Chapter II

*The Edible Woman*

"In bringing together ecology and feminism, ecofeminists see women and nature as subject to the destructive socio-economic and technological systems of modern male-dominated society. Sex/gender is put at the heart of this analysis, but this is not to exclude other cross-cutting dimensions of oppression and exploitation."

—Mary Mellor

With her first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), Margaret Atwood, questions the gender prescribed roles in the patriarchal capitalistic Western society of her times. As Mary Mellor believes, "women's lives are caught in a network of interconnected relationships...as a material reality," (174) it is therefore, crucial to identify the power relationship between men and women with reference to their 'embodiedness and embeddedness'. For Mellor, "ecofeminist concern with embodiment is not limited to questions of sexual difference," in fact, "embodiment involves everything that we have to do as humans to express our biological being-ness; sex, procreation, feeding, excreting, dying" (ibid). What is important then is to incorporate these activities into socio-economic conditions to understand the embedded dualistic, patriarchal, capitalist, consuming structure of society. This is what Margaret Atwood does. She depicts characters living the socio-economic conditions of their times, confronting the embedded dualistic power structures in their day to day lives.

In *Negotiating with the Dead—A WRITER ON WRITING*, Atwood states the aim of a writer: "record the world as it is...To produce order out of chaos. To delight and instruct...to hold a mirror up to the reader...to paint a portrait of society and its ills" (xx-xii). This also holds true for her as a writer as, "The fictional world represented in Marjoe Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is hardly unfamiliar to
readers” for, “in it a great number of normative elements determining their own everyday lives” are clearly evident (Heidenreich 23). Also, “The process undergone by Marian is recognized and formulated because the problematic elements overlap to a great extent with those of the reader’s real world” (ibid). In Margaret Atwood Conversations, Atwood tells Kaminski that when she wrote The Edible Woman in 1965 and published it in 1969, “there wasn't a feminist movement. There had been, but there wasn't at that time, and it didn't really get going till 68, or 69 in the States and in Canada later than that” (27). She adds that, “I did not consider it a feminist novel because that terminology was not in use . . . I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism . . . simply social reporting . . . what things were like in 1965” (ibid). The novel depicts society in total reality, depicting the dual power structures that Marian, the heroine of the novel, confronts when she neglects the social conventions and decides to live on her own terms.

Roberta White espouses that, "the delightful satire [in] The Edible Woman serves as a prelude to all the novels” (54). Atwood's aim in the novel, “is not merely to expose women's complicity in the processes that lead to her colonization and victimization. She intends, rather, to explore the possibilities of combating patriarchal structures of power and domination that disallow women's equal claims as an individual in society” (Salat 97). With her first published novel, then, Atwood tunes in with the ecofeminist concern, of dismantling the patriarchal structures of power and domination that further leads to domination and exploitation of woman as a consumable object and subject.

Possessing a job, an apartment, and a lover, Marian McAlpin seems to be a fully emancipated modern woman at the beginning of the novel. Her gradual journey, though ‘unconscious acknowledgment’ at first, leads her on to discover the difficulties
for the women of the 1960s, of living within conventional norms. Atwood, in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates, states that when she wrote *The Edible Woman*, "It was still very much the model pattern, in Canada . . . to take a crummy job and then marry to get away from it. I was writing about an object of consumption in a consumer society. Appropriately, she works for a market research company. Even in 1969, when the book was finally published, some critics saw the view as essentially 'young' or 'neurotic'. I would mature, they felt, and things (i.e., marrying and kids) would fall into place" (75).

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood writes from the perspective of a woman who is isolated by the presence of patriarchy and experiences the emotional trauma of an identity crisis. She is caught in the same trap of essentialism that all the major ecofeminists fight against, as masculine consciousness uses it as a potent tool to maintain the false masculine hegemony: the two-level hierarchies separating the patriarch at the top with all else, or the Other beneath him. Marian refuses to comply with the established patriarchal standards and rejects the essentializing roles prescribed by the society.

Ecofeminists, like Karen Warren, declare that ecofeminism is a first step toward the eradication of dualistic structures, which focuses on identification of the root cause of the problem that further leads to dismantle the web of dualism. Atwood, likewise opines that, "the women’s movement hasn't invented new things or new areas of conflict; those were always there" (Interview, Kaminski 32). In fact, "it has made it possible for people to acknowledge that they are there, and this makes it therefore easier for them to be resolved" (ibid). She identified the problem of Canada in the mid-1960s and highlighted the issues using series of effective images in the novel. Recalling the times, she observes that at Harvard, "women weren't allowed into
the Lamont Library, where all the modern poetry and records were kept" also, "the female students would serve tea and cookies [as]... social convention" and, "Harvard ... didn't hire women to teach in it, so the male professors were all very nice. ... ladies were no threat" (qtd. in Cooke 93). The choice of embracing a career as a writer was very unconventional but Atwood was determined to do it and, "she concluded that her writing would ... take precedence over any relationship with men" (Ingersoll xiii). She doesn't label herself with particular movements as that limits one's scope, "making a choice of one's own and living up to it is the real freedom" states Atwood in conversation with Jim Davidson (96). However, Atwood not only deals with the ecofeminist premises in her writing but she lives it and so her works provide an unusually rich perspective to an ecofeminist literary study. Further, as Cooke observes: "although Atwood was not actively voicing her political concerns, she was certainly looking very closely at what was happening around her and tuning it to its political significance" (116). As a committed writer later she was laying bare the politics of gender of her times. The Edible Woman is a direct result of this engagement.

Context is very important for ecofeminists to fight against the particular problem embedded in the social and political conditions. So also for Atwood the fight begins at the societal level. She asserts in a discussion with Linda Sandler that, "I try to select characters who are outgrowths of their society. ... it's largely realism. The market research scenes in The Edible Woman are an example of realism" (54-5). Atwood soon after graduation, "was hired by Canadian Facts Marketing, a firm that designed and carried out consumer surveys," her job like Marian's, "was breaking down 'psychologies' into simpler units that could be understood by somebody not a professional in that field" (Cooke 107). Also in 1963, she had a firsthand experience
As early ecofeminists did, Atwood too starts with the identification of women as consumed and objectified by patriarchy, relegating them to the sub-human and the 'natural' or a resource like nature for their exploitation in order to foreground masculine accomplishments. Marian voices Atwood's early concerns by going through a set of experiences that contradicts her initial submission to the culturally prescribed roles. Atwood reveals in talks with Kaminski that consumerism is the central 'metaphor in the novel' the: “central image in The Edible Woman is the cake in the shape of a woman. . . . they become interchangeable, because Marian does come to view herself as a kind of cake” (28). Atwood further adds that the image of the cake, “radiates out into the rest of the novel” (ibid). The problem with the heroine is that, "she comes to identify with the objects the society is consuming, especially food . . . she's making that identification and seeing herself as the consumed rather than the consumer" (ibid). Marian being a member of the othered group identifies with the consumed or the subdued Others. She feels affinity with the consumed as do the ecofeminists, though she exaggerates the literal identification with food. W. J. Keith asserts that, "The Edible Woman is clearly a satire on consumerism and packaging, to which we all in varying degrees comply” (179). It is not just as the main theme that consumerism is important but, “it is Atwood’s treatment of [the] theme that matters” (ibid). Consumerism is attacked through the image of literal consuming in the novel: from the epigraph quotes of cooking from 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. The image of packing is at the core that provides subtlety and depth to the treatment of the theme:
“Atwood, we might say, packages her message about the state of contemporary society in a deceptively humorous but ultimately effective guise . . . the novel is conventional while at the same time playing with convention, parodying conventional expectations” (ibid).

Marian McAlpin is a researcher working for Seymour Surveys—a highly stratified, three-tiered, hierarchical market research organization where all responsible and respectable positions are held by men. She is seemingly ordinary and so wants to have a well-settled life, inheriting her parent’s assumption, ”that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does” (125). Marian's parents exhibit the social conventions of the times as they, “worried she would turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt or a dope addict or a female executive or . . . would undergo some shocking physical transformation, like developing muscles and a deep voice” (45). Marriage is considered essential for a respectable and a fulfilling life and submitting to the conventions, Marian gets engaged to Peter who is ‘nicely packed’ and represents a human commercial product, or rather the advertising image of a product, whose social and personal motivations are indistinguishable from his commercial success-oriented ones. It is only after the engagement that her entrapment by the conventions is acknowledged, first unconsciously and then mindfully. Strange things start happening to her; she can't eat, ‘first meat, then eggs, vegetables, cake, pumpkin, seeds, everything’. She finds herself gradually moving from being a consumer to feeling consumed. Duncan, a graduate student studying literature plays an important role in helping Marian to resolve her eating disorder and to regain the power to reject the roles prescribed by cultural femininity of the times.

Marian's 'inner nature' and the journey, the process wherein she is transformed from a submissive conventional person to an illumined, assertive
individual, who denies being consumed by the patriarchal roles laid by the cultural conventions is very important. Atwood's process of transformation of the heroine reflects crucial issues held by ecofeminists—giving importance to the subconscious, revolting against patriarchal domination, identifying with the animals, the dominated or the unjustified sufferers, denying being consumed by the patriarchal commercial social system and adopting a simple, less complex way of sustaining the self.

Food imagery persists throughout the novel. Emma Parker states, “The images of women as food always convey a negative condition—unhappy, unwell, uncomfortable or dead. Through such imagery Atwood demonstrates the debilitating effect this metaphor has on women’s lives” (129). Metaphorically food becomes the, “subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role of being consumed and assimilated by Peter” (Gomez 82). Peter represents the perfect model of patriarchal, commercial, dominating male. The institutions described in the novel also represent the patriarchal control of the social system. Seymour Surveys is projected metaphorically as a trap and Marian soon realizes that she is literally and figuratively ensnared. She describes the office in terms of an edible item that is attractive, tempting, comforting in large everyday doses, is unhealthy, addictive, and debilitating. The hierarchy of the company is also described in food imagery as, “layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors. The upper crust, the lowers crusts, and our departmental the gooey layer in the middle” (15). The ‘gooey layer’ reinforces the image of the trap that sucks women such as Marian in. Marian further describes the hierarchical structure of her office, “on the floor above are the executives and the psychologists—referred to as the men upstairs since they are all men—who arrange things with the clients . . . our department is the link between the two” (ibid). Commenting on her job status she states, “I’m supposed to spend my time revising the questionnaires” which involves
converting, “convoluted and overly-subtle prose of the psychologist . . . into simple questions which can be understood by the people who ask them as well as . . . who answer them” (14). She and her colleagues are supposed to take care of the human element, the interviewers themselves” (15). Women serve as links between the mechanical, valued male upstairs and the oppressed lower layer Others. This echoes the key point of materialist ecofeminism that questions the mediation role that are prescribed for women. Marian also comments on the status of housewives working for a market research company. They are, “paid by the piece. They don’t make much, but they like to get out of the house” (15). Their work is not valued as equal with male counterparts and they are not taken seriously. Here, Atwood again resonates the materialist ecofeminist view that male time is measured time and they are paid for the services rendered whereas female time is not measured in terms of due value and their services are taken for granted.

Marian is career conscious and worries about her future job prospects. Like liberal feminists, initially, she aims to raise her status and make a respectable place for herself. However, there is a limit to this climb as the glass ceiling circumscribes women and she tellingly realizes that, “I couldn’t become one of the men upstairs” (16). The maximum she could hope was to turn into Mrs. Bogue, the head of the Department, or her assistant of whom she says, “I wasn’t sure I would like it anyway” (ibid). Mrs Bogue represents the woman who has adapted to the conventional roles of the hierarchical mentality to provide her best services to the company. She disregards everything that comes in the way of her work, even pregnancy is considered, “as an act of disloyalty to the company” (21).

Through the image of the three layers, Atwood posts a metaphoric parallel of woman’s place/space in society. M. F. Salat opines: “the three layers represent three
planes of reality: mind, body and matter. The men are minds; the women are bodies” (95). This is the categorization of women in patriarchal discourse; it is the hierarchical distribution which places women above ‘matter’ but below ‘mind’. Marian, the woman, is faced with the dilemma of ‘becoming’ in both metaphysical as well as socio-political sense. 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 identity, as against a relatively defined identity. Salat argues, “the hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being in-between thing and a mind-less body” (96). Atwood, through Marian’s predicament and position, criticizes patriarchal hegemony and gender-specific role models. Peter, Marian’s fiancé, desires to dominate and colonize Marian. For him, Marian is, “the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (71). It does not, however, imply that he would not try to take over hers. On the contrary, Peter, the hunter, armed with his camera, the gun substitute, wants to fix Marian in his image of what she should be. Initially, Marian gives in and accepts all his male claims upon her. She is willing to reflect Peter’s image of her. She crystallizes her passivity and her adopted posture of powerlessness in the acknowledgement that, “As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (99). Atwood does not support Marian’s victimhood as solely the outcome of the patriarchal system of domination. She asserts that women like Marian, in allowing them to be colonized and exploited are equally, if not more, responsible with men for perpetuating gender-related inequality. In this regard Linda Hutcheon comments that as, “a Canadian and a woman, she protests any tendency toward easy passivity and naivety, she refuses to allow either Canadians or women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them” (The
Marian could have refused this posture of powerlessness; it is her passivity and naivety that allows others to subjugate her. She prefers to be dictated to rather than assert her independent will. When Peter proposes marriage to her, Marian sees him as a ‘rescuer’ from chaos, a ‘provider’ of stability. Thus, to Marian, marrying Peter implies having someone who would always make decisions for her. She speaks to Peter in a ‘soft flannelly’ feminine voice she barely recognizes as her own, “I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you” (109). She learns to silence her oppositional voice when she is with him and is subject to his social control: “I was about to make a sharp comment, but repressed it” (140). She says to him, “Well you needn't bite my head off?” (ibid), thinking to herself that she would have to, “watch how she spoke” (141) to him. She seeks to persuade herself that life, “isn't run by principles, but by adjustments” (125). She becomes increasingly dominated by Peter and thus assumes the pre-established feminine role assigned to her by romantic ideology: that of the passive sexual object. Atwood’s intention, however, is not merely to expose woman's complicity in the processes that lead to her colonization and victimization. She intends, “to explore the possibilities of combating patriarchal structures of power and domination that disallow woman's equal claims as individual in society” (Salat 97). In The Edible Woman therefore, Atwood, “de-constructs Marian's fictional journey from an adopted posture of self-negation and self-effacement towards one of self-certitude and self-assertion” (ibid).

Hutcheon states, “for women selfhood has often been seen as defined primarily through relationships” (The Canadian 142). However, in The Edible Woman Atwood, “renders ‘being in love’ a most problematic state, for it becomes the focus of all the possession motifs of the novel. Marriage is presented as owning, as entrapment, even as consuming” (ibid). Although, Marian initially takes Peter at face
value, she soon becomes preoccupied with discovering, “what lay hidden under the surface, under the other surfaces” of Peter, “that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-successes she was aware she had still not uncovered” (191). Peter’s grisly hunting story about killing a rabbit prefaces his pursuit of and proposal to Marian that underlines the narrative’s view of the sexual hunt as a form of predation. Describing how he gutted the animal after killing it with one shot, Peter states how he slit the rabbit’s stomach, grabbed ‘her’ by the hind legs and then “gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards” (81). Marian envisions Peter and his hunting friends as callous killers, their, “mouths wrenched with laughter” (82). Unconsciously identifying with the rabbit in his story—‘surprised’ to find her feet moving, “wondering how they had begun” (85). Marian flees only to be pursued and caught by Peter. Bouson observes that, “In her ‘game of tag’ Marian unwittingly enacts the courtship ritual in which female flight attracts male pursuit and capture” (75). Here again, Atwood voices the ecofeminist strain of connecting to the underprivileged, the hunted and the Others—irrespective of it being Marian or the rabbit. This concern is further dealt in detail in Surfacing which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Peter is ‘ordinariness raised to perfection’, Marian realizes he may be merely ‘the sum of the lifestyle tips’ he gathers from men’s magazines. Adept at masculine role-playing, Peter, readily exchanges his, “free-bachelor image for the mature fiancé one” and he adjusts “his responses and acquaintances accordingly” (Bouson 75). But Marian also begins to perceive him as a menacing presence. When she becomes the object of his sequel conquest as he is about to propose, she sees him as a danger, or
conqueror: his face, “strangely shadowed, his eyes gleaming like an animal’s,” his stare, “intent, finely ominous” (89). After Peter proposes to her, she sees herself as entrapped or ringed animal, the object of male desire subjected to the male gaze that seeks to assimilate and thus erase the female self. In an effort to read Peter’s dehumanizing gaze when he concentrates intently on her face, “as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through her flesh and her skull and into the workings of her brain” (188), Marian imagines that he is, “sizing her up as he would a new camera, trying to find the central complex of wheels and tiny mechanisms, the possible weak points, the kind of future performance to be expected: the springs of the machine. He wanted to know what made her tick” (189). If Peter sounds, “as though he’s just bought a shiny new car” when he becomes engaged, Marian, treated like a female commodity, gives him a, “chrome-plated smile,” her mouth feeling, “stiff and bright and somehow expensive” (107). Marian mirrors what Peter wants from her. She adapts to the essentialized nature of women. She complies with the accepted behaviour. Not only does Peter try to assert his will on Marian but he also does the same with the nature around him. Atwood represents him as a typical patriarch who takes pride in ordering and controlling things. The modernistic apartment in which he lives stands for his domineering will to replace the natural order: “Inside, the shiny surface—tiled floors, painted walls, mirrors, light fixtures—which would later give the building its expensive gloss, its beetle-hard internal shell, had not yet begun to secrete themselves. This rough grey under skin of sub flooring and unplastered wall-surface was still showing, and raw wires dangled like loose nerves from most of the sockets” (66). The lines depict the artificial being imposed on the original. It also voices ecofeminist concerns wherein patriarchal men try to impose their supremacy on the Others—comprising of women, nature and the rest of the subdued classes of
living and the non-living world, alike. Frank Davey asserts that, "Peter is also associated . . . with attempts to replace nature . . . in Atwood’s description of the modernistic apartment building still under construction, in which he lives . . . ghoulish technological mimicking of a living organism, complete with nerves, sockets, skin, and shell" (93). Just before Peter asks Marian to marry him she is treated as a “stage-prop, silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline” (84). Just like the rabbit in nature, Marian is treated as an instrument to meet his ends, to fulfil his fancies, upgrade his social status and professional image. This relates to the instrumentalism of all the othered groups that ecofeminism talks about. Bouson observes: “as a ‘stage-prop’, and later, as a ‘silent and smiling’ object that Peter takes ‘pride in displaying’ to his friends, Marian is caught up in a masculine script which will slowly lead her to a frightening sense of self-alienation” (76). She gradually grows dissatisfied with that role, with her work, wherein she observes: “It was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self” (124). She admits that she was, “tired, tired, tired of being a manipulator of words” (136). The habit of, “letting him choose for her” (185) was draining her inner self. She, the ‘rabbit’, and even a roll of toilet paper in the ladies powder room, seems, “helpless and white and furry and waiting passively for the end” (83). This identification dominates the remainder of the book where Atwood depicts Marian as a victim of patriarchal social order who later fights it and goes on to attain a sense of the self.

Describing women’s entrapment in masculine expectations Joe Bates, a character in the novel, points to the central narcissistic anxiety dramatized in the text. He chronicles the sad fate of women like his wife, Clara. When such a woman gets married the, “centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up; her image of herself” is invaded (304). “Her feminine role and her core,” as he explains, “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” (ibid). To be invaded is to be rendered void within as the self is taken over and assimilated. While this passage clearly contains a political message through Joe Bates, “Atwood is telling her women readers to avoid such a fate—it also gives voice to the key anxiety found in the text... Informing readers of the thematic significance of the nightmarish experience Marian is undergoing” (Bouson 77).

Observing women with ‘mature’ figures in the office party from a distance, Marian fantasizes that she is, “one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh,” she feels, “suffocated by this thick Sargasso-sea of femininity” and fears she will be, “sucked down” into “that liquid amorphous other” (212-13). She represents an independent woman who is different from others and fears becoming one of the group. However, ironically, Marian perceives Peter as a ‘fixed barrier’ against the amorphous world of femininity which she dreads. Her romantic affiliation with Peter leads not to heightened self-definition but to a frightening sense of self-diminishment. As Peter increasingly dominates her and invades her ‘core’ self, Marian becomes plagued by narcissistic fears of body-self disintegration. In a dream that occurs early in the text, she imagines that her body is dissolving: “I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent” (47). When she wakes up the morning after she has accepted Peter’s proposal of marriage, she feels that her ‘mind’ is “as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of her skull” (99). Later, when she has dinner with Peter and
experiences her first significant loss of appetite, she looks at her distorted image reflected in the bowl of a spoon, observing how her ‘huge torso’ narrows, “to a pinhead” at the spoon’s handle end (184). She gradually realizes that Peter was not the barrier which would save her from being engulfed by the societal pressures and compliance to the expected femininity. Rather, he threatens her individuality and essence as a person. Marian, as ecofeminist do, has identified the locus of the problem that tries to invade her self-identity mentally, socially and physically.

Marian suffers an identity crisis as she wrestles with her growing awareness of her dual, if not multiple, personalities which surface after she starts to reject the image imposed upon her. She herself is aware of her inconsistency, “I went about doing things [that] may have been a little inconsistent with my true personality” (124). But she cannot help it. Her inability to control her fate is evident, as she remarks that she was, “left . . . in a sort of vacuum. . . . I was evading reality. Now, this very moment, I would have to face it. I would have to decide what I wanted to do” (82).

Peter and Marian are drawn apart as Marian experiences an unresolving conflict within. Peter has intended to marry Marian out of the need of his profession as a lawyer where a single person is not taken seriously, he remarks: “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” (108). Peter is a perfectionist who has ordered his thoughts, life, learning and career into a ‘near perfect’ pattern. He is an expansive person who wants mastery over life, over all other things he wishes to posses even the ones he loved. He is typical of the white male Val Plumwood talks about as representative of the ‘Master Identity’ of the Western patriarchal mentality.
Margaret Atwood has always taken the present lifestyle as a threat to sustenance. As mentioned in the introduction she talks about how good is the modern civilization at creating junk. Consumerism is the word that defines this situation best. It captures people with efficient tools of advertising and packing. Keith observes that: "The Edible Woman is clearly a satire on consumerism and packing to which we all in varying degree comply" (179). Modern men, unaware of the requirements to replenish or give back in return of the indiscriminate use of resources, are participating in the threat of extinction consumerism can lead to. Atwood here relates to the ecofeminist view of homogenization which patriarchal men use as a potent tool to disguise the real. The actual is hidden by universalising the false in order to advertise it as the unchangeable reality or the logical nature of things. Unreality is the basic principle of the consumer society which is facilitated and made appealing by packing. The reality of meat has been hidden by its packaging. The hunters and fishermen on the billboards are tidy and unblooded: "the fish also was unreal; it had no slime, no teeth, no smell; it was a clever toy, metal and enamel," and the dead cannot be, "ugly or upsetting; it wouldn’t do . . . to have a deer with its tongue sticking out" (190). Unreality extends to the products themselves. A sandwich is, "a slice of plastic cheese between two pieces of solidified bubble bath with several flaps of pallid greenery" (278). Toilet paper is printed in, "flowers and scrolls and polka dots . . . as though they wanted to pretend it was used for something quite different, like Christmas presents" (222). Human beings have also become products. The nicely packaged Peter, fulfilling the commoditized image of masculinity, resembles the young, well-groomed men in the cigarette ads and the plaid-jacketed sportsman in the Moose beer advertisement. Marian imagines that Peter’s attempts to have spontaneous sex—on a blanket in a field and on the sheep skin rug on his bedroom floor—are enactments of
mass culture fantasies found in men's magazines. Marian fantasizes that Peter might secretly be the Underwear Man, an obscene phone caller who poses as a representative of Seymour Surveys doing a study on underwear. Marian imagines that the Underwear Man may be an otherwise normal man, who is 'crazed' by the girdle advertisements found on buses: "Society flaunted these slender laughing rubberized women before his eyes, urging, practically forcing upon him their flexible blandishments, and then refused to supply him with any. He had found when he had tried to buy the garment in question . . . that it comes empty of the promised contents" (145). The Underwear Man focuses attention on the cultural commodification of women, treated as packaged goods, as objects of exchange and consumption. Also, in the novel the, "woman as consumer is also consumed, as a packaged product, like a cake prepared and edible for male consumption" (Fraser 120). In her attention to clothing, that is packing herself as a product, Marian consciously conforms to the accepted social image. During her preparations for Peter's engagement party, she plans to, "have something done with her hair" and buys a dress, "not quite so mousy as she already owned" (268). The hairdresser treats her, "like a cake, something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (ibid). She is operated on, "like a slab of flesh, an object . . . Her whole body felt curiously paralysed" (269). Passively, she gazes at her "draped figure prisoned in the filigreed gold oval of the mirror" (ibid). Surveying the "totally inert" women sitting under mushroom shaped hairdryers, their heads "metal domes," she wonders if she, too, is being pushed toward this semi-mechanical existence, "this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical" (270). Patriarchal models of power have imposed themselves on women, nature and the other living and non-living groups. Atwood depicts this by using images of hard, manmade metal, glass and that reflects the distorted untrue images. Patriarchy has
succeeded in transcending the natural, stripping away the bonds of embodiedness and embeddedness with the natural, prioritizing artificial, unnatural and distorted ways of living. This is reflected in the novel—mechanical existence is imposed on the natural way. Catherine Mackinnon observes that *The Edible Woman* depicts the “thingification of women who have been pampered and pacified into nonpersonhood” (qtd. in Bouson 82). Later, when Marian see her reflection in the silver globes of the bathtub taps, she perceives herself as a, “curiously-sprawling pink thing” for her “waterlogged body” appears “bulging and distorted” (281). And when she looks down at her body it seems, “somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (ibid). Metamorphosed into the object of Peter’s desire—an artificial doll in a red dress—Marian surveys herself in the mirror after make-up is applied to her face and finds herself staring, “into the Egyptian-lidded and outlined and thickly fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before” (286). Later, when she inspects herself in Peter’s mirror, she perceives herself as fragmented, not whole. Unable to grasp the ‘total affect’ created by the assortment of details of her new appearance, she wonders what, “lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?” (295). When she gazes at her arms in the mirror, the only part of her without some artificial conversing, they appear doll like and ‘fake’ to her, “like soft pinkish-white rubber on plastic, boneless, flexible” (ibid). Predictably, Peter admires her new appearance, which fulfils the male ideal of a glamourized and sexualized femininity. In fact, he approves of the final product as, “Darling, you look absolutely marvellous . . . And I love you especially in that red dress” (295-98). “Yum, yum,” says Peter to his edible woman (293). Atwood here, interestingly, shows how patriarchy not only consumes nature as food, animals as meat but also women as a
tempting piece of delicacy. She reiterates the ecofeminists' belief of women consumed as a thing, as a source devoid of essence, as a supplement for meeting patriarchal ends.

Having attracted Peter's gaze as she performs the feminine masquerade at his party, Marian becomes increasingly aware of her object status, she sees herself as a product and him as a threat. With his collection of guns and cameras, he fits the socially approved male image of hunter projected by the Moose beer commercial in the novel. Once engaged, he assumes an attitude of ownership, “now that she had been ringed he took pride in displaying her” (224). Marian imagines that with his, “brand of logic” Peter would, “go out and buy . . . one of those marriage-manuals,” for he believed that, “if you got something new you went out and bought a book that told you how to work it” (189). Certainly logic pervades his occupation, law, which is itself a form of domination by means of legalizing patriarchal power. She panics when Peter asks to take her photograph, for to be photographed, she imagines, is to be, “stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (317). As her sense of self-unreality grows, she envisions herself as a, “two-dimensional small figment in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space” (315). Marian here speaks about the binary of logic and intuition that Plumwood focuses on. In the society based on masculine hegemony, logic is placed above intuition and Peter represents the male order and subdueds Marian and the female values through the positioning of the camera. She imagines that Peter, with his camera/gun aimed at her, is a dangerous predator: “That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal, weapon in his hands” (318). Bouson explains
Marian’s fear of being photographed: “If, in the text’s code, the camera/gun is a signifier of the voyeuristic male gaze which fixates woman as sexual object, to be ‘shot’ by the camera/gun is to undergo a terrifying loss of self” (83). It is true, then, that Marian is trapped in a devious patriarchal plot: “Since loving as possessing is specifically mental, an act of mind, and also directly involves power, then love is the opposite of bodily hunger, just as product is the opposite of process, or as natural death is shown to be the opposite of the death of animals killed by conquering hunters. Peter the Hunter is not surprisingly, Peter-the-photographer too, is English, once again, we shoot with both guns and cameras” (Hutcheon, Canadian 142). Therefore, Peter takes full control of her, imaging and reducing her to the status of a consumerable product.

Marian’s persecutory fears also erupt in her fantasies about her future life with Peter where she imagines knowing him as the, “real Peter, the one underneath,” in a “bungalow- and-double-bed man,” a “Charcoal Cooking-in-the backyard man,” a “home-movie man” (314). However, when she searches through the corridors and rooms of time she finds the middle-aged, balding Peter standing beside a barbecue. He holds a large cleaver in one of his hands. That Marian has no real subjective presence in the masculine plot of desire is signalled in her chilling recognition that Peter is alone, that she isn’t ‘there’. Caught up in a sinister Gothic plot, Marian fantasizes that her husband to-be is a potential murderer; a Gothic fear that continues to preoccupy Atwood’s other novels. Marian thus is a colonized subject. As Wayne Fraser remarks: “consumer society propagates patriarchal values: in a world [where women] . . . remain colonies” (125).

Similar to feminists and ecofeminists, Atwood implies that examining life, “is a necessary first step toward becoming a three-dimensional person in a world that
continues to cast women into two dimensional roles, offering flat mirror images” (White 53). In the novel, Duncan is introduced as Marian’s double image who plays a significant role in her fictive journey towards achieving selfhood in relation to herself as well as to the world around her. He enables her to examine the self-damaging implications and consequences of her passive acceptance of these power structures and gender roles. Atwood presents Duncan as a ‘complement’ rather than a ‘counterpart’: “Your counterpart is someone who is the mirror reflection of yourself, and your complement is someone who supplies those elements that are lacking in you . . . I am interested in compliments, image structures in which other people are perceived as necessarily you. You inside, or hidden you, but a something quite other” explains Kaminski (31-2). Duncan categorically emphasizes the similarity between him and Marian: “you look sort of like me in that” (181). What differentiates the two, however, is that Duncan only self-consciously plays the role of victim and works out the strategy of Peter’s dependence complex to exploit others, whereas Marian is actually a victim and exploited by others. With Duncan’s help Marian is able to see herself as she is and not as others view her. Duncan’s function is to reflect Marian’s passivity and powerlessness—he sets in motion her process of self-examination and reappraisal of herself in relations to others: “May be you want me to rescue you? What from?” (320) Duncan asks Marian after she escapes from Peter before he can photograph her. In the complex scene that follows, in which Marian and Duncan have sex in a cheap hotel room, “Atwood uses the conventional love triangle plot both as a weapon and as a device to rescue Marian from her relationship with Peter” (Bouson 83). Roberta White observes that “Marian’s less-than-indifferent affair with Duncan, a frail emotionless graduate student who likes to iron blouses, leads to a doleful anti-wedding night with Duncan as an anti-Peter, exorcizing the dream of marriage” (54).
Therefore, Duncan's frank question, "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade... who the hell are you supposed to be?" (309) brings Marian's subconscious rejection of the victim role to the conscious level. Marian realizes that what she has so far believed to be an ideal image is nothing but a masquerade. She has lost her identity and in return, has got only an inauthentic appearance. When she flees from Peter’s party to Duncan, she runs for her very life, rejecting the image of the woman which she has so far allowed Peter to impose on her. Duncan seems to her, “only solid achievement... something she could hang on to” (342). Bouson observes that Atwood in *The Edible Woman* dramatizes femininity as, “a male assigned role, an act and an acting out of feminine scripts, a masquerade... a role requiring ‘make up', costumes, and well-rehearsed lines... in order to be properly performed” (82). Luce Irigary also remarks that when women perform the masquerade they, “participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own,” and “they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything” (qtd. in Bouson 82). She asserts that Atwood employs Marian to acknowledge that, “it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask” and thus, masquerade has the potential, “to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulabe, producible, and readable by the woman” (83).

Emma Parker observes that Atwood, “probes the prohibitions on the public display of female appetite and the social taboos which surround women and food in terms of the politics of eating” (113). For Atwood, “eating is unequivocally political... Women are rarely depicted eating in literature because... consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (ibid). Like Atwood's other heroines; Marian initially appears as victim and demonstrates her powerlessness through her relationship with
food. As her wedding approaches, she subconsciously feels herself being absorbed by Peter and she stops eating. As she loses her identity and autonomy, she also loses her ability to eat. Her non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness. In an interview with Elizabeth Meese Atwood states, “the body as a concept has always been a concern. . . . people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their bodies. Which they pick up from their culture and apply to their own bodies . . . it’s there in The Edible Woman” (187). Marian's refusal to eat has grown out of her unwillingness to be eaten; subconsciously and correctly she has identified herself with the hunted, with the object of consumption. As a consumer surveyor, she is constantly submerged in a food environment and in The Edible Woman, getting, preparing and eating of food correlates with power, it: “embodies coded expression of power” (Parker 113). Marian unconsciously transfers her sympathies from the eaters to the things that get eaten. She now invariably adopts an ecofeminist stance. She is able to identify the connection between her emotional state and the consumed—the weak, and the exploited. She becomes a member of the web of life valuing all creation in its essence. She identifies with what it means to be eaten—both on a physical and the mental level. The eggs Marian cooks often take on the characteristics of living creatures, worse, the morning after she becomes engaged to the young lawyer Peter, she cannot eat her egg, thinking ‘It’s alive’: “When she opened her soft boiled egg and saw the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye” she pushed the egg away, for her, it was “living . . . alive” (204). Watching Peter cut his steak, she imagines the living cow and finds her steak inedible: “She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed,
knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar” (91). She also identifies with the hunted and killed rabbit of Peter’s grisly hunting story. Marian’s increasing identification with the object consumed makes her give up eating even vegetables, cake, pumpkin seeds, everything—as she takes one of her vitamin pills, she suddenly begins to look more closely and sees them as, “hard cased brown seeds. I wonder what they grind up to put into these things, she thought as she swallowed” (289). The implication is very clear: now even vitamin pills, the lowest common food supplement was ‘forbidden’. Rescuing Marian from her anorexia, the text does not depict her as becoming dangerously thin. Instead, this threat to Marian’s body-self becomes figured in Duncan’s ‘long feminized body’. Duncan is “cadaverously thin” his ribs, “stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval woodcut,” his body and face, “made of tissue paper or parchment stretched on a frame of wire coat hangers” (54). He provides the image of Marian’s endangered self. Marian finds the, “stunted figure pathetic: with its jutting ribs and frail legs and starved shoulder-blades it looked like the photographs of people from underprivileged countries or concentration camps” (ibid). Bouson observes: “partially displacing Marian’s fears onto the enigmatic Duncan—a character readers are forced to decode— the narrative temporarily deflects attention away from the anxiety subtending the description of Marian’s self-starvation” (80). However, unlike Duncan, who declares that he wants to be ‘an amoeba’ to avoid the complication of personhood, Marian is afraid of, “losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself” (282). Discussing the symbolic impact of anorexia, Atwood remarks that in 1964 she, “had never had, or even heard of anorexia . . . so, Marian’s eating disorder had its genesis in speculation that were symbolic rather than personal or medical” (qtd. in Cooke 129). In The Edible Woman eating is employed as a metaphor
for power, subtly examining the relationship between women and men, the powerful are characterized by their eating compared to the powerless as non-eaters. Atwood portrays the ecofeminist view by representing the male as the eater and female as the eaten. Peter’s power is demonstrated by his ability to control directly what Marian eats. He chooses her order in the restaurant and this is the moment from which Marian can no longer tolerate food. He assumes and displays his power by cutting his steak and consuming it quickly. Duncan, represented as anti-male compared to Peter, recognizes Marian’s refusal of food as a form of protest before she understands it herself. He tells her, “‘you’re probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system; though it isn’t considered orthodox to begin with the digestive system. But why not?’” (245). When Marian finds herself totally unable to eat: “her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside” (333); she faces the prospect of, “starving to death” (341). Duncan, who is the very image of suicidal depression as he sits, “crouched on the edge” of the snow covered ravine cliff, “gazing into the empty pit,” (344) refuses to offer Marian advice when she tells him that she does not want to go back to Peter. He remarks that it is, “your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you’ll have to think of your own way out” (343). Marian, thus, realizes that safety cannot be found with either Peter on Duncan, free from this illusion and the prior false identity, Marian begins her recovery. She decides to bake an edible woman in the form of a cake. When Marian creates the cake lady as, “a test, simple and direct as litmus paper,” (348) she wishes to avoid words and entanglement in the discussion. Although, she has a ‘sudden desire’ to tell Peter ‘the whole story’ but she then thinks ‘what good’ would that do. She recognizes the power of masculine discourse to silence the female voice and finds another way to communicate meaning: “Through the cake-woman
'text', she signifies her own transformation into a consumable object" (Bouson 87). Asserting active mastery over passive suffering, Marian does to the cake-woman, what was done to her. She begins 'to operate' on the cake woman, just as she was operated on at the hair dresser's; she scoops out part of the cake and makes a head with it, repeating her feeling that the contents of her had been 'scooped out' after she became engaged to Peter. She further uses icing to draw, "masses of intricate baroque scrolls and swirls" of hair on her creation, re-enacting what was done to her when her hair was decorated like a cake (350). Through baking a cake, a traditionally 'feminine' action, Marian makes a caricature of her most artificial self as she prepares herself for the party: “with its ruffled red dress, it’s smiling, lush lipped pine mouth” (350), its pink shoes and pink fingernails and fantastically elaborate coiffure. Symbolically, it represents woman as simply an object for male consumption. The cake stands for women who submit to the male gaze and adopt the role of food for the male appetite. The cake as woman also represents Marian’s rejection of submission as food to both Peter and Duncan. It also depicts Ainsley’s denial of compliance to Len as a sexual object to be hunted and consumed. John Lauber explains: “To be consumed means to be assimilated to the man’s life and personally, to meet his requirements; it means to lose one’s individuality; to make one’s self into an object and to be treated accordingly, as the cake is” (28). Marian pensively tells her woman-shaped edible cake, “You look delicious . . . very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you, that’s what you get for being food” (351). Marian seems to follow Dworkin’s insistence that, “woman must serve herself instead of serving herself up like a turkey or duck, garnished, stuffed, sharpened knife ready for ritual carving” (qtd. in Parker 129).
Marian offers the cake woman to Peter with the words: “You’ve been trying to
destroy me, haven’t you” and “You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made
you a substitute” (352). Peter’s eyes widen ‘in alarm’ and he leaves ‘quite rapidly’
when Marian presents him the cake woman and accuses him of trying to destroy her.
This behaviour of Peter can be understood in the words of Dale Bauer: “when women
step out of their traditional function as sign; when they refuse the imposition of the
gaze; when they exchange their sign-status for that of manipulator of signs, they do so
through dialogic polemics. And, at that moment of refusal, they become threatening to
the disciplinary culture which appears naturalized” (qtd. in Bouson 87). Marian does
the unexpected; she offers Peter an image of herself to be consumed. She denies being
available for male consumption in any way—physical or emotional. This moment of
denial becomes an unusual threat to Peter and he does not accept what Marian has to
offer him. And this finally ends their prey and predator relationship. Once dealt with,
Peter is reduced to insignificance in Marian’s mind: “She could see him . . . posed
jauntily in the foreground of an elegant salon . . . impeccably dressed, a glass of rye
whiskey in one hand; his foot was on the head of a stuffed lion and he had an eye
patch over one eye. Beneath one arm was a strapped revolver” (353). The frightening
image of Peter the Hunter has been exorcised, dissolving into the silliness of a
‘Hathaway shirt, or ‘Canadian club advertisement’.

With Peter disposed of, Marian attacks the cake, ending her withdrawal from
food and symbolically repossessing herself. She states, “I’ll start with the feet” (353).
Finishing those, she spears, “a chunk of pink thigh.” When the legs are eaten, she
splits, “the body from the head” (ibid). Later she offers the leftover cake to Duncan
and she says that, “It’s mostly the head,” and Duncan eats the, “mouth first” (362-63).
Careful analysis of the eating of the cake is full of significance. Until baking the cake
Marian has been evading, avoiding, running away, retreating and withdrawing. Running away is clearly not defined as action, as is shown in Marian’s comically futile attempts to run away from Peter. So, by eating the legs, she eliminates not only the artificial and elaborate but also the ineffective and limited part of herself. For running away has, so far, resulted in sitting under, on, or in various beds, a form of infantile immobility which—not very paradoxically—is a form of running away from responsible adult action. Having eaten the legs, she suddenly acquires the psychic energy to break her engagement, look for another job, clean her apartment, and go back to using the first-person point of view: “I found my own situation much more interesting than” Duncan’s (358). This is because she has separated herself from both Peter and her double, but the final step is to share the cake with Duncan. He eats only the head, for, as Marian’s double he is part of her head, but a bodiless head because the rest of him is a corpse in more ways than one: everything important to him is either oral or cerebral. He eats constantly but remains emaciated, as if somehow the food never reaches his body. However, he loves to talk, and he is full of arguments, lies, contradictions, and endless symbol-mongering. He also is unable to write, for he sees all writing, not only his own, as the accumulation of garbage. So, neither his body nor his mind creates anything. When he eats the head of the cake-woman, therefore, he is like Marian, eliminating the most active, but the least effective part of himself. His eating the head and describing it as delicious is a final piece of irony as his head is delicious only to him because, as a narcissist, he can never escape from himself. His disembodied intellectualizing is a form of suicide. Wayne Fraser is of the view that: “Duncan’s action of eating the cake confirms for Marian that men do play on the nurturing, biological function of women to manipulate them into subservient
roles by appealing to the ‘better half' to live their lives for the welfare of husbands and children” (124).

Duncan warns Marian to, "be careful . . . you might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal" (127). In the light of Marian's anorexia, the ‘hunger' to which he alludes is desire for self-fulfilment, for self-realization. However, Duncan also echoes the view that the entire conduct of the world is controlled by the dual appetites of love and hunger. He thus sets the two thematic poles which structure the novel. George Woodcock has seen this as a theme of, "emotional cannibalism" (qtd. in Hutcheon, “From Poetic” 18) conflating the two poles into one accurate phrase. Bouson also remarks that The Edible Woman has its, “focus on the ‘symbolic cannibalism' of marriage in patriarchal society—registers protest as it reveals the cultural and literary expectations she openly challenged at the outset of her novel-writing career” (72). Ecofeminists see masculinity as representing cannibalization of nature and women. Peter's efficient eating of meat, and Marian's denial of the same is the symbolic representation of this.

Reeves Sanday sees ritual cannibalism as, “a way of maintaining the social balance of power” (qtd. in Parker 127). For her, cannibalism is about power and control. She asserts that, “It is an act of domination motivated by subject/object polarities in which the person eaten is seen as the social ‘other’” (ibid). In Atwood's novel, the woman is the other and hence the eaten. Therefore, for both Atwood and Sanday, “cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium of nongustatory messages—messages having to do with the maintenance, regeneration, and, in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order” (127). Emma Parker also observes that, “symbolic cannibalism is obviously a primary theme in The Edible Woman” (ibid). The novel represents the culture of domination and exploitation that is so obvious in today's
society. Out of the hunger pole of the consuming theme come the eating obsession of the novel, which leads to the initial revolt of the body and its rebellious return to natural process. The other pole of love provides the organizing principle of all of the narrative themes of possessing. Marriage is presented as owning, as consuming, as entrapment. Loving as possessing is a mental power, but it cannot sustain life. Peter, the hunter, the consuming would-be husband, the photographer, is not the representative of sustenance but artificial unnatural death and destruction. However, ‘vegetating Clara’ and pregnant Ainsley expounds on the need for a new cataclysm for the birth of the, “goddess of birth and growth and death,” the new Venus, “big-bellied, teeming with life, potential, about to give birth to a new world in all its plenitude, a new Venus rising from the sea” (257). Margaret Atwood presents women as the ecofeminist symbol of creation, of infusing new creative energy into the male dominated and exploited world.

In order to sustain bodily life, warmth is needed. However, coldness of death replaces the dynamic warmth in the novel. Marian thinks initially that cold is preferable to heat; it keeps her whole, together—like the girdle that Duncan, the creature of the cold, examines with such interest. But to be whole in this novel is to be fixed, static, isolated, an object—like Ainsley’s doll that Marian cannot help identifying with or like Marian herself, made up and dressed for the party held by Peter, the ‘Rock of Society’ that feels safer when it owns things. The final cake woman is explicitly the most consumable object image of the novel. It is also the culmination and reconciliation of the hunger and love polarity. Marian has to indulge in the act of baking, representing a move away from the natural in order to prepare a substitute for satisfying the male appetite. Also, here chilling stands for the death of emotion, warmth and of love. By using cooking as a symbol Atwood goes back to the
basics of human civilization that started with the discovery of fire. For the first time it marked the separation of human from nature; men started hunting and women took to tending the fire/hearth. Thus began the process of socialization, which led to the separation of man from nature and to some extent of the woman also, though, to a lesser degree. However, in the novel, the replacement, the cake woman, must be chilled before it can assume a natural form closer to Marian so that it serves as a perfect replacement of her in satisfying male hunger.

*The Edible Woman* may be seen as a novel about choices, but Marian, cannot choose. She cannot choose either to be a scheming super female like Ainsley or the earth mother like Clara. Acknowledging her separate identity as superior to ‘immoral’ Ainsley, she justifies her decision to marry Peter: “I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is. She’s against it on principle, and life isn’t run by principles but by adjustment” (125). She feels glad that she, “wasn’t Clara” who, “lets herself be treated like a thing” (39). Marian also cannot be like the ‘office virgins’ on the lookout for eligible men because this opportunism is self-destructive to her. They illustrate their inability to fill the prerequisites of prevailing social norms since they lack the most important female attribute of social success: successful male partners. The office girls focus more upon the social norm of the woman’s role as wife. Fish—Duncan’s roommate, a graduate student in English and prone to long-winded discourses on literary symbolism discusses *Alice in Wonderland* as a part of his discourse on womanhood: “of course everybody knows Alice is a sexual-identity crisis book that’s old stuff, it’s been around for a long time” (248). In Fish’s analysis, Alice is, “trying to find her role” as a woman: “Yes, well that’s clear enough. These patterns emerge. One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them, I mean she’s really blocked” (ibid). In *The Edible
Woman the, ‘sexual-identity crisis book’—the cliché seems to apply, and many of the details fit. Marian indeed tries on a variety of roles, career woman, submissive fiancé, competent nurse, but cannot finally commit herself to any of them. Duncan is clearly the pre-adolescent Mock Turtle of Alice in Wonderland, “enclosed in his shell and his self pity” (ibid) who provides Marian with an alternative and finally an escape from her entrapping relationship she has with her lover Peter.

Marian has no children, but her friend Clara does, and those children are presented in terms of stink and excrement—they’re quite sufficiently pig-like. And it is certain that Marian has not reached a definite state by the conclusion of the novel, although she has rejected many things. Lauber remarks: “certainly there is absurdity enough in the society presented, and there are powerful forces working to create and maintain it in their own interests, but absurdity is not final, ‘they’ are not all powerful. True sanity is possible, though it may have to be reached through what is ordinarily considered madness, and the heroine appears to achieve it. Marian does not change her society, how could she? or escape from it; the proof of her sanity is that she has learned to live effectively within it” (30). Like an ecofeminist she confronts the binary power models and learns to question them. In the end she is ready to live in society which can no further change her identity and substance as an individual.

Atwood describes The Edible Woman as an anti comedy. The deliberate artifice traditionally associated with the comedy of manners is immediately recognizable. However, the out of caricature, the absurd comedy situations are reflected against the real Toronto of the 1960s. Atwood subtly combines the comic and the serious and the comic scenes can also suddenly become serious and threatening. As Marian observes, “all at once it was no longer a game. . . . It was threatening” (86). Readers are presented with different literary conventions and forced
to reconsider our assumptions. The enforced shift of perspective, reflected later in the novel by the abrupt switch from first to third, then again to first person narration, jolts the readers. They relate to a great extent with the set of comic routines played out by unreal characters. The shift in the narrative voice is a vital tool in the depiction of reality in all its depths. It reflects Marian's self-alienation, her loss and restoration of identity. The first section, about one third of the novel, is narrated in the first person. It presents Marian in apparent control of her life, 'coping' adequately with her job and her affair. She gets little satisfaction or pleasure from either, and she doesn't expect any. A cautious and meticulous person, afraid of attracting attention to herself, and choosing her clothes for 'protective colouration', afraid of public opinion in the person of her landlady, she is thoroughly conventional, even in her sexual freedom. The unconscious rebellion of Marian's body and mind dominates the long second part, nearly two-thirds of the novel. It is against social convention and the conclusion—marriage to Peter—to which it is leading her. It is also a conflict between Marian's social self, what has been expected of her and what she has accepted, and her true self, her inarticulate desires, needs, and revulsions. Part II begins with, “Marian . . . sitting listlessly at her desk” (131) signalling the change from first person to third person narration. The change is necessary because she can no longer understand her own motives or predict her actions. As she drifts toward the party at which she is to meet Peter's friends, before the wedding, the rebellion of her body intensifies, leading to an increasing involvement with Duncan, a refusal to eat, and at last, a successful flight from Peter and his party. “I was cleaning up the apartment” (357) is the opening sentence of part III wherein the action and the first person announce the heroine's regained control. She begins by coping in the most literal and physical way, which is nevertheless symbolic, washing the grimy windows and the dirty dishes and throwing
away the spoiled food from the refrigerator. Commenting on the split point of view of
the first and third person narration Atwood says to Geoff Hancock that, “probably I
do them that way because I get bored with writing in the first person. I switch to the
third. I like to try things that are hard for me” (213). Atwood disguises the complex
style she adopts to bring alive the complexities of the authentic world by making it
sound as simple as being an alternative option for being bored.

Atwood remarks in an interview with Graeme Gibson that the marriage
resolution of the standard comedy, “would be a tragic solution for Marian” (12). She
states that if ‘in the standard 18th Century comedy’ the young couple must ‘trick or
overcome’ the difficulty in the form of someone, “who embodies the restrictive forces
of society” so that they can get married, in *The Edible Woman* on the contrary, Peter
embodies society's repressive forces and he, “and the restrictive society are blended
into one” (ibid). Unlike the traditional courtship novel, *The Edible Woman* elaborates
on Marian's persecutory fears and disintegration anxiety as Peter assumes dominance
over her. *The Edible Woman* contradicts the traditional story of female maturation in
which the action of courtship and marriage is regarded as the ‘climactic event’ that
confers on the heroine her entire personal identity. Brooks Bouson opines that, “*The
Edible Woman* focuses attention on the sexual objectification and potential
victimization of Marian . . . as she consents to femininity. But although Atwood
presents her character as a potential victim, she also expresses her oppositional intent
by disrupting the romance plot line, by interrupting romantic discourse, and by
staging female revenge fantasies in *The Edible Woman*” (73). With the intended
departure from the comedy of manners in *The Edible Woman*, “Atwood diverged
from the British literary model as Canada had from the political, but she also mirrored
the infiltration of American consumerism into the Canadian system” (Fraser 134).
The Edible Woman, in the end, does not provide a clear-cut resolution of the problem. It is open-ended, for Atwood remarks, "you cannot create a character who is fully liberated in every sense of the word in a society which is not" (Interview, Meese 189). The Edible Woman has, "a circular structure, [Marian] . . . at the end is essentially back where she started, except that she's been around once" (Interview, Gerald 136). "The Edible Woman does make a negative statement about society" (Interview, Sandler 45) but, "you may often define a positive by defining negatives" (Interview, Brans 140). The world, in which advertising and packaging obscure almost every reality, where even consuming loses its pleasure because the items consumed have lost their identity, is the present world. These become the poor labels of femininity and of masculinity, and the relations between the sexes, which control the lives of people today. This is how reality is hidden from people and they are confused as to the real nature of their bodies. They are manipulated. Matrimony and motherhood in this patriarchal culture is restricting and exploitative for women. They are reduced to the position of victims through their own complicity to the contemporary hegemonic culture of domination.

In spite of the conflicts, dangers and hindrances of the contemporary materialistic, americanized society, the novel hints at a relative freedom that can be achieved, as is done by Marian. Fraser espouses that, "The thrust of the novel's satire is that Canadian society's materialistic values are indistinguishable from those of the United States" (122). Though this theme is further dealt elaborately in the next novel, Surfacing, however, "the economic nationalism [is] mirrored in The Edible Woman . . . . Atwood demonstrates the danger of American consumerism to Canadian society" (125). The complete self-actualization is a distant dream as R. D. Laing avers: "Western capitalistic society is so thoroughly corrupt and corrupting that
political, economic and social revolution is necessary before anyone can achieve true personality" (qtd. in Lauber 30). Marian’s, “dismissal of Peter at the end of the book is not a rejection of marriage itself but a refusal to continue a relationship with someone whose ‘up-to-date’ values have been judged inadequate” (Keith 179). This hunter-hunted motif in *The Edible Woman* representing American exploitative attitude is expanded further in *Surfacing*.

Atwood does not offer any alternatives nor does Marian find any. The woman must keep on searching for one. The internal change, “makes a difference in a way, but whether she gets out or not, she has still undergone an experience that has changed her way of seeing” remarks Atwood in a conversation with Bonnie Lyons (228). Barbara Rigney agrees with Atwood, “Surely Marian knows more than she did in the beginning. . . . At least she has come to terms with something, has objectified her situation and apprehended it more realistically. The cake thus serves as a reflection; a way of seeing herself as in a mirror and it expresses a truth not before perceived” (qtd. in Bouson 90). At the end of the novel, Marian’s ‘normalization’ is indicated by her, “negation of externally induced images, commercial, social or psychological, and the affirmation of inalterable human needs, represented by the ingestion of food” (Heidenreich 26).

In the novel, the word Marian implies many things: its Hebrew meaning is uncertain, bitter, or from the sea and true to this, Marian is a character who is indecisive, bitter and disintegrated, who eventually derives selfhood by the repetitive submerging under water in her baths. The English root Marie/ Mary of Marian relate it to the meanings of the wished for child, rebellion, and bitter. Marian, who in order to achieve the desired birth of a new self, revolts against the dichotomous order of society. In the light of the Latin connotations of the name, it relates her to the clan of
Marius that makes her representative of the rise of the ordinary by perseverance to a position of self-actualization and the forerunner of a new empowered tribe. Thus, “By demolishing society’s synthetic stereotype of femininity through the ingenious mirroring device of the cake, Marian frees herself to realize her own true identity,” argues Nora Stovel (qtd. in Bouson 90). T. D. MacLulich views that at the novel’s end Marian, “is a whole person again” and while her, “fate is uncertain . . . she will face it squarely instead of trying to escape” (ibid). Although, Atwood refuses a definitive rescue in the end, however, the novel, “dismantles and demystifies the marriage ideal by laying bare what has long been naturalized—and hence ignored—in the traditional romance scenario: the painful objectification and self-diminishment of woman in a male-defined order” (Bouson 91). As M. F. Salat observes, “Atwood’s preoccupation with deconstructing the dialectics of male-female binary opposition and examining hegemonic structures of power and domination issuing within interpersonal relationships remains more or less constant and unmitigated. Her universe, of course, becomes progressively more elaborate, but she does not become essentially different” (94).

In *The Edible Woman*, thus, Margaret Atwood starts with the basic premise of ecofeminism, by identifying the dualized power model the society rests on. Through her women characters she questions the standards of patriarchal hegemony that alienates women and nature. In harmony with the ecofeminist views she identifies the basic connectivity of life processes that supports the web of life—sustaining the human and the non-human nature. Using the symbol of cooking and eating as the dominant image in the novel, Atwood subtly establishes how patriarchy consumes women and nature alike. She stresses the need to identify and value all the life forces enabling a healthy coexistence of all life forms.


