychologist’s lecture on the importance of a strong father image for a normal healthy upbringing of a boy changes Ansley’s view of marriage. She is now determined to get a husband, just to provide the father image to her child. When Len refuses, Ansley is not unduly upset and her response is: “I simply have to get another one.” For her husband is just a replaceable spare part, whose function is to provide Father image to her child. Ansley finally marries Fish and in order to conform to convention goes to honey moon at Niagara. In this way, the novel deals with ‘gender’ roles and shows that characters, both as victims and predators, are often swamped by their social system in varying degrees. Atwood herself once said:

I don’t give a piss about generalized roles” never have. If I’d believed in “roles”... I would never have been a writer.... Why are people, especially women always being told they have Roles? It is not a play.33

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Thus to put it bluntly, “Atwood has disregard for gender roles” and has shown her characters both victims and predators swamped by their social system in varying degrees.\textsuperscript{34}

Atwood perceives a vital dynamic relationship between ‘individual nature’ and ‘social nature’. It announces paradoxically that society is important for individual because Individual’s behaviour is conditioned by social expectations and suggests even that for society itself individual is important because only individual’s care about what others think of them. However, in the novel one finds that the communal values are in conflict with protagonist’s values: the edible women are an imaginative transformation of a social problem because here Marian, a young woman, rebels against her social destiny. The novel reveals that alienation is a reality of our system and the only way to resist it is through a revolt against it. While actively interacting with the society Marian asserts her genuine, metaphysical, philosophical identity and reality. She is alienated and driven by desire for recognition, as a result of which her personal self is spilt into parts. As she loses parts of herself, she realizes she loses herself entirely and she moulds herself into a ‘role’ which she plays in the society. Atwood lays bare

\textsuperscript{34} Quoted from, Coral Ann Howel, \textit{Modern Novelist Margaret Atwood}. MacMillan Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire London, 1996. p. 22.
the hypocritical postures of society through the dramatization of identity crisis in the soul of Marian. Brooks Bouson says:

Atwood deploys her female protagonists, Marian Me Alpine to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women.35

Marian like Rennie of *Bodily Harm* and unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* experiences the mind-body split and sees her body as an object with a ‘mind’ of its own. Her alienation from her body permeates the novel and she comes to learn that body cannot be disposed off so easily, though it is the main recourse to evade society’s patriarchal control. Her body is crying for acceptance and she does not want to be dismissed because it becomes apparent that “both the body and the feelings of this woman have gained autonomy from her conscious intentions.... And that they will continue to behave in an erratic manner until she acknowledges and integrates them.”36 Marian’s body is a subject of sudden metamorphoses and transformations which are symbolic of her mental state. Her confession that she doesn’t usually remember her dreams is to be taken the attempt of her the dream is taken as an attempt of her subconscious mind to warn her against the perils of society. In her

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35 J. Brooks Bouson, “The Anxiety of being Influenced: Reading and Responding to character in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*,” *Style* 24.2 (Summer, 1990). p. 230
alienation she compares herself to a roll of toilet paper, and feels overwhelmed by an obsessive fear of disintegration and fragmentation. Although she has made every effort to adjust herself to the socially acceptable role, it is her imagination which is a subversive force. The pattern is signalled in her first attempt when she runs away from Peter and Lank. This attempt is fuelled by Marian's subconscious identification with the rabbit in Peter's story and then confirmed by her recapture: “I felt myself caught, set down and shaken. It was Peter who must have stalked me”.(88) She is accused of emotional instability because on the surface she seemed to be content with her destiny but the crisis is shown through her behaviour. In response to society’s control Marian attempts to remove her body from its patriarchal strong hold when she crawls under a bed to hide from “the reverbrating hot glare” of Peter.(91) Her behaviour symbolically shows her endeavour to escape patriarchal society as Coral Ann points out:

Marian's anxiety at the prospect of her erasure as an independent social being within the Patriarchal system through marriage to Peter is externalized first in images of metamorphosis where she becomes identified with animal victims and then even more overtly by her body's
panic protest in its refusal to ingest food or drink. The social system makes her sick.\textsuperscript{37}

This shows the Psychic resistance to the role of social conformity. Marian is scared to turn into any of the models of an adult woman offered by society because behind the conventional feminity lies a horror of the body which relates to her fear of growing up marriage, and maternity. At the office Christmas party, we realize Marian's perspective shifts from a kind of anthropological detachment to a sudden shocked recognition that she too shares the mysterious female condition. She feels suffocated and imagines Peter's friends regarding her one of these females. She fears “losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer” and as a safety measure she attempts to bind her body in an unneeded girdle, to squeeze it because she does not want this sort of future.

Marian finds herself lost and wants to know what she was becoming as well as what direction she was going to take. Waking up one morning she felt so alienated from her ‘self’ that she doubted her sanity and believed that if things go at the same rate she would require the services of psychiatrist. She was so uncertain that she wanted

to clarify with Clara and Peter as to what kind of abnormality had crept into her if she was becoming mentally unstable. They, however, assured her that she was “wonderfully normal” and told her that it was nothing more than bridal nerves. She remains unconvinced and according to Salat:

> Marian's problematic of 'becoming' constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposes upon women in paternalist society.... The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mind-less body.\(^{38}\)

Marian's inner self is submerged under her social self and she is struggling against this division. When she was sitting on her dressing table she feels disturbed by her triple reflections in her dresser-mirror seeing her reflection between dark and blonde dolls which are propped on the dresser.(282) The entire episode of “dolls” reveals Marian’s inner self is in opposition to her social self and she is unable to reconcile the two. It is important to note that Atwood in her “Five poems for Dolls” reiterates this image of dolls as self projections, as embodiments of the speakers own guilt.

Marian's identity crisis is conveyed through the reflections she sees of herself in different objects: she thinks of manipulating her image, but

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her single image breaks into three images. The three images reflect her own water logged body and she gets surprised by the fact that three images move with each move that she makes on the bath tub and they are not identical: “The two on the outside were slanted inwards towards the third”. (281) Accordingly, her own ‘self’ has fragmented and divided away from her. Coral Ann believes that Marian suffers from a condition of self division which Denis Cooley has identified in power politics:

We find in power politics what we find in so many Atwood's books of the 1970's especially (I include the novels) namely, a division of head and body at the neck. 39

The neck figures as pinched conduit between faculties (mind/body) whose schism is disastrous. To Marian this division signals two powers of agency within herself, will and instinct acting in opposition to each other in a pattern which becomes the main line of narrative action: whatever it was that had been making these decisions, she sees this as a malignant, powerless condition to control.

Women in society measure their own worth in relation to their success with men and their value in society depends upon the artificiality of their fascinating images. In order to live up to the decorative aspect of the ‘feminine’, women are conscious of their looks and the need for

pretty clothes to adorn themselves in order to attract the male gaze. However, it is not society alone, which is responsible for inferiorization of women, but even women themselves allow to be colonized and exploited. In this context, Linda Hutcheon remarks:

As both a Canadian and a woman, she protests any tendency towards easy passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow either Canadians or women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them.\textsuperscript{40}

It is her passivity and naivety that allows her to be an object. Atwood's response is discernable in her illustration of Marian's visit to a beauty Salon, a female space dedicated to the presentation of the female body: “Marian has closed her eyes, leaning back against the operating-table, while her scalp was soaped and scraped and rinsed she thought it would be good idea if they would give a slab of flesh, an object”.\textsuperscript{269} Her discomfort is palpable and she goes on to confess that her whole body felt curiously paralysed. Molly Hite rightly argues:

Sexuality is not the same as being sexy, desire is not the same as being desirable and what women want is not entirely reducible to what men want in women.\textsuperscript{41}

Marian considers herself to be acting at her own free will, despite the fact that it is Peter's wish she is fulfilling. Atwood's clinical treatment of the beauty salon is a reflection of the scrutiny patriarchy inflicts on


female body. The ostensibly headless bodies visually encapsulate the gendered mind/body dichotomy that is central to women's oppression. They cause Marian to question what she is trying to achieve: “was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical? An electric mushroom.”(270)

Marian became a decorative object and her hair is decorated to such an extent that she thinks it (her head) as a separate unity and balances it on her neck “as though she was a juggler with a fragile golden bubble.”(268)

According to Bouson:

As a realistic novel *The Edible Women* 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 Marian does not want to be trapped in decorative life where her identity and individuality are likely to be mercilessly crushed. 42

The unreality of her ‘self’ becomes evident as she agrees to play a meek and submissive fiancé as dictated by Peter. She decks herself out in all her finery and even her smile becomes artificial when her mouth was painted “with several coats of glossy finish.”(289) Eric Fromm, in *The Sane Society*, dwelling upon this idea contends that:

by trying to be one with the society man sacrifices his primary sense of the ‘self’ by experiencing himself as being approved of, worthwhile and successful, a person who acts and feels like an automaton, who never

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42 J. Brooks Bouson, "The Anxiety of being Influenced: Reading and Responding to character in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, *Style* 24.2 (Summer, 1990) p. 23.
experiences himself entirely as the person he thinks he is supposed to be, whose artificial smile has replaced genuine laughter, whose meaningless chatter had replaced communicative speech. When Marian gazes into mirror she finds herself like a beautiful Egyptian Mummy, an iced frozen body form devoid of life, whose open eyes reveal a “serene vacancy”. Marian stared into the Egyptian hidden and out-lined and thickly fringed eyes of a person and began to fear more and more of divided self – self annihilation and lack of identity. When she looks at mirror she fails to see the Tightness of it, as she is unable to recognize the ‘true Marian’, her true self, behind the glittering façade: “what was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them together? She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering…boneless flexible”. (285) She was progressively divided and objectified in the society; she feels in a red dress as ‘the perfect target’ and likens her face. She realizes the fact that she is sought to be turned into a state of eternal bondage and feels a sense of urgency to wriggle herself out of this crisis because as she was getting married now she had nothing to do. “It was all being taken care of there … .”(143)

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The American poet, Adrienne Rich, also writes about such a condition in which Marian finds herself, using similar imagery of drafting a self division:

What frightened me most was the sense of drift, of being pulled along on a current which called itself my destiny, but in which I seemed to be losing touch with whatever I had been, with the girl who had experienced her own will and every almost statically at times, walking around a city or riding a train or typing in a student room.\(^{44}\)

Marian loses any sense of herself as unified subject and hallucinates her emotional conflict in images of fragmentation “she was afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain.”\(^{(286)}\) Patricia Goldblatt rightly argues that “Marian is merely a blank state upon which each man can write or erase his concept of female.” She also considers Marian's “mind and body have split away from each other. Her mind's revulsion at a dog-cat-dog world holds her body hostage, captive territory when a woman disagrees with her world. Marian tries to reason with her body accusing it of having frivolous whims.”\(^{45}\) The body coaxes and tempts but adamant Marian's mind expresses her disapproval because on that action she possesses control: ironically, herself. Her punishment is circular, first as a victim susceptible

\(^{44}\) Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken' in \textit{Onlies, Secrets and Silence}, p. 42.

because she is a woman subject to her society's values; and second as a
woman only able to command other women, namely herself.

In her engagement party Duncan’s question “you did not tell me it
was masquerade, who the hell you are supposed to be” (309) brought
Marian's subconscious rejection to the conscious level and made her
realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. The party provided Marian a
perception that Peter has a strong motive to negate her individuality and
autonomy, by expecting her to assume the role of a traditional wife in the
society. T.N. Dhar rightly points out that:

her beliefs and modes of thought are put to a strenuous test till, after being
battered in body and psyche, she finally passes into a state of 'raised
consciousness.\(^\text{46}\)

She now believes that she should never have worn red, as a result of
which she avoids mirror and feels relieved for not having been fixed, in a
photograph. Marian's changed circumstances are signalled in narration
by a shift from 1st person to third person; and according to Atwood’s
own words “the novel makes negative statement about society the
complications are resolved but not in a way that affirms the social order.”

Atwood shows their indictment of double standard of morality and
discrimination through Marian's running away from her engagement
party. In the words of Patricia Goldblatt:

\(^{46}\) T.N. Dhar, "First Person Singular: The Raised Feminine Consciousness in Atwood's
The Edible Woman," Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, Sushila Singh (ed.).
After enduring, accepting, regurgitating, denying and attempting to please and cope, Atwood's protagonists begin to take action and change their lives.\footnote{Patricia F. Goldblatt, “Reconstructing Margaret Atwood’s Protagonists”, World Literature Today. Vol. 73. Issue: 2. 1999. p. 32.}

Goldblatt believes that “Marian's revelation in *The Edible Women* “is experienced at the precipice of a ravine, where she comments.”\footnote{Ibid.} Atwood urges women to asset their right and re-inhabit their bodies. She articulates woman's anxieties over her oppressive cultural experiences as well as confronts that oppression. Atwood exposes the falsities, dualities that alienate woman and drive her from her somatic self. She urges women to empower themselves through positive re-embodiment: to re-embody culture by first re-embodying themselves.

When Duncan conducts Marian through twisted maze of Toronto's streets and ravines and brings her to pit a ‘gigantic hole scooped into the ground’ together they sit in the snow which looks like nothingness, and Duncan says to Marian “It's your own personal cul-de-sac you invented it, you'll have to think of your own way out of it.”(343). It is with this exhortation to responsibility that Marian Leaves the ravine. She descends, to the depth of ignominy and confronts not the shadow self but shady self after which she re-emerges with new knowledge, about her ‘self’ and about the ‘other’. This inversion persuades her to return to her apartment and take off the red sequined dress which had made her a
‘Target’ for Peter. She washes her dishes and restores order in general and proceeds to bake a cake: “an elaborate cake cut and decorated to look like a woman in bright pink ruffled dress wearing her hair in intricate baroque scrolls and swirls”. Now she has become a sculptor rather than a lifeless Statue erected in the name of beauty. In an interview with Gibson, Atwood comments:

Marian performs an action, a preposterous one in away, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself.49

After ‘the process of cake making’ Marian finds that “Her image was taking shape”(350) — words which are deliberately ambiguous and refer to her new self, which was taking shape within her. It also refers to the shaping of the cake woman as her former self, the edible woman for man’s consumption. She exorcises all the former elements within her and projects them on her artistic creation. She realizes the immobility imposed by the societal role, which slowly drained her. Howell asserts that women shaped cake is:

Marian’s perception of women’s condition and fate as decreed by the feminine mystique so that her cake-baking is both a gesture of complicity in domestic myth and also a critique of it.50

Even Catherine Mclay states that Marian’s cake represents:

a feast the celebration of Marian’s new freedom and even re-birth- she is from the spell, from her identification of herself with the victim. No longer isolated and alien, Marian has rejoined society.  

Naturally, after this experience Marian as a woman seems to have changed from the meek, docile, and traditional woman to the bold, conscious and rebellious feminist. She has become active again, an agent, a subject, a consumer rather than a consumable object of exchange traded on the market. According to Gayle Green, Marian's cake woman is a gesture of defiance, a way of saying “no” to a system that defines women as commodities and devours them. Marian has resigned her job, challenging the gender power politics to attain ‘human equality’ and ‘human freedom’. She wants to become neither a man nor a machine but a woman who aspires for a meaningful human identity. This is Atwood's feminist perspective as found in *The Edible Women*, and “sociology translated into the private idiom of one fiction character.”


and others that she is not food.”

Her pleasure, says Goldblatt, “is symbolic of the death of the old Marian. One might say that Marian’s ingestion of her own image.”

Marian becomes representation of a woman rebelling against the system of society, gender and its oppression. By consuming the cake image of herself she has become active again, an agent, a subject, a consumer rather than a consumable object. She attempts through mirror image to join her split self and as Barbara Rigney argues:

Marian knows more than she did in the beginning [and her] fashioning and eating of cake signifies her recognition and rejection of her former complaint self, culminating in her new ability to respond to her own feelings.

Marian demolishes “society’s synthetic stereotype of feminity through the ingenious mirroring device of the cake” and “frees herself to realize her true identity.” Marian according to T.D McLulich, at the end of the novel “is a whole person again” and while her fate is uncertain “she will face it squarely instead of trying to escape.”

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54 Sharon Rose Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1993. p. 96.
57 Nora Foster Stovel, "Reflections In Mirror Images: Doubles and Identity in the Novels of Margaret Atwood", Essays On Canadian Writing 33 (1986).