CHAPTER - II
RESISTING THE SOCIAL MYTH
(The Edible Woman)

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. It is the first Canadian novel that anticipated the trends of feminism found in the later women novelists such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Toni Morrison. Atwood does not raise common or garden gender question in this novel. But she parodies various strains of feminism which were popular in the 70s. Though the novel was written in 1965, in the initial stages of Women’s Liberation movement, it appeared only in 1969 at the beginning of “Second wave” feminism. Atwood rightly describes The Edible Woman as a “proto feminist” novel which shows the influence of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949) and Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963). It has been
read and interpreted variously by several critics like Catherine Mc Lay who seeks to discuss the novel in terms of a “romance”, while John Lauber analyzes it in the light of contemporary consumer society. T.D Mac Lulich in Atwood Adult Fairy Tale: Levi Strauss Betteiheim and The Edible woman defines that “The novel is series of haunting images, a sequence of dream like hallucinations, which flicker through the mind of Atwood’s protagonist” (111). 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. This same image is first featured in her unpublished novel *Up in the Air So Blue* (1964). Atwood’s interest in survival as a Canadian theme is already being explored in the unexpected context of modern urban Toronto. The identity crisis of Marian, the main character is like Kafka’s original hunger artist in the tradition of hunger and starvation in his literature. Her refusal to consume food is an act of resistance that diagnosis of Marian’s eating disorder is a rejection of an exploitative, predatory consumer culture. Marian’s difficulty is that she comes to identify with the objects that society consumes. This finds resonance with Maud Ellmann’s work on women and hunger in *The Hunger Artists: Staring, Writing and Imprisonment* (1993).

The novel was actually written in 1964-65, when the feminists were not radicalized enough to focus upon erasing gender inequalities and challenge male domination. To evaluate Atwood’s ‘feminism’ (proto-feminism) one needs to see how she responds to the world defined for women in the 60’s and the kind of world she envisages because the very title of the novel underscores the passive, subordinate and vulnerable status of women from Simon de Beauvoir to Tauna have argued that, women have been simultaneously perceived fewer components and inherently less valuable than men. In a way women are viewed to a very basic menstruation, pregnancy and lactation. Which means women are perceived
as more closely tied to nature. This perception has been used to distinguish women from men in western culture, and ultimately to devalue that women are incarnated disturbing mysteries of nature. 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 moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man.

The Edible Woman is structured like a journey of a woman called Marian Mac Alpin, 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, particularly to the western feminism of the late 20th 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.

The novel is either an optimistic celebration of female ‘liberation’ or materialist feminist protest. The writer’s manipulation of a shifting narrative point of view and her use of an unbalanced, structure reflect a more complex picture of capitalism and female subjectivity. Indeed Atwood displays a profound preoccupation with eating in her writings. In her novels eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an
extremely Intel means of examining the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by eating and powerless by their non-eating. Atwood’s both the novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* (1976) have been analyzed extensively in terms of food, particularly in terms of feminist theories of eating disorders because food is served as a metaphor for family, religion, sex, gender, social position and group identity. These principle metaphors appear across cultures, but are organized locally as different peoples speak of different foods and equate them with specific elements of their lives. It is also a powerful metaphor for sacrifice, order, obedience, self discipline, purity, generosity and other key values in religions and ritual life around the world. In contemporary western societies, ideas about man, hunter, woman, the gatherer permeate understanding of gender. In the sense food production, gender relations and human reproduction are inter-twined in a metaphorical cycle of energy exchange. While men credit with cultivating staple crops to meet the nutritional needs of the community, the task of women is to raise children, supplying the next generation of ‘man power’. As Catherine Mc Lay in her essay “The Dark voyage” edited by Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy. N. defines that The Art of Margaret Atwood seeks to discuss the novel in terms of a “romance” (123). Food is not only used to communicate ideas about gender roles it can also express sexual inequalities. It acts as a visual metaphor, in many forms of art and it can convey sensuality, temptation
and the arousal of desire, consummation and fulfillment. So the analysis of the politics of eating in all the novels provides a new way of reading, and a new understanding of women’s relationship to food.

Part and parcel of a “consumer society” Marian is faced with a choice of being “edible” to her husband and remain single as an individual and assert herself. Consequently she chooses the later and thus refuses to be the edible woman. Through a series of hunting “images, a sequence of dream-like hallucination which flicker through the mind” (116) of Marian, the novel presents a kaleidoscopic picture of her life. To make the picture more real, Marian is presented as a perfect foil to her friends, where in owing to her coming into contact with them, she learns immensely of women’s problems. Though the choices available to her are limited, she confronts several issues crucial to her, “what does it mean to be a woman, what is her situation, and what constitutes femininity” (269). Marian’s identification with food is closely linked to general theme of consumerism. Her characters relationship with food and her struggle towards self determination, relation with her fiancé Peter are played out against a determinedly Canadian back drop, the survival of the country’s cultural autonomy.

*The Edible Woman*, which spans a few months of Marian McAlpin’s Life is told in three parts. Part one is written in the first person
point of view, explaining the life of Marian who engaged to Peter and experiences an escalating paranoia as she is variously alienated by her work situation with co-workers, friends and living arrangements. In part two, the longest section of the novel, the narrative abruptly shifts in to third person point of view, and Marian gradually becomes more and more anorexia. Her anorexia nervosa is of a particular nature, through which she not only loses the ability to eat anything but is also haunted by the idea that she herself is being consumed. At the end of part three, Marian bakes and serves the “edible woman” to Peter as she rejects him as a marriage partner. Ultimately part three witnesses Marian’s emergence from third-person anorexia space; she regains the ability to eat and is once more the speaker, the ‘I’. It’s a reflection of the fact that the heroine has found out her identity.

In 19th century, Freud noticed propensity among his women patients to develop anorexia. In *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the work of Victorian female authors, such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelly and Emily Dickinson’s characters were essentially ‘Mad Women’ because of the restrictive gender categories that their societies forced upon them both privately and professionally. In the novel, Marian’s identification with food is closely linked to general theme of consumerism, her relationship with food; her struggle towards self-
determination and her relation with her fiancé are played out against a determinedly Canadian backdrop about the survival of country’s cultural economy. The motive of consumerism shows that the commercial and marital market place draws attention to distinctively Canadian pressure point.

Marian Mc Alpin works as researcher working for Seymour surveys, a highly stratified, three-tiered, hierarchic market organization where all responsible and respectable positions are held by men. Moreover, Seymour surveys proscribe marriage and pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the authority of the company. She feels outraged at the comment of a man whom she interviews. He says “you ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you” (48). Through the imagery of the three layers of Seymour surveys, Atwood posits, “a metaphoric parallel for women’s place or space in society. The three layers represent three planes of reality: mind, body and matter: The men are minds; the women are bodies” (95). Seymour surveys defines Marian’s place as above ‘matter’ but below ‘mind’. As Salat, M.F aptly says in *A Delicious Fair: Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman*:

Marian’s problematic of ‘becoming’ constitutes and expresses Atwood’s feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society… The
hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mindless body. (96)

Her dilemma arises out of this situation because the top floor of the research organized is manned exclusively by men and is not accessible to Marian, while at the lower level are old house wives. This is the received categorization in patriarchal discourse, Marian feels on the floor above are the executives and the psychologists, referred to as the men. Women sit in the down floor as they are compared to machines. So Marian cannot hope to be at the executive level nor can she allow herself to be equated with machines. Her place is defined as above matter but below ‘mind’. She couldn’t become one of the men upstairs, neither could she become a machine person... as that would be a step down Marian has no freedom in her work and therefore she feels forbidden to do what she likes. She has no future because her job as a researcher cannot provide her with adequate pension, after a life time of unrewarding work. She feels it to be an outrage on her personality. Peter Hidalgo in her essay “The Female Body Politic; From Victimization to Empowerment” remarks on Marian’s problem of anorexia thus: Marian’s anorexia is symptom of her fear of the kind of future society offers to women. In an episode which is fairly typical of the feminist novel of 1960’s Marian visits a former classmate, now a wife and
mother, and is overwhelmed by the purely biological existence of a woman with the three small children. But Marian is still free from the horror of enforced domesticity does not mean that she does not play a “feminine” role in her work place. The structure of market research Company represents the power distribution between the sexes. All men who are executives enjoy their private offices. All women share a large room and are supposed to take a human element, the interviewers. Since Marian has a degree in English, she revises the questionnaires devised by the men so that they can be understood by ordinary people. She says: “she is a mediator between masculine ‘scientific’ jargon and the daily experience of the housewives targeted by market research”. (291)

Marian’s predicament typified the situation of women in male-dominated society and implicitly enshrines Atwood’s criticism of patriarchal hegemony and gender specific role models. Her identity crisis acquires a feminine coloration, she looks for choices in terms of alternatives to her present situation. She is juxtaposed with Ainsley, with whom she shares an apartment. They live together in a “symbiotic adjustments” (6), but they differ on the issues of marriage and motherhood. Ainsley works as a tester of defective electric tooth brushes in a company. She is a self-proclaimed feminist, who is fond of “paper-back” books on psychology and anthropology. She develops hatred for marriage and plans
to be an unwed. She says, “The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands” (40). She wants children by choice, so she hunts for a strong, handsome, intelligent man as “biological father” for her child and then looks for a father image. Though Ainsley offer this radical alternative to Marian’s situation, she rejects that because, bringing forth an illegitimate child is a cold-blooded act, for which a woman has to pay her price.

Marian, the protagonist fairly sensible, intelligent young woman decently liberal in her news, defensive about her own individuality suffers from identity crisis. Marian’s crisis however acquires alternatives through her colleagues Emmy, Lucie and Millie her friend Clara and her husband Joe and Ainsley her flat mate. Marian closely watches and feels sorry for Clara, her former classmate during her schooldays, “a natural blonde and every one’s ideal of translucent perfume advertisement feminity” (36). Though Clara gets married to her lover Joe, she is not practical but sensible enough to manage and run a well-organized marriage and motherhood. But Marian thinks about Clara that she could not control more mundane aspects of life. As Katherine E. Waters, in *Mother was not a Person*, opines: “Marian is aware that “the power of the wife declines as the number of children grow” (117). Marian feels that Clara is no longer the ‘vegetable’ because Clara and Joe present a different fact altogether about love and marriage. Having three children Clara is quite content to remain
within the bounds of family, impractical and non-assertive as she is, leaning on Joe, her husband “let’s herself be treated like a thing” (35). Even though Clara does not admit that her children are unplanned, because her first pregnancy with astonishment, second with dismay, third had subsided in to a grim but inert fatalism. Thus Clara unwillingly becomes a pawn in the marriage game. Therefore Marian emphasizes the importance of family planning, birth control, otherwise, gradually; woman becomes more than a child bearing machine. She is totally dependent socially and economically upon her husband.

A third choice for Marian is represented by the trio of perennial blonds are Lucy, Emmie and Millie, who occupy the first basic victim position in survival. The position of being afraid to realize, that they are victims in patriarchal society for “Fear of losing the privileges they possess” (36). Marian rejects these artificial blonds, because they invite victimization. This disturbing awareness is the direct result of a technologically advanced society, which by its very advancement forces individual into her fabricated roles, as said by T.N Dhar in Raised Feminine consciousness in Atwood’s in The Edible Woman, Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, edited by Sushila Singh said “what does it mean to be a woman, what is her situation, and what constitutes femininity?” (116)
Ainsley, a proto-feminist has strong views about the male-dominated “consumer society” (20). As one of the ironies she becomes a victim of the self-sane society. Ainsley though against marriage does not deny motherhood. She wishes for pregnancy. For, she prefers a child of her own. She thinks that motherhood satisfies one’s deepest felinity and every woman should have at least one baby, “it’s even more important than sex” (40). Thus she finds Len, a male specimen to father her child and partially fulfills her dream. But it does not take her long to realize that such a role as she has chosen for herself would be a difficult one to perform in the patriarchal society and she changes her views regarding matrimony and accordingly gets married to provide the infant a father. Marian says: “I knew Ainsley was wrong, but she sounded so rational. I thought I would better go to bed before she had convinced me against my better judgment” (43). Hence Marian accepts neither the radical and extremist feminist view-point of Ainsley, nor the submissive earth-mother role of Clara nor the self-destructive innocence of ignorance of the office virgins.

Marian has been able to realize perceptively how Ainsley, “scheme female”, Clara, “the earth-mother”, and Lucy, Emmie and Millie, “the office virgins” have allowed themselves to be victimized as objects of carnal desires of men within and outside the legal frame work of marriage. Ainsley, Clara, Lucy, Emmie and Millie, these three different role models
fail to offer appropriate alternatives to Marian’s identity crisis. So, she seeks male alternative in Peter, her boy friend, to fulfill her objective. Because Marian looks upon him as not only a rescuer from Seymour Serveys, but also a “rescuer from chaos” (89). Peter is a law graduate, well known for his purchasable hobbies, needs a wife to complement his collection of knives, guns and cameras. Marian is drawn to him because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking and thinking. He is an ideal choice of her. He is of the view that she fits well into a “conventionalized even stereotyped image of a woman who minus her chastity, recalls the mid Victorian Ruskinian image of a passive and dependant woman”. (272)

In course of time, peter’s narration of hunting spree shocks Marian. She discovers that Peter enjoys shooting and killing of rabbits and other animals mercilessly as a matter of pleasure and pride and as well is very fond of non-vegetarian food. Peter’s narration of his hunting spree shocks Marian. His images of the hunter and herself as the hunted enters into her mind. She feels that he has treated her as a “stage-prop” (71) and she begins to distance herself from him because she develops a kind of nausea for these very habits of Peter.

A kind of disapproval and protest against all that Peter represents begins when she maintain distance from him. She chooses to eat very
rarely and stops eating non-vegetarian food as she is aware that one has to eat to live. Marian feels nervous as the date of her engagement approaches. She realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe and secure in the event of marriage with Peter. She begins to look at him as a destroyer of her individuality and identity. When Marian accepts her fiancée’s proposal for marriage, she voluntarily gives up her position as a free and independent individual. “I drew back from him. A tremendous electric blue flash very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (12). Her choice of an egg emphasizes the fragility of Marian’s independence and sense of self identified as something easily crushed and breakable. She is ‘small and oral’ inside her shell and entirely dependent on her future husband. Her sense of victimization becomes acute after she comes across Joe, discussing the after-effects of university education on women. The conversation provides Marian with a flash of insight. She realizes what married life with Peter would be, assuming the role of meek and docile women; dependent on her husband allowing him to devour her is slow and relishing.

Marian suffers from oppression because she wants to know that where does she stand in relation to Peter? She feels, “my mind was at first as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skill like a
cantaloupe and left the mind to think with” (83). She turns paranoid at her crucial juncture, when she gets engaged to be married to Peter, because he is symbolically named rock of this consuming society. The male gaze of Peter dominates and influences her appearance, as she finds herself awarded by her fatal metamorphosis into Peter’s life. As Peter begins to gain control over her in every aspect, her identification with the haunted and consumed reaches the precipitation point. She is made a mere decorative object and is reduced to insignificance. Marian’s presence in the beauty parlor reminds the preparations of animals for sacrifice. Her hair is decorated like a cake something to be carefully iced and ornamented. Marian is being ‘packaged’ out of all recognition shows Atwood at her most satiric because Marian’s head resembles “a mutant hedgehog with a covering of rounded hairy appendages instead of spikes”. (209)

The description of Marian is unquestionably humorous, but under the humor, we detect attack on the absurdities of contemporary fashion. The imagery seems to be drawn from the chemical, industrialized, air-conditioned nightmare of the city life, as the hair dresser becomes a ‘doctor’. Marian leans against an operating table and later returns to the doctor’s chair to have the stitches taken out. Marian is taken back along “the gently-trying live of those who were not yet done” (210). As she
returns from subject to object, consumer to the consumed, Marian loses her capacity to perceive anything.

Situations are created by Atwood in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of the societies, discover that they must reconstruct themselves as braver, self-reliant persons in order to survive. She feels more and more a victim identified in her red dress as the perfect target when Peter’s camera becomes substitute for a gun, the weapon. Further Peter with his camera episode in the novel serves as a turning point to the private life of Marian for it gives a clear picture of Peter, a ‘homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands’ (246). The possession of the camera is viewed synonymous with gobbling identity and autonomy of Marian. The camera focusing in the ‘zero hour’ in the party on her red dress according to Marian is actually reducing her life zeroing into nothing. A subconscious fear that she is a commodity in matrimonial market eats her life. As Brooks Bouson states in The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to character in Margaret Atwood’s The Edible woman: “as a realistic novel, The Edible Woman shows how female passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self” (231). Perhaps Marian experience with Clara and her model of wife and mother terrified Marian the most, but she never resembles Clara under similar
circumstances. She looks upon her as an image of a stable commodity as Peter wants to get a couple of shots of Marian alone. She feels that she should never have worn red, because it has made her a perfect target of Peter’s designs. She perceives Peter as a victimizer, who directs technological assault on women by means of a camera. His aggressive nature is highlighted when he cuts meet so skillfully with no tearing, no ragged ends. And yet it was a violent action. His fiery manipulation and ingestion of food is a revealing metaphor of his implacable consumption of Marian’s identity:

He would focus his eyes on her face, concentrating on her as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through flesh and her skull and into working of her brain. She couldn’t tell what he was searching for when he looked at her like that, it made her uneasy. (149)

The sexual politics at work within the relationship between the protagonist and her lover Peter, clearly signifies how historically, there have been various distributions of illness and different ways in which “one specializes disease” (3). Marian’s efforts to comply with patriarchal norms, is an effect of the male oriented cultural values on her identity, because a woman attempts to abide by patriarchal regulations which lead them to bodily disintegration and disease. Many of Marian’s bodily gestures and
movements show her body as a locus of social control and second as a text of culture on which patriarchal ideological constructions of femininity have been deeply inscribed. As Susan Bordo says in *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*; “these practices of femininity may lead women to utter demoralization, debilitation and death” (91). She sees in him a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands. Her dream about her future married life crashes on the hard rock of bitter realities. She avoided the mirror and Peter’s camera because Peter’s photography is a kind of death or the final trap for her. The plot reaches its climax when Peter arranges the cocktail party on the occasion of their betrothal. The engagement provides Marian an occasion to have all her male and female friends together, who she figures out as her alternatives. This shows how the artificiality in the consumer society manifests itself in Marian, who is found in an elaborate coiffure, a “daring” new red dress, a girdle, heavy make-up and gold earrings. She does all this as directed by Peter. She looks at her own image as reflected in the mirror, which seems to mock in return at her. The cocktail party provides Marian with the perception, that Peter has an ability to devour her in a civilized way and he has a strong movie to negate her individuality and autonomy, thereby expecting her to assume the roles of a traditional wife and mother. J.Brooks Bouson says; in *The Anxiety of Being Influenced*: “*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’. (230)

Marian takes her flight to Duncan as she hopes to find some kind of safety and shelter at the place of him. Instead she becomes a helpless victim of Duncan’s lust. A friend, an English graduate student Duncan is both playful and animal who accompanies Marian on her down-ward journey to the dark side of self, a complex character in his own right who is instrumental not only in fathering Marian’s development, but also in advancing Atwood’s critique of academy. Through his dissatisfaction with consumer society in general, and academy in particular, Duncan a reluctant consumer and conflicted graduate bridges these spheres. He is the perfect character to challenge society’s values as he is resistant to social expectations.

Duncan tells Marian that, he would like to be an amoeba, an amorphous creature lacking boundaries, because “they are immortal and sort of sharp less and flexible, being a person is getting too complicated” (201). When other characters in the novel, believes that identity in the artificial society is achieved by adopting artificial roles, he emerges as an ambiguous character that is simultaneously old and young, death like, vital, experienced and virginal, shrewd and naïve. His combination of youth and deathly sickness turns him to be a sort of ‘aged child’. She
observes him ‘cadaverously thin’ (48). When she meets him first he takes advantage of Marian’s credulous and gullible nature and entices into his bed saying that he is a ‘virgin’ who needs to be introduced to sex. According to him, the unreality of matter is; if we went to bed, god knows you’re unreal enough now, all I can think of is those layers of wooly clothes you wear” (202). He is portrayed as a beast enjoying and discarding its prey. He appears mysteriously in illogical places where Marian least expects him. They both exploit each other; in spite of that Duncan fascinate her throughout the novels.

Finally Duncan takes her to a hotel patronized by prostitutes and their clients later accuses her of “corrupting” him. He sees the red dress as a sign of seduction and Marian as “the scarlet woman herself” (247). Marian may not be the first woman to become the victim of Duncan’s lust and deceit is the very breath of his life and with his meticulous planning, he exploits many women. Duncan, the passionate beast, looks upon Marian as a seductress, and the female equivalent of the male hunter figure. After seducing her, he says “it’s no use, I must be incorruptible, I don’t exactly know what’s wrong. Partly I don’t like not being able to see your face” (253). This damaging statement degrades womanhood and humanity itself.

Marian’s encounter with Duncan shatters her completely. So, she decides to stop eating altogether until she finds a way out to resolve the
crisis and chaos in which she finds herself. Her refusal to eat grows out of her unwillingness to be eaten in turn. Emma Parker rightly says in, *You Are What You Eat* that “her non-eating is physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness” (35). When Marian leaves the place of Duncan, he asks her; “where do you want to go? (28). This query echoes the plight of women who are abused, exploited, oppressed, divorced and abandoned.

Atwood has presented a comedy of resistance to social myths of femininity through the discriminating eyes of Marian. She wants to become a woman who quests for a meaningful human identity. Refusal of food as well as eating of food has a symbolic meaning by combining the feminine and the anorexia aspects of the story and through which the unconsciousness of a young woman, her protest against the conventional female role is understood. According to the Freudian theory of Catharsis, when the neurosis is recognized, it should not only lose its power but also make way for the long shifted element of the authentic self to grow. This pattern of increasingly conscious neurosis and implication of the neurotic action followed by tentative new growth is the true pattern of Atwood’s novels. Marian finds herself reduced to the state of a destitute girl. She is extremely melancholic and feels dejected about her future. Gradually she realizes the futility of starving herself to death. Marian begins to see both
Peter and Duncan in their true colors and recognizes her complicity in her victimization. As Linda Hutcheon says in *The Canadian Post Modern: A study of contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*: “as both a Canadian and a woman, Atwood protests any tendency towards easy passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow… women to deny their complicity in the power structure that may subject them”. (12)

Atwood examines the situation of women vis-à-vis patriarchal structures of power and domination. The protagonist realizes how she has allowed Peter and Duncan to exploit and “eat” her. Thus Marian is made a victim of symbolic cannibalism. She is aware of the necessity to wage a war against those, who exploit women for their advancement and property by way of nude and semi-nude advertisement. Hence, she takes exception to the obscene posters of women to boost up the sales of different products. Marian struggles against the technologically oriented men with cameras, guns and planned career, who direct technological assault on women.

The sense of new personal beginning marks when she decides to bake a woman-shaped cake for Peter-symbolically an egg inside her shell. In the beginning her hunger seems to be hampered, she skips an egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which is a proper example of self-symbolizes her having attained the necessary self-knowledge. Marian’s baking of cake and eating could be said to be a
gesture of defiance, a way of saying no to a system that defines women as commodity and devours then.

It is essential to note that cake has different meanings for all the characters that come into contact with it. For example, it begins, as a test and ends as ‘only cake’ for Marian. Where as it is a symbol of Marian’s madness of her unsuitability as the wife of a rising young lawyer Peter. It is an indication that Marian is rejecting (her) “femininity” (272). To test and expose the true colors of Peter and Duncan, Marian bakes a cake in her own image woman. Atwood herself says, that by doing so Marian is trying to depict “an action, a preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself”. (25)

Marian has become a sculptor, rather than the lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty. By creating the cake, she would like to symbolize her feelings in the wake of her experiences with Peter and Duncan. It reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the gender system of marriage. Marian admits that “that price of this version was testing the other one”. (271)

Marian offers Peter a cake as a substitute for herself, When he comes to demand an explanation for her disappearance from the cocktail party, She remarks, “you’ve been trying to destroy me…you’ve been
trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along” (271). Marian performs an act on, and obviously what she makes is a substitute of herself. It also reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the gender system of marriage. This gesture of Marian is at once complicity and a critique of domestic myth. Howell rightly asserts, that the woman shaped cake is “Marian’s perception of woman’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”. (43)

Peter is embarrassed by the cake and is non-plussed at this unanticipated behavior of Marian. He realized that he can no longer play the game of deceit with her and hence prepares himself to leave the place, as Marian deconstructs Peter’s image of her by making the symbolic literal. This symbolic gesture is suggestive of Marian’s release from what George Woodcock in *The World of Canadian Writing: The Critics and Reflections* opines “that people like Peter and Duncan would be dangerous as they know how to pin woman as a victim. Marian imagines Peter Featured on a poster as one hand: his foot was on the head of a stuffed lion…beneath one arm was strapped a revolver”. (272)

Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves. She urges them to eat their way into the world. Likewise, Marian begins to eat the
cake ending her with drawl from food as soon as Peter leaves the place. This gesture is symbolic of the empowerment of women. As Emma Parker comments: “By demonstrating how consumptions related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way in to the world”. (367)

The cake acts as a kind of magnet attracting all the images, associations and interpretations that come, with in its field. The title image performs an important function within the structure of the comedy by providing a central imagistic form that can affect a resolution. If there is anything that can legitimately be described as the meaning of the woman cake and it is the combination of all the individual meanings which presents an appropriate emblem of the multiplicity of human reaction. Apart from all this, ‘the act signifies the celebration of Marian’s new freedom and rebirth’.

The process of cake making is joyful as she recognizes her own complicity in her former victimization. Marian says, “you look delicious very appetizing and that’s what all happen to you, that is what you get for being food” (270). She was definitely changed from the meal, docile, traditional woman to the bold conscious and rebellious feminist, representative of modern youth rebelling against the system of gender and its oppression and makes us understand how even an economically
independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the ‘second sex’.

Marian is able to destroy “the society’s synthetic stereotype of femininity through the ingenuous device of the cake and free herself to realize her own true identity (53). Marian’s ambivalence about Peter is contracted with her fascination of ambiguous young Duncan when she tells herself that she is comfortable with her decision to marry Peter, her body send’s her clear signal that it is not so comfortable with her decision. Her visualization of herself in Peter’s hands gets stronger when she watches Peter eating “The capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressure. How skillfully he did it no ragged edges and it was a violent action” (150). The office manager Mrs. Bogue, explains that the ‘under wear man’ (a man who is posing as a Seymour-surveys employees, makes obscene phone calls to women) has struck again. Marian contemplates whether this mystery man is a victim of society or Peter in disguise.

There are many symbolic possibilities in a cake-baking episode. The cake baked by Marian, is shaped like a woman, looks like a pink and white doll, and symbolizes the conventional, oppressive image of women in society, Marian turns it in to an object laden with irony, making its fingernails pink and emphasizing all kinds of frilly, feminine details. The
baking is a creative act, representing the awakening of her powers as a kind of artist. When she offers her to Peter for him to eat, she said, “this is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get you a fork, she added, somewhat prosaically. Peter started from the cake, to her face and again she wasn’t smiling” (271). Marian finally overcomes her food phobia, a result of having acted, asserted her, and won new confidence. This act signifies the celebration of Marian’s new freedom and even new “rebirth” (138) making her ‘a whole person’ again.

Critics have taken the image of cake, very seriously, and they have read it in variety of intellectual and psychology interpretations. The first learning process has to take its undignified course, as when she feels obliged to put on the appropriate, hyper feminine clothes and get a matching hairdo for her engagement party. Her dress is short red and sequined, and it comes wrapped in a pink box. The color is the same as that of a cake she bought, and pink symbolizes the stereo typical passive role prescribed for women. As Marian puts it, “they treated head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented”. (208)

From the time The Edible Woman was published, we finds many oppressed voices, struggling to be heard, women are still heavily pursuing equality and questioning their roles in society which had been otherwise accepted for so long “This novel is an obvious manifestation of the inner
turmoil felt by many women, even today it contributes in its way. We find characters like Marian who are forced to be suitable partners, get married, quit her job, and become a mother and home maker like pitiful Clara. But Marian’s drastic step towards the end, reclaiming her identity become whole again seems appreciable. In this sense the cake-doll is the baby that she has given birth to with Duncan as father-guide. Thus she over comes her phobic reactions to pregnancy, gestation, revealed in the repulsive, hallucinatory image of emerging life forms that plague her. Critics like Babara Rigney are more positive in their reading of the closure. She argues that, surely, Marian knows more than she did in the beginning.

The symbolic evidence of the cake is development of Marian’s vision, which asserts, that she cannot be manipulated by people like Peter and Duncan. As Jayne Patterson in *The Taming of Externals: A Linguistic Study of Character Transformation in Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman*, says even Marian “fashioning eating of the cake signifies her recognition and rejection of her former complaint self, culminating in her new ability to respond to her own feeling” (152). Her genteel fiancé Peter had no interest in marriage or even any serious commitment from her. He even despised the thought of the traditional spousal role, and mourned his friends, who one after the other, succumbed to such a repressed life style as if Marian ever truly loved Peter, but rather enjoyed the confront of being
around someone who seemed so in control of his life. The young single “office-virgins” at her work place also regarded her so snagging such a handsome, upcoming bachelor. Though he finally realized his passionate love for Marian and his desire to marry her, he seemingly had no real interest in Marian’s needs or wants unless it affected his own comfortably maintained existence or ambitious goals.

Marian after being battered in body and psyche finally passes in to a state of raised consciousness. She comes to think of herself in the first person singular and acquires a confident voice of her own. As Galyle Green comments in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman: Rebelling Against the System*, that, “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”. (111)

Ainsley, the rebellious room-mate of Marian, appear to represent everything that Marian was not, almost a completely contracting character who believed she was in total control of her own life. Though she despised the role of house wife, she believed women were more significant than men because of their ability to achieve motherhood. She is obsessed to fulfill her universal purpose of becoming a successful single mother. She was arrogant in her understanding of social roles and motivations and believed. She could use her girlish looks to trick Marian’s friend Len, who
had a fetish for corrupting youthful innocence into sleeping with her and ultimately achieve for goal of pregnancy.

Surprisingly in the end, Ainsley allowed society or certain knowledgeable people to convince that her child could never be happy and well adjusted without a proper ‘father figure’, which she finally found at the end in Duncan’s quickly room-mate, Fish Leonard, who had no desire to become a spouse or parent. He dated only with young girls on the brink of womanhood, whom would not expect any commitment from him. Len as a manipulator becomes the manipulated. But when Ainsley tricked him, he was infuriated to the point of madness and appeared to have a complete mental breakdown. In Atwood’s own words: “the novel makes a negative statement about society... The complications are resolved, but not in a way that affirms the social order”. (13-14)

The pathetic house wife, Marian’s long time friend Clara, who represents a house wife who could not take care of herself, let alone mange her home or children without the constant attendance of her dutiful husband Joe. She seemed a child herself, small and frail, and dependent on a man. But the Irony was, as so often seen in real life, she was producing a mass of children like a manufacturing plant though she clearly was the most inept person at caring and raising them. Perhaps Marian’s experience with Clara and her model of wife and mother was terrified Marian. But
she would never resemble Clara under similar circumstances. 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 femininity through the discriminating eyes of Marian, the champion of feminism.

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. Inspite of these learned responses, the main theme of the novel is inadequately focused upon and partially explored.

Atwood postulates a contextual discourse to examine woman and their passivity, incapacitated stand against the male aggression in the patriarchal discourse, which by extension, represents the feeble and powerless status of Canada against devouring domination of America. As T.D. Mac Lulich, in *Atwood’s Adult Fairy Tale: Levi-Strauss, Bettelheim and The Edible Woman*, opines that “at the novel’s end, “is a whole person again” and while her “fate is uncertain she will face it squarely instead of trying to escape”. (128)
The Edible Woman is an indictment of the male authority, hierarchy, competition double standards of morality and discrimination, the governing elements which continue victimize women. 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 result against it. So The Edible Woman is a subversive rather than a confrontational novel, which attacks on social script of gender ideology. As Roberta White Hill says in “Reflections in a convex mirror”, Canadian Women Writing Fiction that also serves as “a prelude to all the novels of Atwood”. (54)

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.