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Deconstructing the Self in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract

The Edible Woman written by Margaret Atwood is a startling, funny yet intense commentary on the Canadian society as a whole. Entangled in a viscous web of hypocrisy, patriarchy and growing consumerism, the characters continuously try to escape the sordid reality of life. The story is perhaps a bildungsroman which sketches the psychological growth and development of Marian from a repressed woman shrunk in the social web to an independent individual who is ready to consume and not to be consumed anymore. The paper attempts to carve out the structural metaphors embedded in the text and Marian's deconstruction of herself from those structures. Atwood skilfully portrays the existential angst which arises due to the problem of choice and freedom man is condemned to by virtue of his existence. The paper views the novel as representative of the shift from structuralism to deconstruction and Marian undertakes the journey to break away from the bindings which society, her friends and her fiancé place upon her individuality.

Keywords: Hypocrisy, Consumerism, Deconstruction, Structure, Choice, Individual

Introduction: The Edible Woman is a classic tale of Marian McAlpin, an educated independent woman who is torn between the society and her repressed self. The story voices out the existential angst of Marian and shows how in the world full of diverse people and rigid codes, she struggles to understand her own self in detachment with the society.

Marian, as the story progresses, explores herself in the different roles she has to play to survive in the society. It is her journey from a compromising and always "adjusting" woman to an individual who asserts her existence away from all social essence. Atwood plants Marian in a complex web of human relationships. The multiple characters layer the different aspects of a typical society. Marian works in a market research company and is unsure about the future prospects of her job. She has in her life her colleagues, all girls; her room-mate Ainsley, her college friends, Clara and Len. Besides these, she is involved with a lawyer; Peter who, she thinks is very pragmatic and is an ideal choice for marriage. However, Ainsley does not think so and Marian, too, is quite unsure about her choice of Peter.

Atwood carefully details Marian's relationship with all these characters and depicts how these people work as external forces in Marian's life and affect her existence and every choice she is destined to make by virtue of her existence. Marian is seen dubiously introspecting of her decision to work in Seymour Surveys and she justifies her job saying, "What else can u do with a BA these days?" However, she imagines herself in Ainsley's job working much better than Ainsley. Marian realizes Peter is seriously involved with her and they decide to marry. However, she hardly decides anything as she always ends up asking Peter to decide for her. Her inability to voice herself out makes her psychologically suffocated and at one point of time, she realizes she is not able to consume anything. The society takes her decisions and she lets them adjust her, assimilate her and consume her in their own ways. Perhaps this is what makes her abstain herself from meat and kinds of flesh and even roots. She lives up on salad diet primarily.

The force of resistance and expression dawns upon her after she meets Duncan, the aimless graduate student of English Literature, while conducting door to door interviews for an ad campaign. It is he, who with his extremely callous and outwardly strange yet radical attitude makes her realize the mask she has been wearing to please everyone. It is after her encounter with Duncan that for the first time she behaves awkwardly when she, Peter, Ainsley and Len meet up. She cannot tolerate the manner in which Peter sidelines her and engrosses himself conversing with Len about camera and a violent, bloody hunting episode. She moves out and even after going to Len's place hides herself under his bed. After the scene, she and Peter reconcile the next morning and her behaviour is assumed to be her possessiveness towards Peter. He proposes her for marriage and she accepts. She justifies her choice by the saying that she had always thought of marriage, kids and family. She attempts to console her choice by knowing other people's reactions about her engagement without much effect. She is peculiarly attracted to Duncan and despite her engagement to Peter, she meets him and shares intimate moments with him. As the day of wedding approaches, Peter decides to throw a party and expects Marian to dress up like a Barbie – doll in a red gown with hair done in the most fashionable way. She complies with him and identifies herself to a cake with layers of icing and ornamentation done on her. She invites Duncan and his roommates, her office colleagues, Clara and Joe without informing Peter. Marian leaves the party half-way and moves out with Duncan to spend the night in a hotel. The next morning she realizes that she is not able to eat anything and that she has to confront her problems, as her problems, according to Duncan are all in her mind and only she can solve them.

Marian resolves the problem by baking a cake in the shape of a woman clad in red and offering it to Peter as her substitute for she is an individual and Peter cannot assimilate her. Peter leaves and Marian breaks her fast by consuming the cake. She calls off the wedding and restores her food-habits and traverses back to reality from a masked world. Marian at the end of the tale is relaxed, happy and satisfied watching Duncan eating the cake with full attention. Marian pronounces a strong statement that she is a woman, an individual and not at all edible and easily devoured by the external forces.

Besides Marian, Atwood nurtures the character of Ainsley in the most radical manner possible. She does what she wants, ignoring and not giving a damn about the society. She cares not about the extremely careful land-lady and by the end of the story quits the room to her independence. She utilizes Len for becoming a mother and then marries Fish to give her baby a Father image as advised by the doctor. Peter is also shown to be extremely obsessed with his friends and seems psychologically displaced and alienated at the announcement of the marriage of his last bachelor friend, Trigger. The office virgins and the land-lady with her "child" are emblematic of the so called social code of virginity and purity of women. Duncan many a times reflects the other (inner) side of Marian's psyche. Perhaps he is not a character but just a mirror image of Marian herself who sets Marian on a journey deep down within her own self to make her realize that there are no structures within and outside.

Atwood divides the novel into three parts. The three parts are uniquely treated in terms of narrative techniques and use of images, metaphors and structures. The first part acquaints the readers with the existing social structure relating to women, marriage, career, marriage, motherhood, love, commitment and family. Atwood consciously chooses Marian to narrate her tale with extreme caution of the fact that she adheres by the social structures. The second part delves deeper into the protagonist's psyche and she shows signs of resistance. She detaches her soul from her body and narrates her tale in third-person voice. She suffers throughout till she deconstructs herself and finally frees herself from all the shackles in the third part. There she embraces her body and regains her control over her voice and enjoys narrating her story in the first voice. The present paper attempts to study the text as the interplay of various structures and Marian's attempts to deconstruct herself from all the external forces which wall her, engulf her and try to make her adjust.

The Being "adjusted" to fit into Structures: Atwood throughout the first part draws neat structures and Marian is seen to adjust fairly in them. Life is not run on principles but on adjustments; she maintains. Her office is described as an ice-cream sandwich in the executives and the machines occupy the upper and the lower crusts respectively, while the middle layer is occupied by the women, who are supposed to take care of the interviewers. The women department is sandwiched between the upper and lower men and the air is humid and suffocating there with air-conditioners hardly functioning properly. The pension plan obligatory to sign on gives Marian an expression of being captivated in vault. Parallel to the description runs the description of the rice pudding which Marian is asked to taste and suggest the flavours. Marian is a dissatisfied consumer throughout the first part and mostly remains hungry. Food is the dominant image all through the novel and the title rightly substantiates the depth of it. The structure of steak which Peter eats with all its parts is visualized by Marian as an organic whole cow alive and breathing. Again, while Peter and Len talk about the bloody rabbit hunted down, Marian identifies herself as the rabbit out of its burrow which is equally at a risk of being hunted down bloodily. She thinks that she allows Peter to use her as a two-dimensional outline and a stage prop. Apart from the food, Atwood draws binaries in the first part. Saussure maintains that language is structured system of signifier and signified and that, meaning is best understood in relation to

opposition. Here too, Marian and Ainsley depict the binaries. The office-virgins also form a part of the rigid good-bad structure. The first person Marian interviews who teaches her a lesson on Christianity and ethics also falls in this category. Atwood carefully explores power relationships in Marian's life and shows how she lets herself being dominated by others. She and Ainsley are supposed to live in a symbiotic adjustment with each other with a sensible division of labour. However, when it comes to the landlady, it always Marian who saves Ainsley. She does all the talk while the other simply pretends innocence. While Ainsley always does what she feels, Marian continuously struggles while making decisions and all through the novel she provides justifications of her choices and tries to console herself by knowing other people's reactions on her choice. Marian thinks Ainsley's choice of dress as radical but on her way to office, in high heels and 'decent' dress, she feels a "private atmosphere condensing around her like a plastic bag".

Marriage and pregnancy are important issues Atwood raises in the first part and continues all along. Clara and Joe are the embodiment of the social structure of family and kids. While Clara is pregnant for the third time, Joe is having an extremely tough time managing tow kids and an expecting wife. He appears domesticated which Ainsley detests. The structure of a soon expecting Clara makes Marian uncomfortable as she thinks Clara is possessed. Children are described as "barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to rock", by Marian. (Pg.19, Atwood)

Peter too seems engrossed in a psychological crisis with his last bachelor friend Trigger getting married leaving him as the single bachelor in their entire group. He is distressed and cannot accept the situation. Likewise, Marian again structures herself to behave in a considerate way so as not to offend him. In this crisis, Peter perhaps attempts to fill the void of his friend with Marian who is the most reliable and sensible person. Marian, here becomes the substitute and adjusts herself to fix in that position. The structure of Peter's home decor also has a pattern and he is believed to have installed new things as carpet, blanket, bath-tub etc. each to mark the marriage of a friend. Marian likens Peter's bath-tub to a coffin and her commitment there as symbolic of the death of a part of herself.

Quite radically, Ainsley is all set to become a mother and she is in search of a handsome man who can make her a mother but she does not want to become a wife. She has heard of Len, Marian's friend and is interested in him to serve hr purpose. Marian, however, does not want Ainsley to ruin her friend's life but cannot help. Without invitation, Ainsley joins Marian and Peter when they go to meet Len. Marian is there completely adjusted by both Peter who is so busy with Len that he fails to even look at her; and Ainsley who is pretending to be an innocent school-goer to lure Len. She feels at a loss and after listening to Peter's bloody tale of hunting rabbit, she feels herself ditched as he never said it to her before. The aura of pretence and hypocrisy takes a toll on her, and much inspired by Duncan, she resists, reacts and leaves the place. She creates quite a scene and after going to Len's home hides herself under the bed to avoid the noise and external force. However, the next day, they decide to get involved takes upon the responsibility to become more "organized" so as not to make a mess like Joe and Clara.

Throughout the first part, her relationship with all the people bear something in common- she never resists and always adjusts in the existing structures to find the meaning of her life in those structures. She can make her body and words adjust for her, but her psyche rejects such adjustments and gradually she begins to lose appetite as she lets people devour her, she cannot become a violent consumer and stays by on a salad diet.

Deconstructing the Self: The entire second part, Atwood shows fragmented structures. There is a marked fragmentation in Marian's self also. She detaches herself from her body and narrates her story in the third person narration. Clara delivers a baby and deflates "toward her normal size". The separation of the mother-baby relaxes Marian who looks forward to meeting the normal Clara again. Detaching from herself, Ainsley further asks Marian to detach from her room as she plans to spend intimate time with Len. The reference to pumpkin seeds and pumpkin shells, egg shells all intensify the sense of fragmentation. Other references of Emmy's skin drying and leaving flakes; images of moon, full and half; the broken mirror at Duncan's home intensify the sense of fragmentation and decentralisation.

Duncan overtakes the second part and makes Marian embark on the journey towards her independence. He asks Marian to give him some clothes as he wants to do some the ironing. The very act of ironing is symbolic of the monotony and the futility of life. This act of ironing alludes to the Myth of Sisyphus where Sisyphus is asked to carry a boulder to a pointed hill only to have it rolled back. As Sartre maintains, life does not carry with it a presupposed meaning; it is absurd and meaningless. Human beings are forced to take the responsibility of the choices they are condemned to make. Marian struggles throughout in the process of making choices; she is unconfident of her job, of her marriage with Peter, and is uncertain of her future. Experience and enjoyment of the present time lack in Marian's relationship with Peter. She tries to fix her future but she fails to realize that nothing is fixed until Duncan takes her to rim of the city to a ravine to show her that it is as deep as she wants to see it. There is no structure and her search for one is creating the problem for her. Derrida in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences' deletes the structural linguistic "centre" and eliminates the possibility of a controlling agency in language. He leaves the use of language as an unregulatable play of purely relational elements in a circular motion. Meanings there, are not derived in Difference but are deferred and relayed to other words. Building upon Levi Strauss' work, Derrida introduces the concept of Totalization. Derrida says that language and a finite language excludes totalization -not because of the nature of the field. This field is in effect, the field of the play, that is, a field of infinite substitutions, only because it is finite; that is instead of being too large, it is just short of a centre.

The Edible Woman too turns out be a finite text, short of a centre, like the central character Marian. Marian is the substitute for Ainsley to the landlady; she is substitute for Trigger to Peter; she is the substitute for laundromat to Duncan and chocolates are a substitute for cigarettes to Duncan. Again, Len is the substitute for husband to Ainsley and Fish is the substitute for Len to her. Marian is left to wonder if Duncan is also a substitute for her. He

lends her an escape from the reality awaiting her and makes her enjoy the present time. She does not necessarily have to answer everything and anything to Duncan; she does not ask him after her buns his hand while ironing and he does not expect of her to say anything. While with Peter, Marian ruminates, he would wait for reply after saying her “I love you”, and she would exert herself for the same.

The climax is reached when Peter calls upon Marian for a group photograph in the party thrown to celebrate their marriage. She realizes that she has to deconstruct herself from the frame. She runs away and decides to spend the night with Duncan in a hotel. The party, says Duncan was a masquerade. Duncan's roommate does not even recognize the changed, presentable, socially gorgeous lady in red to be Marian. Peter's instruction to Marian about how to dress, how to pose, how to behave, and how to live lay bare the hypocritical structure every woman in the society is expected to adjust into for the sake of assimilating in the society and not remaining different. She elopes and escapes from the external forces of domination which refer to her as “yum, yum” and attempt to devour her. Marian is not able to consume anything at all. She now realizes that only she has the solution to her problem and she is solely responsible for her existence and choice. She bakes a cake of the shape of a woman resembling the mask she wore to the party. She calls Peter and offers the edible woman in the form of a cake to him as a substitute to her. Atwood, through the mouthpiece of Marian pronounces a strong statement against the entire society who view woman merely as the reproducer class meant to be consumed by the society.

In the final chapter, Marian regains control of herself. But this time, she does not want to control herself in structural and temporal borders. She appears to be confident and happy; more importantly, she appears to be independent for she no more relies on Duncan too. She calls off her marriage, respects Ainsley's marriage with Fish as she could get what she wanted to, and embarks on a new quest for a job, a home and presumably a boyfriend. She gets back her appetite and deconstructs herself from the webs, structures, snarling of the telephone lines and lenses of the camera. Duncan too, breaks free from what he thought to be the substitute of his parents-his roommates and starts afresh.

The Edible Woman, therefore is Marian's journey from a woman who adjust to it into structures to a woman who deconstructs her femininity to float in the circular and immense ocean of individuality. Not just the meaning of this text, but the meaning of life is also not fixed and permanent and is continuously deferred, substituted and multiplied.

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