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ACADEMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Department of English

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Crossing Borders: Exploring the Diversities of English Language & Literature

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Psychoanalytic Feminist Approach in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian writer, poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. Her fictional work consists of historical in addition as scientific backdrops with a powerful and freelance girl as its central character. Her stories have realistic nonetheless creative textures that converge thoughtfully with open endings that tend to create a larger impact on the society. *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. By using the food imagery, Atwood underlines Marian's regaining control over her own life. Throughout the novel *Marian* tries to search for her identity and finally she is able to find herself. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is about woman and her relationship to men, to society and to food and eating. It is through food and eating that Margaret Atwood discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern male-dominated society. It seems that Marian has problems not only with food, but with her social relations and with her love life too.

Key Words: Identity, Alienation, Femininity, Body Image, Eating Disorders, Social Expectations, Feminist Critique

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian writer, poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada seen as one of the world's leading women novelists. Her writing has an impact on the reader's mind and one is forced to think about the connection between reality and fiction after reading her stories and poems. Her fictional work consists of historical in addition as scientific backdrops with a powerful and freelance girl as its central character. Her stories have realistic nonetheless creative textures that converge thoughtfully with open endings that tend to create a larger impact on the society. Many of her stories have been adapted into stage plays and movies in addition to the translation of her works in more than 30 languages. She is considered as a literary genius with the ability to connect her fictional character with the deepest emotions of

the reader and society. She is an international award-winning prolific author and also a well-known humanist.

Her first novel was *The Edible Woman* (1969), about a woman who cannot eat and feels that she is being eaten. This was followed by: *Surfacing* (1973), which deals with a woman's investigation into her father's disappearance. *The Edible Woman* is the first published novel of Margaret Atwood in 1969. It is the story of a young woman, named Marian, who struggles with society for her fiancé and food. It shows that there's no place for the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and opinions expressed by ladies, the central figures of Atwood's fiction. This novel maps out however Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of the novel, initially loses then rediscovers herself. *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.

The novel is divided into III parts. In the chapters 1-12 when *Marian* is still in her own possession, the narration is given from the first person's point-of-view. It contains around fifteen characters. They are - Marian MacAlpin (heroine), Ainsley Tewce (Marian's roommate), Peter (Marian's boyfriend, Lawyer), Clara (Marian's High school and College friend), Joe (Clara's husband), Arrthur and Elaine (Joe and Clara's sons), Len Slank (a college friend of Marian and Clara), Duncan (a post graduate student of English Literature), Trigger (Peter's friend), Marian and Ainsley's Landlady, landlady's daughter, Mrs. Bogue (HOD and Marian's colleague) and three office virgins Emmy, Lucy and Millie. Through the descriptions of the above mentioned characters it is practical that all the characters are related to its heroine, i.e. Marian MacAlpin, who tries to be conscious throughout the whole novel. Marian's colleagues, Emily, Lucy and Millies, are also aware of being victims in a patriarchal society. They accept their society's definition of the role of women as lovers, wives, mothers and lower mean: they represent irrationality, wilderness, and nurture. Their sole aim in life is getting a husband who is reasonable, civilized, and cultured.

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 workplace. 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.”

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”⁴ 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).

Margaret Atwood strongly presents the aspect of male domination through her protagonist’s relationship with her fiancé, Peter. Peter is a person, who wants everything from Marian according to his own desires. Every action of Marian is instructed by him and Marian falls a prey to Peter’s dictatorship. He finds her important only for her physical appearance, while he ignores her emotional and psychological requirements completely. 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 “Groundhog 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)

At this point 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.” (101). 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. Marian is firmly expected by Peter to fulfil his desires and needs. She does not want to upset him because she is scared of him. Peter intends to give Marian an identity which would conform to his norms. She feels robbed of her identity as a woman which is unbearable to her. She is expected to be different from other women in her behaviour, thoughts and attitudes.

Marian needs to lead a solid association with Peter, yet he doesn't comprehend her desire. She is compelled to take after Peter's activities with no contention. She is constantly ignored by Peter and anticipated that would consent to him all around. Marian's resigned nature makes him additionally cruel. She realizes that her connection with Peter is not perfect and satisfying; by and by she tries to make it productive. Atwood investigates the problem of ladies' reliance on men through her novel *The Edible Woman*. Through Marian, she depicts that weight of gentility makes lady a persecuted character and transforms Marian's identity into an accommodating adherent of her life partner, Peter. Her accommodation gives him the acknowledgment of supremacy.

At Marian's engagement party, she feels uneasy because she thinks that Peter manipulated her cleverly and made her a puppet in his hands. She takes off from her own engagement party, escaping from Peter the hunter, and joins up with Duncan. Duncan, an important person whom Marian encounters during her survey in Seymour Surveys, aptly points out that her physical restlessness and refusal to take food are due to her eating disorder, called anorexia and it is nothing but her revolt against domineering patriarchal society. Hence, Marian chances to see her true self in her meeting with Duncan. Duncan relates her inability to eat as an inner rebelliousness: “you're probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system”. (EW 192)

Marian believes that Duncan is another alternative, but when she finds out that Duncan wants to seduce and sexually exploit her, she realizes that he is not the alternative. Marian meets Duncan, but it is like jumping into the fire from the pan. Duncan's role in the novel is ambiguous as he seems to be more of a symbolic than a real character. Marian is not angry with Duncan's behaviour, instead she is faintly relieved because her relationship with Peter is filled with confusion about his personality and his motives. She sees both Peter and Duncan in

their true colours and understands how she has allowed both these men in her life to use and consume her in the process of victimization.

The famous cake-baking episode at the end of the novel is developed with symbolic possibilities. The cake baked by Marian is shaped like a woman, looks like a pink and white doll, and symbolizes the conventional, suppressed image of women in society. The cake which she bakes is at once a remedy, a solution, a self-discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. Sharon Wilson concedes that Marian "returns to the society" that has oppressed her, but maintains that there is a symbolic agency in Marian's return: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake – the woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food". The cake, which Marian bakes and eats, shows the development of her vision and her refusal to be a victim. 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."

Marian claims that she cannot be manipulated by people like Peter and Duncan. Marian is able to destroy the society's stereotypes of femininity through the ingenious mirroring device of the cake and free herself to realize her own true identity. When Marian serves Peter the cake, she consciously and verbally rejects the roles of a mother oppressed by her reproductive function, of a wife, of an over submissive female, of an underpaid worker, and of an ideal manipulated woman. Her body does not have to express her inner conflict and rebellion anymore. As Peter runs off, her appetite returns and she regains independence by eating the cake. By using the food imagery, Atwood underlines Marian's regaining control over her own life. Throughout the novel *Marian* tries to search for her identity and finally she is able to find herself.

Conclusion:

In this way, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is about woman and her relationships to men, to society and to food and eating. It is through food and eating that Margaret Atwood discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern male dominated society. It seems that Marian has problems not only with food, but with her social relations and with her love life too. In the last chapter of the novel i.e. 31 *Marian* returns from the third person narration to the first person, which makes it clear that her search for identity is completed and now, *she is no more an Edible Woman.*'

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