Chapter II

Surviving Consumerism: *The Edible Woman*

The strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the control of men has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievements in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women.

- Simone de Beauvoir ¹

*The Edible Woman* (1969) is the first Canadian novel that anticipates the trends of feminism found in the later women novelists such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Toni Morrison. It is a highly complex piece of realistic fiction. It has been read and interpreted variously by several scholars and critics. Though the novel was written in 1965, at the very beginning of the Women’s Liberation, it appeared only in 1969 at the beginning of the “Second wave” feminism. *The Edible Woman* is Margaret Atwood’s maiden attempt at fiction writing. As the novel predates the Women’s Liberation movement, Atwood rightly describes *The Edible Woman* as a “protofeminist”² novel. It exposes how even an economically
independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the “second sex”. It is an indictment of “male consumption” of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, consumer society. Thus, Atwood is chiefly concerned with “de-constructing” gender politics as her strategy of survival in The Edible Woman as in her other novels.

The title of the novel suggests that the food metaphor plays a dominant part in the evocation of the meaning of the novel. As Rama Devi succinctly puts it,

more than food gets eaten in a capitalist and patriarchal society dominated by conspicuous consumption, rationality and industrialism, where there is no place for the attitudes, desires, beliefs and opinions expressed by the females, the central figures of Margaret Atwood's fiction.  

The Edible Woman is structured like a journey, the journey of a woman called Marian. During her journey in life through her association with several male and female acquaintances, the role models and friends, she realizes and assesses different male strategies of exploitation and the causes of women’s oppression. Her interaction with them brings in its wake a series of experiences, mostly unpleasant. Eventually, she picks up enough courage to turn the tables against men like Peter and Duncan, who are out to exploit and humiliate her. Thus, she refuses to be the “edible woman” trapped in domesticity. She endeavours to attain humanity and a human
identity. It would be instructive to try and explicate the progression of Marian from a meek, docile and non-descript woman to a strong individualistic and active feminist.

Before examining Marian's success, it is quite interesting to hear of what prompted Atwood to write this novel:

I used to be a very good cake decorator and was often asked to reproduce various objects in pastry and icing. Also, in my walks past pastry stores, I always wondered why people make replicas of things – brides and grooms, for instance, of Mickey mice and then ate them. It seems a mysterious thing to do. But for my heroine to make a false image of herself and then consume it was entirely appropriate, given the story – don’t you think?  

Even after the decision was taken to write this novel, Atwood found the elaborations difficult. She talks of her experience thus:

I wrote it on University of British Columbia exam booklets. There was going to be one booklet per chapter [...]. I wrote that novel in four months, I find with horror in looking back [...]. Every day I would ask myself, what is going to happen today to these people? In the place where you plot out your exam questions on the left hand side, I’d make a list, a few notes on what she does today. Then I would write the chapter.
However, Atwood has made a beautiful artistic work in *The Edible Woman*. In her 1979 introduction to the novel, Atwood says that the tone of the book seems more contemporary now than it did in, say, 1971 when it was believed that society could change itself a good deal faster than it seems likely at present.

The central character, Marian, is a young woman just graduated from University and working for a market-research company. Her spinster colleagues are Lucy, Emmie and Millie, nicknamed as “the office virgins”. Marian shares a room with Ainsley - a parody of extreme feminism - and the relationship between them is purely non-obligatory. Clara and Len are Marian’s former classmates. Clara is married to Joe and has three children.

On weekends, Marian occupies herself with Peter Wollander, a lawyer. They are initially happy with neither trying to dominate the other nor believing in marriage. Thus, their relationship is a non-interfering one, based on non-expectations for the future. But as the story progresses we start to question whether or not her life really is acceptable and worthwhile. Possessing a job, an apartment, and a lover, Marian seems to be the fully emancipated modern woman, but, in fact, she’s adrift; she has no tradition, no freedom, and no future. There is no moral or social authority she can accept. There is not even a suitable role model.

Utterly normal both to outward appearances and in her own self-estimation, Marian seems to accept the conditions of her life and to pride
herself in her ability to cope. It is Peter's hunting story that initiates Marian's collapse. "So I whipped out my knife [...] and gave her one hell of a crack [...] there was blood and guts all over the place" (EW 69). When Marian introduces Peter to Len, from their conversation Marian comes to know Peter's hobbies as a hunter and a photographer. When Peter talks of a released rabbit as a hunter's target, she begins to feel herself as his potential prey. She realizes that Peter, the hunter, armed with his camera, the gun substitute, wants to forever fix her in an image of what she should be. She decides to do something about it. Her decision takes the form of a flight.

Peter is perplexed and follows her. At the end of the flight, Peter proposes and Marian accepts, accepting the sanctioned pattern "to marry someone eventually and have children, every one does" (EW 111). But to her surprise, as the marriage approaches, Marian suffers from apprehensions. Marian's visualization of her as a victim in Peter's hands stretches further and further to a point when she watches Peter eating. It strikes her that Peter is treating her in as civilized a way as his handling of the steak on his plate, devouring it with relish and style. Watching him eat reminds her of the picture of the cow on her cook book. The cow stands undisturbed because it doesn't know its fate. So long as Marian does not realize that she is exploited, life is blissful and carefree. But the realization has come. It gives her a rude shock. She reacts to it by refusing to eat.
Marian’s system rebels against non-vegetarian food. She is, however, unable to understand her body’s sudden rebellious reflexes. She goes about asking her friends, and even Peter, whether she is normal. Their affirmative answers do not in any way dispel her fears. Shunning non-vegetarian food and later even salads and vegetables, she exists on canned rice pudding, but to her dismay, her mind recoils at the thought of even this kind of food.

As the employee of a market research company she tries to interview Duncan, “a young boy” who looks “about” fifteen” (EW 48) but who turns out to be a twenty six year old graduate student in English. She begins to go around with him without Peter’s knowledge. It is on the day of the grand party that Peter arranges that Marian realizes the consequences of her marriage with him. Once again she realizes instinctively that she must run for her life. She realizes that she must get out of the party before it is too late, and reach Duncan. He would know what to do.

Marian learns her final and decisive lesson from Duncan. His guidance is honest and trustworthy, but he refuses to offer advice. “Don’t ask me, that’s’ your problem […]. You’ll have to think of your own way out” (EW 293).That’s the lesson she learns from him, to face, tackle and survive. Having learnt the lesson, she decides to counter Peter. In a rebellious mood she sets out to bake a cake in the shape of a pretty, innocent woman. She invites Peter to have the cake and at the right moment she chooses to attack. “You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you
a substitute, something you’ll like much better. That’s what you really wanted all along, isn’t it?” (EW301). Peter is flabbergasted. He is shocked at being cornered, and “apparently he didn't find her silly” (EW 301). As soon as she has broken off her engagement with him, her body reverts to normal responses. “Suddenly she was hungry” (EW 271).

The Edible Woman portrays how the protagonist has come a full “circle”. As a woman, Marian has definitely changed from the meek traditional woman into the bold, conscious woman. The self-discovery helps her to reject her passivity and to refuse to be a victim. Atwood does not adopt an extremist stance as a feminist and hold men alone responsible for the subjugation and inferiorization of women. In Atwood's view, women like Marian, in allowing them to be colonized and exploited, are equally responsible for perpetuating gender-related inequality. As Linda Hutcheon remarks: “As both a Canadian and a woman, she [Atwood] protests any tendency toward easy passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow either the Canadians or the women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them”.7

Marian reveals, what Atwood in Survival calls, “the Rapunzel syndrome”. In Canada, she says, Rapunzel and the tower are the same. The heroine has internalized the values of her culture to such an extent that she has become her own prison. Marian needs to break the dragon cage of self and live her life as a whole human being. Joseph Campbell believes: “If a
person doesn’t listen to the demands of his own spiritual and heart life and insists on a certain programme, he is going to have a schizophrenic crack-up. The person has put himself off-centre”. True to what he says, Marian has stopped listening to herself and consequently, there is a rift between her social and inner selves. Having yielded to the demands of her society, her words often do not reflect her innermost thoughts and feelings.

Though Marian has physically escaped from her hometown, she unconsciously identifies with her town. The following quotation from Wallace Stagner’s *Wolf Willow* applies to her. She could well repeat what Stagner’s protagonist says:

> I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humour I respond to, the prejudices I wear like dishonourable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from [...] sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colours and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb (town).
Marian's unnamed small town inhibits her because she spends a lot of time and energy trying to maintain her social mask. Marian struggles to appear sensible, mature and helpful at all times.

At the beginning of the novel, one finds Marian vaguely accepting the victim's role. She says: “Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they’re a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can’t see anything wrong with that” (EW 12). The imagery used is significant. Only a victim of animals of prey needs camouflage or protective colouration. Ainsley sees Marian as a victim and Marian accepts this image of herself because she sees nothing wrong with that. In the words of Shiela Page:

Her acceptance of the consumer – consumed syndrome as the basis of society seems to stem from her own distance from it, and from a feeling of ineffectuality on her own part [...] Marian is an instinctive victim never naming her hunters, but knowing who and what they are just the same.10

Her feeling of ineffectiveness makes her think that she has no power to confront and overcome the sources of her oppression, whether they are people like Peter or institutions.

Marian works for 'Seymour Surveys', a market research company. It seems a good enough job to her at the time she takes the job, but, as Marian says: “After four months its limits are still vaguely defined” (EW 18). Seymour Surveys, it becomes clear, is projected metaphorically as a trap and
Marian soon realizes that she is literally and figuratively trapped. She remarks: "The Company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors; the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle" (EW 18). Marian's department is all women; above her are all men and below her are the machines. "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys?" (EW 19) is what intrigues Marian.

Through the imagery of the three layers, Atwood posits a metaphorical parallel for a woman's place / space in society. The three layers represent three planes of reality – mind, body and matter. The men are minds; the women are bodies. This hierarchical distribution defines a woman's place as above "matter" but below "mind" and Marian, the woman, is faced with the dilemma of what she is to "become." As she says: "I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person [...] as that would be a step down" (EW 19). Her problem of 'becoming' is both a metaphysical as well as a socio-political problem. At the metaphysical plane, Marian's quest is for a meaningful human identity. At the socio - political level, her desire is to become neither a man nor a machine but a woman with an absolute, rather than a relatively defined identity.

Marian's problem of 'becoming' constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against the restrictive gender role imposed upon a woman in a paternalistic society. The given role models not only inferiorize woman
but, at the same time, distort and problematize her self-perception as well. The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to an in-between thing and a mind-less body. For Atwood, Marian’s predicament and position typify the situation of women in male-dominated society and implicitly enshrines “Atwood’s criticism of patriarchal, hegemonic and gender-specific role-models.”

As a matter of fact, 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 lifetime of unrewarding work. She feels it to be an outrageous infringement of her personality. Moreover, Seymour Surveys proscribes marriage and pregnancy of women in employment. It regards marriage and pregnancy as acts of disloyalty to the authority of the company. Marian experiences an identity crisis in her place as researcher because of the discrimination against women. 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” (EW 50).

Marian seeks a male alternative in Peter, her boy friend, to fulfill her objective. Marian looks upon him as not only “a rescuer from chaos” (EW 96), but also as a provider of stability. She is drawn to him because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking. Peter, a young lawyer, is prosperous, well-dressed, and good-looking. His distinction is his
DECLARATION

I, PAULINE DAS hereby declare that the thesis entitled THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD submitted to the Bharathiar University, Coimbatore in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor Of Philosophy in ENGLISH is a record of original and independent research work done by me during 1999 – 2004 under the supervision and guidance of Dr. DIWAKAR THOMAS, M.A., M.Phil, M.A., M.Ed., M.A., Ph.D., Reader and Head, Department of English, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, and it has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree / Diploma / Associateship / Fellowship or other similar title to any candidate in any University.

Countersigned 28/6/04.
Head of the Department

Dr. DIWAKAR THOMAS
M.A., M.Ed., M.A., Ph.D.,
Head of English
Kongunadu Arts & Science College
COIMBATORE-641029.

Signature of the Candidate
(PAULINE DAS)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the help of a number of people. It is my duty to thank all of them. Firstly, my guide and mentor, Dr. Diwakar Thomas, M.A., M.Phil., M.A., M.Ed., M.A., Ph.D., Reader and Head, Department of English, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore. His encouragement made me embark on an exploration of Canadian Literature and Feminist writings. He inspired me to study Margaret Atwood. His painstaking guidance saw me through every stage of this thesis; his advice in the planning of this study, his insight and remarks while the thesis was in the making, were truly encouraging. Words are inadequate to express my deep sense of gratitude to him.

I am ever grateful to Dr. Muthuraj, Principal, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore for his help and encouragement in the initial stages of this study. My subsequent employers were equally encouraging – Sr. Agnello and Sr. Maria Goretti Martis, former Principals of Providence College, Coonoor and Sr. Anthumary, the present Principal. Their wholehearted support made me pursue my research work after shifting to Coonoor.

My sincere gratitude is due to my colleagues Dr. Jessie Varghese – for her valuable comments – and Mrs. Hannah Hemavathy for proof reading the manuscript. A special word of thanks to my friend Ms. Rose Pereira and
normalcy. Peter is not a monster of male-chauvinism; he is, in Marian's words, “ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads” (EW 62). She thinks that he is an ideal choice for her. Little does she realize that all his characteristics are nothing but affectations intended to win her over.

Apart from Peter, Marian has a few other choices. This prompts Alan Dave to observe that “The Edible Woman is a novel about choices”. To make the kaleidoscopic picture of her life more real, Marian is presented as a perfect foil to her friends. Through them, she learns immensely of women's problems.

Marian’s friends, colleagues and acquaintances illustrate various attitudes towards their own status as women. Marian's spinster colleagues, “the socially conscious Lucy”, “Emmie, the office hypochondriac” and “Millie the girl guide practicality” (EW 22) nicknamed as “the office virgins” occupy the victim’s ‘First Position’: they are unaware of being victims in a patriarchal society. They unquestioningly accept society’s definition of the role of a woman as a wife. Their sole aim in life seems to be about getting a husband. All of them are artificial blondes, since blonde hair is one of the charms required by their society in women. Lucy dresses elegantly and systematically visits all the expensive restaurants in town during lunch break, in the hope of catching a prospective husband.
When Marian announces her engagement to Peter at lunch, their expression changes “from expectation to dismay” and Lucy blurts out: “How on earth did you ever catch him?” They look up with “pathetic too-eager faces poised to snatch at her answer” (EW 124). When they are invited to Peter’s last bachelor party they come eagerly. “They were so excited. They were each expecting a version of Peter to walk miraculously through the door, drop to one knee and propose” (EW 258). They anxiously surround Len Slank because he is “single and available” (EW 260). Lucy even tries to attract Peter, fluttering her silver eyelids and paying him lavish compliments. “You are even handsomer than you sound on the phone,” (EW 263) she says.

Later, when Marian disappears from the party, Lucy accompanies Peter in his search for Marian, displaying concern and sympathy and Peter is properly impressed: “Damn nice of her to take the trouble, it’s nice to know there are ‘some’ considerate women left around” (EW 295). One might perhaps surmise that Lucy or someone like her would succeed in hooking Peter and living to his stereotyped expectations concerning a wife. Undoubtedly, Lucy seems better suited to Peter than Marian for both of them are dedicated to the false gods created by their society.

The brief but vividly etched sketch of the landlady of Marian’s apartment is another example of a woman drifting through life in a state of unawareness blindly accepting and enforcing society’s cliched expectations
from women. She is a self-appointed champion of bourgeois morality and strongly disapproves of a rebel like Ainsley.

Clara and Joe present Marian with another alternative— a different facet altogether of love and marriage. Clara, Marian's former classmate, a natural blonde, had been "everyone's ideal of translucent-perfume-advertisement-femininity" (EW 37) during her high school days. She had fallen in love with Joe Bates in her second year in college and had been swept into matrimony and motherhood in a state of unawareness. She had "greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment," the second with "dismay" and with the third she had "subsided into a grim but "inert fatalism" (EW38).

Repeated pregnancies bring Clara to accept her life as something inevitable and fated. One way of responding to this position is with passivity; another is with anger. Clara chooses the first response in general, though here is humorous exasperation, bordering on anger, when she refers to her children. Her resentment of her position comes out when she calls them "leeches" (EW 32) "barnacles" (EW 38) "all covered with suckers like an octopus" (EW 32). Marriage and multiple motherhood seem to have reduced her to a state of exhaustion and inertia, almost to a vegetable. "She lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like strange vegetable growth" (EW 32). Ainsley is furious about Clara's passivity: "She just lies
there and that man does all the work! She lets herself be treated like a ‘thing’ [...]. She should ‘do’ something; if only as a token gesture” (EW 39).

Joe prepares the meal because Clara is pregnant for the third time. After vainly trying to feed her son, she sits “in a nest of crumpled newspapers with her eyes closed” (EW 36), while Joe does all the chores. Full of ‘embarrassed pity’ for Clara’s helplessness, Marian sees that Clara’s house littered with papers, garbage, dirty diapers and the babies are all beyond Clara’s control. Even Clara’s “own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers” (EW 37).

All the babies have been unplanned. Ainsley, Marian’s room-mate criticizes Clara for not being organized, for not finishing her degree, and for “draining” (EW 38) her husband’s energy. But Marian asks: “Where would Clara be without him?” Ainsley retorts: “She would have to cope by herself” (EW 40). Marian is indignant with Ainsley for not understanding “Clara’s position” (EW 38). Atwood wants the readers to see that Marian is wrong here.

Ainsley wants Clara to at least finish her degree. When Clara’s husband Joe Bates suggests that she should go to night school she just gives him a “funny look” (EW 262), as if that were impossible. She probably considers her position to be unchangeable because she believes it to be inevitable. However, she does not blame her husband; instead, she
considers him very good (EW 143). When Marian tells Clara of her engagement, Clara does not sound at all happy. Sensing a question mark in her own life, she perhaps wonders if Marian will be as happy as she hopes to be.

Joe’s attitude to women is gentle and patronizing. He tends “to think of all unmarried girls as easily ‘victimized’ and needing protection” (EW 37). He sees women as inevitable victims in another sense too. Analysing the condition of university educated women who marry, he sees an opposition between women’s self image or ‘core’ or inner self and her feminine role as a wife and mother.

A woman who has been to the university gets the idea she has a mind, her Professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married her core gets invaded. Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her […] so she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn’t have anything left inside, she’s hollow, she doesn’t know who she is any more; her core has been destroyed (EW 261).

This chilling analysis of the core or the inner self being destroyed by her role is followed by the startling conclusion, that sinking into
unawareness is the best course to be adopted: “Of course it doesn’t help to realize all that. It happens whether you realize it or not” (EW 261). Joe therefore concludes: “may be women shouldn’t be allowed to the university at all; then they wouldn’t always be feeling later on that they’re missed out on the life of the mind” (EW 262).

Though a considerate and kind husband, Joe endorses and thus perpetuates the victim position of women as something inevitable. He too thus contributes to Clara’s position as a victim. He recommends unawareness as the only strategy of survival. Perhaps Clara achieves this in the end, for she seems better – adjusted and capable of coping with life. Her membership in a Burial Society takes on a symbolic meaning, perhaps indicating that she is buried alive in her victim condition, like Meridian’s mother, Mrs. Hill, in Alice Walker’s novel, Meridian (1976) who found herself “being buried alive, walked away from her own life, brick by brick”, with the birth of each successive child.

Atwood achieves correction of Marian’s opinion about Clara by introducing Duncan, who is in the same position as Clara. Although he is an unmarried young man instead of a married young woman, and emaciated instead of being bloated by pregnancy, he is given a setting both literally and symbolically analogous to Clara’s. Duncan is described sitting in the middle of chaos just as Clara is described sitting in hers, and he is shown to be exactly what she is; disorganized, unable to finish his graduate work,
passive, a voracious child dependent on others for both his physical and emotional nourishment. His gloomy apartment is like Clara’s house: “littered with notebooks, books opened face down, ‘rats’ nest of papers” (EW 50, 51), and garbage bags in every corner.

In the midst of this chaos, he crawls into his bed of tangled sheets and sits there motionless, “backed into the corner formed by the two walls” (EW 54). His two solicitous room mates, his surrogate parents, fuss over him, shop for him, offer him beer in bed, and one of them even cooks him huge gourmet meals. He not only devours these but, like Marian, is constantly snacking and sometimes “speaks in the wheedling voice of a small child begging an extra cookie” (EW 55). He exists as the opposite of all that Peter represents.

Just as Clara is more her husband’s child than the mother of his children, Duncan is a child, too, and as his immobility on the bed suggests, he too is stuck in his position, not only in his relationship with his room mates, whom he professes to dislike, but also in his unproductive graduate work. Though his roommates, Fish and Trevor, are almost of the same age as he is, they act as if they are a family with Trevor assuming the role of a mother, Fish, that of a father, to Duncan, their only child. Thus, they cannibalistically feed on each other’s emotions and do not want to live away from each other.
He presents his own situation thus: “They think I'm mad [...]. I think they're mad” (EW 99) - a situation that Marian is being led to recognize as her own. Marian is visually linked to Duncan rather than to Peter. As Jayne Patterson has observed: “[...] the split voice [...] allows her to objectify her experience, to stand back from herself as it were, and it is through this distancing process that she is able to emancipate herself from her initial role as victim”. When Marian nuzzles against Duncan in an effort to get warm, he provides a need, human but not, as yet, sexual, that she cannot find in Peter.

Although Marian and Duncan climb up the spiral staircase to reach the ancient Egyptian section in the Ontario Museum, the journey clearly represents a symbolic visit to the underworld, a descent to the world of the dead. On the way, he shows little interest in her marriage, though he remarks: “[...] it sounds evil to me” (EW 184) before directing the conversation back to the complex and ever-fascinating subject of himself.

Although he sounds egoistic, Duncan, as guide, is indirectly teaching Marian an all-important lesson in self-responsibility: that she must ultimately think for herself and make decisions for herself. “Duncan's point seems to be that life is always deceptive and equivocal, that he is offering valuable practice in interpreting and surviving in a duplicitous world”. Marian asks him to return and talk to Peter, but he refuses; all he can do is to
show her the way back to the upper world. Thus, Duncan is a splendidly complex creation, one of the most original creations in Canadian fiction.

When Marian meets Duncan at the laundromat, she symbolically meets her 'other' self. Atwood reinforces the intended symbolism by making Duncan actually emphasize the similarity between him and Marian. "You look sort of like me in that" (EW 144), Duncan tells Marian who is wearing his gown and thereby quite clearly precipitates his function as Marian's alter ego. What differentiates the two, however, is that whereas Duncan only self-consciously plays the role of a victim and uses this pretended posture to exploit the others, Marian is actually a victim, exploited by others. Nonetheless, "Marian is able to see herself in Duncan's affected pose as a victim". She is able to see herself as he is and not as seen by others. This confrontation with the 'other' self sets in motion the process of self-examination and re-appraisal of herself in relation to others and Marian eventually acquires a new knowledge about herself.

In Ainsley, we have a parody of extreme feminism. At one extreme, we have the Victorian narrow rectitude of the lady down below; at the other, there is Ainsley, with her liberated views derived from, some dubious anthropology courses at her college. Ainsley is against marriage because marriage, according to her, kills the identity of the woman. But she wants to give birth to a child, to fulfill her deepest femininity, as she puts it. All she
wants is a man with a decent heredity, who would father her child and then leave her. She succeeds in trapping Len, Marian’s former classmate.

Ainsley Tewkes repudiates the victim role assigned to woman, and her rejection of marriage as an exploitative relationship probably stems from this. But she wants to give birth to a child, to fulfill her “deepest femininity,” (EW 42) as she puts it. But she believes that “the thing that ruined families these days is the husband” (EW 42) and decides to dispense with one. All she wants is a man with a decent heredity, who would father her child and then leave her “and not make a fuss about marrying” (EW 44) her. Marian knows that Ainsley is wrong but finds it difficult to argue with “some one who sounded so rational” (EW 43).

Ainsley’s strategy is thus to turn the tables on man and use and exploit him to fulfill her own need to become a mother. In her relationship with Len Slank, the traditional male-female role assumptions as victor – victim and hunter – hunted are reversed. The images used to describe her in Len’s apartment make this role reversal clear. She is compared to a “pitcher-plant waiting for some insect to be attracted, drowned and digested” (EW 81). Putting on a school-girlish innocence, Ainsley makes Len believe that he is the hunter stalking the prey, while the truth is different. Later, when Len hears how he had been used by Ainsley he is filled with shock and anger and rails at all women as “clawed, scaly predators” (EW 238).
Atwood, through Ainsley, brings out the challenge to convention that manifests itself within the complex art of living.

A psychologist’s lecture on the importance of a strong father image for the normal healthy upbringing of a child radically changes Ainsley’s view of marriage. She is now determined to get a husband. When Len refuses, Ainsley is not unduly upset. Her response is: “I guess that’s that” (EW 238). “I’ll simply have to get another one, that’s all” (EW 239). For her, a husband is just a replaceable spare part, whose function is to provide a Father image to her child.

Finally, she manages to get Duncan’s friend, Fisher Symthe, to marry her. Fisher, who is a pro-birth, fertility worshipper, complies readily. Ainsley thus repudiates the victim role in the politics of gender, by assuming the power-wielding victor / dominator role. She does not come out of the victor-victim ambit but merely reverses the roles. She ultimately accepts the traditional role of a wife and mother. Thus, she becomes edible in the marriage market against which she has professed earlier.

Len Slank also lacks a core and is as much of a victim as he is a predator. Len is “a self-consciously lecherous skirt-chaser” (EW 87) who delights in “corrupting” young virgins under seventeen and running away from them before they start chasing him. Beaten by Ainsley at his own “hit and run” (EW 66) game, his play-boy image crumbles and he sounds very much like an injured maiden when he accusingly tells Ainsley: “The only
thing you wanted from me was my body” (EW 159). What Len does not realize is that all his ex-girlfriends could well accuse him of the same thing. Len’s agony intensifies when Ainsley tries to rope him into marriage and he reveals himself to be an emotionally insecure person who, unable to handle a crisis, regresses into infancy.

While Marian struggles to overcome her psychic alienation and move towards spiritual survival, these minor characters are depicted either as existing in their alienated states or at various stages in their personal quests. As Ainsley, Clara, Lucy, Emmie and Millie fail to offer appropriate alternatives to Marian’s identity crisis, she seeks an alternative in Peter to fulfill her objective. Peter is a law graduate who is well known for his purchasable hobbies. Peter needs a girl to complement his collection of knives, rifles, pistols and cameras. His recently married friend is significantly named 'Trigger'. Peter likes Marian as she never demands anything from him. He sees her as a girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life. However, Peter’s hobbies unnerve Marian. Peter hunts wild animals, but Marian begins to feel herself as the potential prey. She recognizes herself as the victim. She “let go of Peter's arm and began to run” (EW 71). The hunting imagery gives way to that of a military operation.

At the end of the flight when she apologizes, he is appeased by her penitence and proposes marriage to her. Just then, there is a flash of lightning and she sees herself: “small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (EW
89). This image conveys that henceforth she will strive to be the mirror reflection of the ideal that Peter has imagined. Peter, who at first is found lamenting over the marriage of the last of his bachelor friends, later proposes to Marian just because it suits him and his values, which are well synchronized with those of the plastic society he serves. He rationalizes his sudden surrender to marriage by saying:

A fellow can't keep running around indefinitely. It'll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife, people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're a queer or something [...] And there is one thing about you, Marian; I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatter brained but you're such a sensible girl. You may not have known this but I've always thought that's the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife (EW 96-97).

Queerness is not a quality Peter associates with himself. What Peter actually means by 'sensible' is 'conventional'. Believing implicitly in male superiority, he feels threatened by outspoken women like Ainsley who dare to reveal the presence of a mind.

He likes Marian for her passivity and her lack of strong conventions and feels she is not the kind of girl who would try to “take over his life” (EW 61). “Peter’s manner of choosing a life partner on the basis of her
outer or social self is not very different from that of choosing something like a packet of noodles at the supermarket based on the attractiveness of its package".\textsuperscript{17} Having selected her with care, he then thinks he owns her and displays her with pride to his successful friends.

Rapidly, Peter assumes a proprietorial air over her: “He sounded as though he’s just bought a shiny car, I gave him a tender chrome-plated smile” (\textit{EW} 96). Peter imposes on her his image of a perfect woman, as when he tells her that he chose her because she was “sensible”, a quality he wanted in his wife. “I didn’t feel very sensible, I lowered my eyes modestly” (\textit{EW} 97), says Marian.

Her loss of autonomy comes as a shock even to her. When Peter asks: “When do you want to get married?” to her great astonishment, she heard “a soft flannelly voice,” barely recognizable as her own, saying: “I’d rather have you decide that, I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you” (\textit{EW} 98). The very prospect of marriage makes her take on the role of the subservient wife. Her inner self is subordinated to her role. Marrying Peter, thus, implies having someone who would always make decisions for her.

Marian’s loss of individuality is indicated by the silencing of the inner voice of ironic commentary. Instead of asserting herself, she begins to quote Peter as an infallible authority even to herself, in private and “thus she becomes Her Master’s Voice”.\textsuperscript{18} Marian also sees marriage as a matter of convenience and inevitability, especially after the trauma she undergoes
when she hears about the pension plan in her office. "Given her insights, her constant paranoia, her inner doubts and defensiveness, it is not surprising that she considers marriage as a means of total concealment". It is when she is about to take this extreme step that her body intervenes and confronts her with the reality of the situation. It makes her realize that marriage to Peter means more than protection, that it means death – a form of socially acceptable suicide. The rebellion is carried on through the ‘body language’ in which the body makes it impossible for Marian to eat one thing after the other and it is in this sense that the significance of the food metaphor can be felt.

The first symptom of anorexia (loss of appetite) is seen in Marian immediately after she agrees to the marriage proposal made by Peter. When she goes to a restaurant along with her colleagues who are all spinsters, 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" (EW114). However, she is aware that one has to eat to live. She chooses to eat very rarely and stops eating non-vegetarian food. This seems to be a form of a disapproval and protest against all that Peter represents.

In course of time, Marian understands the true character of Peter as a manipulator and gets insights into the truth of her relationship with him. She realizes that she has let herself be sold as some kind of a dispensable commodity. Marian’s rejection of food points out, paradoxically enough,
that in order to survive one must starve, and that by starving one can
survive. Her non eating thus turns into a metaphor of sustenance.

As the date of her engagement approaches, Marian feels nervous and
disturbed. She realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe and
secure in the event of her marriage with Peter. She begins to look at him as a
destroyer of her individuality and identity. She becomes more and more
aware of her loss of free will and choice. She finds herself lost and she
wants to know what she is becoming and what direction she is going to take.

The events in Marian’s life reach a climax when Peter arranges the
Cocktail party on the occasion of their betrothal. The artificiality in the
consumer society manifests itself in Marian who is dressed up in red with a
heavy make-up and gold earrings, as directed by Peter.

She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They
were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or
nylon or leather or varnish covering, but [...] even they looked
fake, like soft, pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless,
flexible (EW 229).

Marian realizes that a woman’s primary market value in the marriage
depends upon the artificiality of her fascinating image. She finds herself
dwarfed by her fatal metamorphosis into Peter’s wife. She becomes
progressively divided and objectified in the marriage market. As she is made
a mere decorative object, she is reduced to insignificance. Marian is now
defined as ‘other’ and becomes an object. As she turns from subject into object, from consumer into the consumed, Marian loses her capacity to perceive anything.

Two events bring Marian’s subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role to the conscious level. One is Duncan’s brutally frank question: “You didn’t tell me it was a masquerade, who the hell are you supposed to be?” (EW 265) This makes Marian realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. The other is Peter’s attempt to photograph her in that guise. She finds this a threat to her real self, a delimitation and a dehumanization of herself into an image.

Peter is a camera enthusiast. His camera is his substitute for his gun, the weapon. He gives up all his thoughts of loving her. He looks upon her as an image of saleable commodity. He wants to get a couple of shots of Marian alone in order to show her ‘red’ on a movie slide in the ‘zero hour’ of the party. He evokes uneasy feelings in Marian for she feels as though she has become a lifeless statue meant for commercial display.

She perceives Peter as a victimizer who carries on technological assault on women by means of a camera. She sees him a “homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands” (EW 246). The image of Peter as a hunter upsets Marian emotionally. A short while before his party, he looks at his clothes neatly lined up in his cupboard and feels she dislikes them for asserting an “invisible silent authority” (EW 229). Moreover, she does not
want to touch them, for, aware of his multiple selves, she fears his clothes will be warm and that each costume will contain a fragment of Peter.

The climactic section of the novel also provides Marian an occasion to bring together all her male and female friends who figure as her alternatives. Marian finds that Peter, Len, Emmy, Lucy, Millie, Clara and Joe are all both victims and predators swamped by their social system in varying degrees. She decides to run away from them all, metaphorically by rejecting all the alternatives they represent. She feels the need for fresh air, the freedom to grow and develop her personality. She refuses to be his 'edible woman'. She upsets Peter's designs to control and dominate her by running away from her engagement. It shows her feminine valour and her potential for wholeness.

Peter, "the symbolically named rock of this consuming society" is the most tragically self-alienated character in the novel. Unaware of his true or inner self, he is a random conglomeration of what T.S. Eliot calls "a heap of broken images" derived from the technological, consumer society in which he lives. "Peter-the-Presentable" is "ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads" (EW 61).

Marian tells us that he is in his articling year as a lawyer and that though his is a small firm, "he's rising in it like a balloon" (EW 57). The image of the balloon reinforces our impression of Peter as made up of surfaces and totally without a core. Though the building in which he lives is
still under construction, his apartment is largely finished and is used as a model for prospective buyers. Like his apartment, Peter struggles to be a model of modern, successful man.

It is because of the “anxiety of being influenced” that Marian takes a flight to Duncan. She believes “he would know what to do” (EW 244). When she finds Duncan at the laundromat, he greets her as “the Scarlet Woman herself” (EW 247). Whereas Marian has run to him for guidance and protection, as soon as they meet, the roles are reversed. She begins to look suspiciously like a seducer who has tracked down her prey. “The pattern of production and consumption, consumer and consumed, is continually working both ways”.23

When Marian observes that she must now decide what she is going to do, his reply is honest and trustworthy in its refusal to offer advice that cannot properly be given. Marian asks him to return and talk to Peter, but he refuses; all he can do is to show her the way back to the upper world. Duncan’s point seems to be that life is always deceptive and equivocal, that he is offering valuable practice in interpreting and surviving in a duplicitous world.

D.J. Dooley makes the following observations about Duncan:

This man is anything but ordinary […]. His response to the world of commerce […] is gamesmanship […]. The difference between him and most other people is that he is quite aware
that he is playing a role, whereas they are falling into roles without knowing it. Just as he is capable of looking at his own situation objectively, he is capable of analyzing his society. He prefers a literal waste land to the waste land of the modern commercial world [...]. In other words, his response is to being as it is defined in the modern mercantile world – fitting into the cycle of production and consumption, making one kind of garbage into another – is to come as close as possible to not-being.24

Duncan may be an irritatingly paradoxical character, but he is advocating the paradoxes of duplicity as a possible way of coping with the world. W.J.Keith applies to Duncan a remark used of one of the world’s most profound but also enigmatic mentors: “He saved others; himself he cannot save” Matt.27:42).25

It is from the experiences of her friends and her own evaluation that Marian gradually but painfully learns that a woman in contemporary society is reduced to a commodity meant only for male consumption. Hence, she takes exception to the obscene posters of women to boost up the sales of different products. She is aware of the necessity to wage a war against those who exploit women for their advancement and prosperity by way of nude and semi-nude advertisements. She struggles against technologically oriented men with cameras, guns and planned careers who direct
technological assaults on women. She opts for a long battle “in a spirit
approaching gay rebellion” (EW 267) against exploitation and oppression of
women.

Marian rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. She bakes the
cake-woman to test and expose the true colour of Peter. It is a test “simple
and direct as litmus paper” (EW 267). The immobility imposed by the
victim role has slowly drained her and she has been approaching stasis. The
process of creation (cake-making) is joyful, though the product makes her
pensive, as she recognizes her own complicity in her former victimization.

Addressing the Cake Woman, who is an image of her former self, Marian in
fact addresses herself: “You look delicious. Very appetizing. And that’s
what will happen to you; That’s what you’ll get for being food” (EW 300).

If a woman makes herself consumable, she will be consumed. She
understands that her curse has been her own meekness.

She bakes the cake-woman in her own image, the surrogate of her
own artificial self she presented at the cocktail party. In an interview with
Gibson, Atwood comments: “Marian performs 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”. 26 She has become a
sculptor rather than be a lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty. By
creating the cake, she would like to symbolize her feelings. Thus,
“symbolically the cake-woman represents woman as an object for male
consumption. It also reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the
gender system of marriage.”

When Peter comes, in lieu of an explanation, she offers the cake to
him with the words: “You've been trying to destroy me, haven’t you?
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,
isn't it?”(EW 301). When he refuses to eat the cake - woman, and is horrified
at seeing it, it is clear that he does not understand Marian. But what
triumps is Marian's sense of self - determination, her recognition that she
was being consumed by Peter and her desire to remain intact as a person.
Once Peter leaves her apartment and her life, her body returns to normal
metabolism and she eats the cake herself. With her new consciousness, she
has a new perspective. She is no longer a status symbol for Peter, once the
transference of victim - identity she has projected out of food disappears.

Once Marian externalises society's gender-role expectations from her,
she is set free from the immobility of the role and begins to eat again. It is
not only that. She is also set free from the need to be needed by Duncan.
Self-consciously recovering her individuality, she says: "Now that I was
thinking of myself in the first person singular again, I found my own
situation much more interesting than his” (EW 308). With this, she reverts
to the first person narration.
The Edible Woman asks the question "What is a woman in a consumer society?" The answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male, is partially denied by the novel's ending; Marian, its ironically named heroine, decides against marrying. The circular plot that leads her into an engagement with Peter, a conventional young lawyer, leads her out of it again. The novel does not conclude with the traditional comedy ending of a wedding cake. The consumption of the symbolic cake - woman is the novel's climax. It defines Marian's mis-conceptions about her female identity by contrasting them to cultural assumptions about male identity. As Sharon Rose Wilson puts it: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image [...] Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food".  

Written mainly in the past tense, the novel is divided into three parts; Part I and the very short part III are narrated in the first person by Marian, and part II is narrated in the third person. One partial reason for this switch in point of view is Marian's engagement near the end of Part I. Throughout Part I, she is hungry and eating. In Part II, she begins to identify herself with the objects she has previously ingested and consumed. The last chapter in Part I switches to the present tense, and begins: "So here I am" (EW 101). "Here" is motionless on the bed, where Marian remains through the entire chapter. Thus Part I leads up to a point where Marian begins to crumble and eventually has to try and break free. It is a false climax that has led Marian
into a seeming acceptance of her role as fiancée. But it is at this point that the work jarringly switches to a third person narrative that allows the reader to hover ominously above Marian's life and her actions until she finally breaks free for real.

The first chapter in Part II returns to the past tense but begins in the third-person point of view: "Marian was sitting listlessly at her desk" (EW 107). The significant similarity between the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II is her continued motionlessness. But Part III begins with bustle: "I was cleaning up the apartment" (EW 277). These contrasts between apathy and energy are paralleled by another set of somatic changes. In the first chapter of Part II, Marian begins to lose her hearty appetite; near the end of Part II, after she and Duncan have become lovers, her anorexia hits bottom; she can eat nothing. But in Part III, Marian’s appetite is restored when she bakes the cake woman. Marian ends with no lover, no job, no room mate, but with a remarkably healthy appetite.

Thus, The Edible Woman, a convincing narrative of personal growth, 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. Marian, after being battered in body and psyche, finally passes into a state of raised consciousness. She comes to think of herself in the first person singular and acquires a confident voice of her own. The Edible Woman begs its readers to revaluate their own roles in society, and as Hutcheon
describes, the novel warns us about the dangers of “accepting the victim role in a consumer society”. 29

Marian Mac Alpin is a sensitive, self-reflective and exquisitely articulate female. She has quite an artful language to voice forth the changes that take place in her attitudes and feelings, as she journeys through her various associations with several male and female friends, and arrives at an understanding of what it means to be a woman. Though the narrative language abounds in various symbols and metaphors, it is the food metaphor which is the chief vehicle that serves to put forward the feminist tendencies of the heroine and helps her protest against the dehumanizing tendencies of her society and save herself by rejecting her inauthentic self.

The Edible Woman is clearly a satire on consumerism and packaging, to which we all comply in varying degrees. Atwood attacks consumerism through the image of literal consuming, a motif that runs through the book from the epigraph which quotes, "The Joys of Cooking" to the half-symbolic baking of the woman-cake, from getting breakfast on the opening page to the final consumption of the cake on the last. Marian is both consumer (she must eat to live) and consumed (she sees Peter as wanting to devour and absorb her).

Intellectually, the ending is a necessary compromise; Marian establishes a reasonable equilibrium. From being someone uncritically accepting her society's mores, she becomes in the course of her life
excessively defiant of them - the politics being physical and psychological as well as instinctive and basic. At the end, she finds some kind of balance between the consumer and the consumed, accepts the realities of modern living while clearly recognizing their frequent absurdities.

Marian MacAlpin, Atwood’s ‘abnormally normal’ heroine struggles to survive spiritually in her seemingly sane but actually insane society. George Jonas says:

In organic life we tend to feed off each other. Natural as this condition maybe, it has some curious emotional implications. We try to surround it with rituals and generally eat things looking as much as possible the other way. We speak of ‘meat’ rather than ‘flesh’ and use further linguistic refinements to turn gamboling calves and whimpering piglets into veal and pork on our table. And after we have perpetuated our existence at the cost of a once-living thing that has itself known the pleasure of eating, we embark on the less obvious but equally unpleasant process of feeding our emotions chunks of the emotions of others, devouring whole egos at times to satisfy our own hunger.30

Atwood forces us to become aware of the dark, awkward, rejected and repressed ‘shadow’ side of ourselves by insisting that all of us get our ‘emotional vitamins’ (EW 185) from feeding on others.
Like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Erich Fromm’s psychoanalytical and sociological work *The Sane Society*, *The Edible Woman* too is a critique of what Fromm calls “the pathology of normalcy”\(^{31}\) in contemporary western society. Most of the characters in the novel, including Marian, reveal a passionate desire to appear ‘normal’ and ‘well-adjusted’. Little do they realize that their society itself is sick. It was Freud who first spoke of social or collective neurosis in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*. According to him, social neurosis is a lot more difficult to remedy than individual neurosis for

\[
\text{...in the neurosis of an individual we can use as a starting point the contrast presented to us between the patient and his environment which we assume to be ‘normal’}. \text{ No such background as this would be available for any society similarly affected; it would have to be supplied in some other way.}^{32}
\]

What is interesting is that collective neurosis seems typical of the so-called civilized communities indicating that, unlike traditional or tribal societies, such communities fail to satisfy certain innate needs of human nature. The spiritual side of the psyche is starved by a life devoted solely to the pursuit of material prosperity. This defect is, however, cunningly masked as a virtue.

Consumer ethics idolizes the materially prosperous individual and regards the spiritually inclined person with disdain. To add to it, a wide
variety of ‘desirable’ images are created for the appetite of consumers, most of whom are made to forget that happiness lies within themselves rather than in the external world. However, Atwood does not show everyone being inevitably swamped by the social system. In its own way, the novel celebrates the spirit of those who dare, like Marian, to resist the consumer society and survive spiritually.