CHAPTER II

THE EDIBLE WOMAN: CONSUMERISM AND COMEDY

'The Edible Woman is the first published novel of Margaret Atwood. It can be called as a proto-feminist novel as it entertains and presents the most serious problems that women face. It depicts how women are objectified by conventional society as consumer products. It shows that there is no place for the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and opinions expressed by women, the central figures of Atwood’s fiction. Even though the novel was published even before the emergence of the feminist or women’s liberation movement, it successfully exposes the ideological and gender differences, thus proving to be a pioneering novel. This novel maps out how Marian McAlpin, the protagonist of the novel, first loses and then rediscovers herself.

As one would expect from a novelist who is also a major poet, 'The Edible Woman had been shaped and unified by a central image, the metaphor of eating, that runs through the entire novel, from title page to final scene. We can discover for ourselves the various forms in which food imagery appears. “All the writer of a brief introduction needs to do is suggest some of the ways in which the author has made the central metaphor an effective technique of story telling.” 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 that help her protest against the dehumanising tendencies of the society and save herself by rejecting her inauthentic self.

"Through a series of haunting images, a sequence of dream-like hallucinations which flicker through the mind"² of Marian, the novel presents a kaleidoscopic picture of her life. To make the picture more real, Marian is presented as "a perfect foil to her friends" wherein, owing to her coming into contact with them she learns a great deal about women’s problems.

Dealing as it does with the patriarchal society which has become synonymous with consumerism (of women especially), the novel presents "symbolic cannibalism" of women. The novel proves once for all that financial independence is no independence at all. The awareness of being subjugated and victimized has to come from within the self of an individual. This is exactly what the novel depicts — the reasons for the suppression of women within and without the institution of marriage.

The Edible Woman offers a quest for self-identity by Marian, the protagonist. She is a fairly sensible, intelligent young woman, decently liberal in her views and somewhat defensive about her own individuality. She is employed in Seymour Surveys Company, a market research agency. Facing an identity crisis, she is confronted with various alternatives. The first phase of
the problem Marian has to face and overcome is at her work place. The company Marian works for has a highly stratified, three-tiered, hierarchic structure. The top floor is occupied by men and is not accessible to her. The bottom is managed mostly by old housewives and she does not wish to go there. "On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists referred to as men upstairs, since they are all men. Below us are the machines – mimeo machines." The prospect of getting fixed at the middle point of the office structure for the whole of her life, with a pension at the end of her tenure of job, makes her feel that in front of her was a "self...waiting, performed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward."

Marian's crisis, however, acquires a feminine colouration when she looks for alternatives to her present situation. These alternatives are represented in her office colleagues, Eurney, Lucie, and Millie, her friend Clara, and her husband Joe, Peter, and Ainsley, her flat-mate.

A proto-feminist to the letter, Ainsley has strong views about the male-dominated 'consumer' society. That she becomes a victim of the self-same society is one of the ironies of fate. Ainsley, though against marriage, does not deny motherhood. She does want to get pregnant. For she would like a child of her own. She thinks that motherhood satisfies one's "deepest femininity" (41) and "every woman should have at least one baby ... it's even
more important than sex” (40). And she is absolutely certain that “the thing that ruins families these days is the husbands” (40). Wanting children “by choice” rather than as a natural consequence of a happy relationship in a marriage, she looks out for a perfect male specimen to father her child and finds one in Len, thus partially fulfilling her dream. It does not take her long to realise that such a role as she has chosen for herself would be a difficult one to perform in the patriarchal society and she changes her views regarding matrimony and accordingly gets married to provide the infant a father. Marian, repulsed by Ainsley’s cold blooded attitude to men and marriage, thinks it is all wrong:

"I know Ainsley was wrong, but she sounded so rational. I thought I’d better go to bed before she had convinced me against my better judgement.” (43)

Ainsley’s movement towards conventionality (for the most up-to-date reasons) ironically counterpoints Marian’s growing rejection of it.

Clara and Joe present Marian with another alternative – a different facet altogether of love and marriage. Theirs is a fairly good marriage and they have three children. Clara is quite content to remain within the bounds of family. But Marian is not unaware of Joe’s condescending attitude towards women. “He tends any way to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection” (131). Clara, impractical and non-assertive as she is, tends
to be rather leaning on Joe and "lets herself be treated like a thing" (35) much to Ainsley's annoyance. In this regard Marian agrees with Ainsley that "the power of the wife declines as the number of children grows" and Clara "wasn't able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time ... her own body seemed beyond her, going in its own way without reference to any direction of hers" (35). Even though Clara does not admit it to herself, this seems to be perfectly true, for the children are unplanned: "Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her and her second with dismay; now during her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism" (36), thus unwillingly becoming a pawn in the marriage game.

Choices and alternatives presented by her friends apart, Marian feels outraged by the attitude adopted by Seymour Surveys towards its women employees. The Manager, Mrs. Bogue, regards the very acts of marriage and pregnancy as offensive to the company: "Mrs. Dodge in Kamloops will have to be removed. She's pregnant" (24). Such discrimination against women arouses in Marian righteous indignation. While conducting market research survey, Marian interviews a man who feels "you ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you" (48) – a comment which enrages her justifiably.
Marian refuses to accept the alternatives given to her in Ainsley and Clara. She seeks something different from life. She rather hopes that she would be able to fulfil this yearning for a better life with Peter. She thinks that “Peter is an ideal choice. He’s attractive and he’s bound to be successful” (102). He seems to be a godsend to relieve her from her monotonous life at Seymour Surveys — “a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability” (89). Despite her dreams as to their future, she also has her own doubts regarding Peter. Disturbed by his casual attitude towards sex and general behaviour, she feels at times that “he was treating her as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline” (71).

Peter is described as “ordinariness raised to perfection” (61). He is a conventionally acceptable figure obviously at the start of a successful career “... his is a small firm and he is rising in it like a balloon” (57). Peter in turn is drawn to Marian because she is unlike the other women of his acquaintance. Undemanding and non-aggressive, “a girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (61). When he proposes to her, he gives out his reason as to Marian’s suitability as a wife: “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 first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife” (89). In other words, Peter is trying to fit Marian into a
"conventionalized, even stereotyped image of a woman passive and dependent." 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 ... you’re such a sensible girl. (91)

He considers Marian as a sensible girl because she leaves all the major and minor decisions to him. In fact, this can be seen immediately after she agrees to his proposal of marriage. When Peter asks her when she would like to marry, she wants to say “Ground hog day” but instead she grants Peter the authority to take the decision.

Marian accepted the proposal of Peter and in spite of her unease at the acceptance, she tries to defend her choice.

“I’d always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does ... I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is ... she is against it on principle, and life isn’t by principles but by adjustments.” (100)

Here Marian is accepting the role that is traditionally foisted upon women that "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society ... The celibate (single) woman is explained and defined with reference to marriage
whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution.”6 It is only after the acceptance of the marriage proposal that she is assailed by serious doubts as to whether she made the right choice. Her relationship with Peter seems to have undergone a sea change and Marian realizes that “she had let herself be sold as some kind of a desirable commodity.”7

She fails to identify the real Peter underneath all that sophistication and doubts her understanding of his true self. Disliking strongly Peter’s manipulation of herself, she identifies him with an anonymous caller who introduced himself to ladies as a seller of underwear, but whose real identity was not known to anybody. “This was his true self, the core of his personality, the central Peter who had been occupying her mind more and more lately. Perhaps this was what lay under the surfaces, that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-guesses she was aware she had still not uncovered: he was really the Underwear Man.” (118).

But later she begins to recognise her sense of loss of identity. But first she ignores the demands of her subconscious mind, and thus the problem starts. At this point her body intervenes and makes her realise that marriage to Peter means more than protection, that it means death, a socially acceptable suicide. It is her digestive system which carries the rebellion and makes her stop eating
one thing after the other. It is in this sense that the significance of the “food metaphor” can be felt very strikingly in this novel.

The first symptoms of anorexia (loss of appetite) are seen in Marian immediately after she agrees to the marriage proposal made by Peter. Atwood has skilfully manipulated our responses here. In Atwood’s time anorexia is a serious illness and we are naturally drawn sympathetically to Marian’s plight. There are comic aspects to this development. When Marian 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” (114). First her body refuses anything that may at one time have been alive. It begins with meat when she goes to dinner with Peter. First, Marian finds it difficult to eat the steak because she feels 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 street car ... She set down her knife and fork. (155)

In contrast Peter chewed and smiled pleasantly, conscious of his own superior capacity and control over Marian as well as her own life. After this one after the other crossed out of her list of eatables.

As Marian stops eating certain things, she begins to view herself as powerless and weak, quite in line with Darwin’s theory of survival of nature
that says, if one is powerless and weak, one becomes edible. Thus she identifies herself with a consumer product. For sometime she relies on omlette, pea-nuts and cheese which also slowly disappear from her list of eatables as she identifies herself with these things also:

The next morning ... when she opened her soft-boiled egg and saw the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye, she found her mouth closing together like a frightened sea-anemone. It’s living: It’s alive, the muscles in her throat said, and tightened. She pushed the dish away. (165)

This makes her stick on to “salads” and vitamin pills for some time. But when she loses appetite for vegetables also, her panic is clearly evident:

She was watching her own hands and the peeler and the curl or crisp orange skin. She becomes aware of the carrot. It’s a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn’t die right away, it keeps on living, right now it’s still alive ... She thought she felt it twist in her hands, she dropped it on the table. Oh, no, she said, almost crying. Not this too. (183)

Thus identifying herself with lower forms of life, she refuses to eat, which she equates with preying upon – first steak and all meats, then eggs, then carrots. She reaches a stage where she is unable to destroy the lowest form of life. She finds herself unable to clean the used vessels and the kitchen sink. As Peter begins to gain control over her in every aspect, her identification with the hunted and the consumed reaches the precipitation point. She comes to the
realisation that she is powerless to control her own life. Marian's horror at the act of consuming flesh coincides with her alienation and detachment from society. She becomes a passive figure, just watching the society with shocking clarity and not playing any active role. She comes to view “eating” as a violent action concealed behind the social facade of dining which also reminds us of the sacrifice of the victim in the Moose Beer ads. The cook book description of preparing turtle soup suggests to Marian ‘the deaths of early Christian martyrs.”

You were supposed to keep your live turtle in a cardborad box or other cage for about a week, loving it and feeding it hamburger to rid it of its impurities. Then just as it was beginning to trust you and perhaps follow you around the kitchen ... you put it into a cauldron of cold water ... and then brought it slowly to the boil. The whole procedure was reminiscent of the deaths of early Christian martyrs. What fiendishness went on in kitchens across the country in the name of providing food. (159)

In terms of the ever-present food metaphor, Peter is a master-chef, and Marian is in grave danger of becoming puff pastry. Peter subtly prepares her for the different fillings he will demand of her for his cultured palate. George Woodcock has rightly described The Edible Woman as a novel about “emotional cannibalism.” noting the predatory nature of human beings and the necessity to maintain the distances and defences between them in human society.
The unreality of her situation becomes more evident to Marian when she agrees to play the part of a meek and submissive fiance as dictated by Peter. She decks herself out in all her fiery apparel, but when she looks up in the mirror she fails to see the rightness of it, as she is unable to recognize the true Marian behind the glittering facade. Nothing seems to be real any more:

What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them together? She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or varnish covering, but even they looked fake, like soft, pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible. (229)

As the impending engagement party approaches, Marian becomes more and more aware of her loss of free will and choice. In Chapter 24 of the novel Marian’s presence in the beauty parlour reminds one of the preparation of animals for sacrifice. Her hair is decorated “like a cake something to be carefully iced and ornamented.” Marian is being “packaged” out of all recognition, and the scene in the hairdresser’s shows Atwood at her most sharply satiric. The scene also brings together much of the telling imagery that Atwood has already employed. When all the technology is in place, Marian’s head resembles “a mutant hedgehog with a covering of rounded hairy appendages instead of spikes” (209) We are reminded perhaps of Duncan’s image of the frenzied armadillo. More often, however, the imagery is drawn from the clinical, industrialized, “air-conditioned nightmare” side of modern
city life. The hairdresser becomes a "doctor." Marian is required to lean against what she sees as an "operating-table" and she begins to think it would be a good idea to "give anaesthetics to the patients." (209) Later she is returned to "the doctor's chair to have the stitches taken out." The whole process is seen in terms of an assembly line, and the hair-dryer looks like an "electric mushroom." Moreover, often a nurse has pronounced her dry. Marian is taken back along "the gently-trying line of those who were not yet done" (210). The recurrent cooking image is also included. The descriptions are unquestionably humorous, but under the humour we detect a bitter attack on the absurdities of contemporary fashion.

As the party progresses and Peter clicks away with his camera, Marian realizes that "once he pulled the trigger, she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture." (245). It dawns on her that she is nothing but a saleable commodity wrapped up as a wife. She at once grasps that Peter has manipulated her cleverly and made her a puppet in his hands.

She recognises her loss of identity and her "edibility" to Peter. Her sense of victimization becomes acute after she comes across Joe discussing the after-effects of university education on women. He says, "she 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 core ... the centre of her personality, the thing she has built up, her image
of herself ... Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demand passivity from her” (235). The conversation provides Marian with a flash of insight. She realises what married life with Peter would be. She perceives that as Peter’s wife she would be expected to don the mantle of a conventional woman, assuming the role of a meek and docile woman, dependent on her husband, allowing him to devour her slowly and relishingly.

Although Marian refuses to be an “edible woman” for Peter by running away from him, yet she falls a victim to male-dominance in the person of Duncan. He seduces her feigning ignorance and helplessness. Later on it occurs to Marian that she has allowed the men in her life to use and consume her, thus actually helping the process of victimization. This new awareness provides her a renewed strength and purpose in life.

As in the Freudian theory of catharsis, when the neurosis is recognised, it should not only lose its power but also make way for the long stifled element of the authentic self to grow. This pattern of increasingly conscious neurosis reduction and simplification of the neurotic action, followed by tentative new growth, is the true pattern of Atwood's novels. Marian’s unconscious fear of being devoured comes to the ‘surface’ of her consciousness as an increasing aversion to food and culminates in her realization that “what she really wanted ... had been reduced to simple safety.” The realisation takes place in a snowy ravine which Duncan describes as “close to absolute zero,” “as near as possible
to nothing" (263) when she returns to her apartment and decides to take her first positive action in several days – to bake a woman-shaped cake for Peter. This marks a sense of new personal beginning.

Atwood says that by doing so Marian is trying to depict “an action, a preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself.”¹⁰ She offers the cake to Peter who is affronted at the very sight of it. Denying the passive role as his fiance she tells him:

You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you, she said, 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? I’ll get you a fork, she added somewhat prosaically. (271)

Marianrealises immediately that the spell of anorexia has been broken. “Suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry” (271). As soon as she has broken off her engagement with Peter, her body reverts to normal responses. In addition, as soon as this appears, the cake ceases to be regarded as a symbol, failed or otherwise, and becomes “only a cake” (273). It is no longer an edible woman but an edible cake. Marian eats the cake with relish. “Liberated of the false notion of having an existence in which she is some kind of appetizing food, she begins to enjoy taking food.”¹¹
“Marian’s baking of the cake and eating it could be said to be a gesture of defiance, a way of saying no to a system that defines women as commodity and devours them.” Marian is also able to destroy the society’s synthetic stereotype of femininity through the ingenuous mirroring device of the cake. She frees herself to realise her own true identity.” Apart from this the act signifies the celebration of Marian’s “new freedom and even rebirth,” making her “a whole person.”

If the “meaning” of the novel is to be found anywhere it will surely be located in an explanation of the title image. Atwood herself, characteristically, is most interested in the technical effect of the image within the fiction. In the interview with Graeme Gibson she describes Marian’s action in moulding the woman-cake as “preposterous,” but adds, “as all pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself.” Critics have taken the image very seriously indeed and have read into it a variety of intellectual and psychological interpretations. But “a novel’s meaning will be the same kind of meaning as that of a philosophical treatise or a political tract.”

It is essential to note how the cake has decidedly different meanings for all the characters who come into contact with it. For Marian it begins, as we have seen, as a ‘test’ and ends as “only a cake.” For Peter, it is a symbol of Marian’s madness or at least of her unsuitability as the wife of a rising young
lawyer. For Ainsley, it is an indication that Marian is rejecting (her) femininity” (272). Finally Duncan sees the cake for what it really is, an edible object, and in the last word of the novel, he pronounces it “delicious.” If there is anything that can legitimately be described as the meaning of the woman-cake, it is the combination of all these individual meanings which presents an appropriate emblem of the multiplicity of human reaction. Perhaps more important than the cake’s meaning is its effectiveness. The cake acts as a kind of magnet attracting all the images, associations, and interpretations that come within its field. Whatever else it may suggest, the title-image performs an important function within the structure of the comedy by providing a central imagistic focus that can effect a resolution.

The wit of The Edible Woman is concentrated in its brilliant images. Concepts instantly become physical realities. Joe, Clara’s husband, remarks that the feminine role demands passivity, and instantly “Marian had a fleeting vision of a large globular pastry, decorated with whipped cream and maraschino cherries, float-suspended in the air above Joe’s head” (235). The image suggests passivity and domestic function. It suggests woman as an object of consumption, over-richness and over-decoration in the consumer society. It clearly foreshadows Marian’s cake, the “edible woman.”

Lucy’s man-hunting in an expensive restaurant is described as
... trailing herself, like a many-plumed fish-lure with glass beads and three spinners and seventeen hooks, through the likely-looking places, good restaurants and cock-tail boss with their lush weed-beds of philodendrons, where the right kind of men might be expected to be lurking, ravenous as pike though more maritally inclined. (113)

The plumes, the beads, the spinners and the hook imply the colour and elaboration of Lucy’s outfit, and its intention. Implied also is her entire lack of interest in men as individuals (one fish is as good as another). The paradoxes of the female role are clearly stated: woman must be positive and active, she is the fisherman and she is the bait, and she can capture only by yielding up herself.

The Edible Woman is a successful comic novel which offers constantly the pleasure of surprise and incongruity through the wit and sheer unexpectedness of its striking yet relevant images, through the startling yet somehow logical reversals of intention and action by its characters, and through reversals of normal expectations as to how people should talk, feel, and behave. It instructs us in certain realities of the world we live in, providing both the satisfaction of recognition and the shock of novelty and combining them as it transforms the familiar into the novel. Atwood has offered a frequently quoted comment about the novel’s ending: “The tone of The Edible Woman is light-hearted but in the end it’s more pessimistic than Surfacing.”¹⁶ This attitude has surprised most critics, and it is worthwhile pausing over the
comment here since it establishes a useful point of comparison with Atwood’s second novel, which appeared in 1972. Although certain thematic links can be established between the two books – both protagonists, for example, experience a radical alienation from their society – *Surfacing* is a far bleaker novel than its predecessor. Indeed, the two books provide a striking illustration of the dangers of limiting any literary inquiry to the area of subject matter. Summaries of their themes and basic structural patterns might make these novels sound reasonably similar. A response sensitive to tone and style, however, reveals them as startlingly different.

To return to Atwood’s controversial comment, the tone of *Surfacing* is certainly anything but “light-hearted.” The unnamed protagonist has in the course of the book been facing up to the psychological after-effects of an abortion, but by the close of the novel is poised for a return to the city in a mood that might be described as a combination of courageous determination and defiance. Her future, however, is decidedly uncertain. So, in a way, is Marian’s, but we cannot help feeling that the experience Marian has undergone has been a maturing one, and that her compromise with a debased society is both practical and dignified. *Surfacing* is more obviously a symbolic novel and can therefore end in a more equivocal symbolic gesture. *The Edible Woman*, on the other hand, as a later day comedy of manners, can hardly end on anything but comic terms, however much it may diverge from an unalloyed,
traditionally comic ending. In seeing this ending as “more pessimistic than Surfacing, Atwood seems to be reimaging her own novel. She had been much more positive in her earlier interview with Graeme Gibson when she pointed out that at the ending of both novels, living in harmony with the world is “seen as a possibility finally, whereas initially it is not.”¹⁷ It is not an uncommon phenomenon for novelists’ attitude to their work to change over the years, and their later judgements of earlier writings are not necessarily authoritative. D.H. Lawrence in a famous dictum asserted: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”¹⁸

In this novel that maps out how Marian first loses and then rediscovers herself, the point of view from which the story has been told shifts to correspond to the stages of this journey. In Chapters 1 to 12, when Marian is still in her own possession, the narrative is told from the first person point of view. The first chapter (and the first section) begins, “I knew I was all right on Friday when I got up, if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual” (9). But within this first section of the story, Marian’s self gets lost, and Chapter 13 to 30 are told from the third person point of view. “Marian,” Chapter 13 begins, “was sitting listlessly at her desk,” (107) and things in Part Two are not as “all right” as they were in Part One. In the single chapter that makes up the final section, Marian becomes herself again, and Atwood returns to the first person
point of view. As Marian says “I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again” (278).

Thus The Edible Woman, “a convincing narrative of personal growth,” shows how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self. Marian, 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.
REFERENCES


11. T.N. Dhar, 276.


17 Graeme Gibson, "Margaret Atwood," 23.