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RESUSCITATING ECOFEMINISM IN *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, the seminal figure of Canadian literature plays a key role in framing and construction of Canadian culture as well as its literary identity. Her magnum opus novels contain multitudinous voices that respond and resolve numerous socio-political, cultural and human issues. Her works portray an in-depth sense of the intricacy and perplexity of human and non-human life in Canada. She knits the wool of heterogeneous issues viz Feminism, politics, culture, gender, ecology and reflects those into a unified whole, so as to depict plaguing of her nation Canada. Her novels directly as well as indirectly present the diverse images of womanhood in the backdrop of the social, historical, environmental and political settings. Her first and foremost novel *The Edible Woman* expostulate female objectification and the authoritative pillaging and ravaging attitude of masculinity towards women and ecology, as from centuries together women are being victimized by the double standard morality, authority and hierarchy of male dominated society. She depicts how women are being sidelined, exploited and marginalized in a patriarchal society. The novel deconstructs all phallogocentric power structures that subjugate women and nature at numerous levels.

**Keywords:** feminism, ecology, gender, womanhood, masculinity, phallogocentric power.

Atwood has portrayed how Marian the protagonist of the novel along with other women's shattered civil individuality qualifies the utilization of all her parts; logical, spiritual, material and intellectual into a cultural agenda. The title of the novel 'Edible' is an adjective that raises and evokes the idea that women are victims to be destroyed or utilized. Atwood pursues to abolish intellectual, physical, logical and spiritual duplicity in the novel. She seeks to eliminate power/powerless, mind/body, logical/emotional, head/heart dualism in the novel. Marian, the protagonist and Peter, her prospective spouse, serves the dualism which survives in patriarchy. Atwood has developed an outline which discloses the egoist temperament of man versus females and animals. She closely discloses how man and their disillusionary ways abuse both woman and nature. The novel examines how men wordlessly dominate women and nature to please their limitless hunger. The title 'edible' itself shouts out the heartbreaking status of woman as an object for entertainment and consumption. The protagonist of the novel Marian MacAlpin is an employee in a marketing company namely Seymour surveys. The organization she works in is highly biased in terms of gender inequality as it doesn't prefer to provide jobs to pregnant women. The marketing company of Seymour survey regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty. The novel seems to echo

Willy Lowman's metaphor, "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a (wo)man is not a piece of fruit" (Miller, Web), as the company is highly prejudiced against women especially pregnant ones. It is a direct rebuke of their consumption as women are taken advantage of when they are budding but during their monthly cycles, pregnancy and maternity period they are considered as humiliating and catastrophic to the company as MrsBogue prefers girls to be not only unmarried but non-pregnant also.

The protagonist has to do least important work all though she is highly qualified like the men working in the same company. Atwood through Marian MacAlpin brings forth gender discrimination that becomes an obstacle in women's prosperity and development. The very structure of Seymour organization is symbolic of patriarchal society as its top up is occupied by men who are considered to be privileged citizens in parallel to women who are to remain in bottom down or ground floor as they are considered to be home economists to work like typical housewives. If we apply Plato's human body analogy to the Seymour organization, men are head and always to command and women are legs ready to obey. M.F Salat while commenting on the symbolic structure of organization puts forth, "The three layers represent the three plains of reality: mind, body and matter. The men are minds and women are bodies". (Salat,67).

Marian like other women is not also given access to the top floor, which is very much suggestive of exploitation of women in patriarchal hegemony. She feels entrapped and sandwiched between the oppression of the man above her and the machines below her as she asks herself: "What, then could I expect to turn into at Seymour surveys? I couldn't become one, of the man upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person or one of the questionnaire ladies, as that would be a step down". (Atwood, 34)

Marian could no longer remain Hamlet (a legendary Shakespearian character famous for indecisiveness) and she finally decided to marry Peter who is a lawyer by profession. She starts to accept the social conventions as she tells herself that "Life is not run by principles but by adjustments" (Atwood, 46). Marian in the heart of hearts knows the fact that by marrying Peter she would be nothing but a servant fulfilling Peter's wishes, pleasing him and managing his sexual desires as the female body has always been a site of oppression for men and a major weapon of patriarchy to restraint and subjugate women. Marian makes out that she has completely lost control over herself and the world (marriage) she herself got into. Although she feels a need to escape yet she neglects and turns blind eyes and deaf ears to her demand and starts to act passively. She even has to surrender her decision-making process to Peter: "I would rather have you decided that ... I would rather leave the big decisions up to you". (Atwood, 109). Moreover, Marian is pretty sure that she has to obey Peter else she would get punishment from him. She convinced herself to believe that her relationship with Peter is not cake and ale at all. So Marian is completely controlled and consumed by Peter. She fears to appear that 'absolute she' towards Peter and performs the conventional role of a female adequately. She knows that she will even lose shelter along with Ainsley as they had got the apartment only by performing the role of femininity but with the passage of time she feels more uncomfortable by playing the melodramatic role of wife. She pretty soon feels that Peter is the synonym of mistake that she herself as committed. She feels dejected and desolated as her relationship with Peter turns not rosy at all. She gradually distances from her real self and lets herself to be consumed and subjugated at the helm of her husband. In other words it is she who is subordinating her own self. She realizes that Peter is destroying her individuality only when Peter narrates his hunting story to Len. She feels herself fragmented and consumed as she starts to co-relate herself with the poor victim Rabbit (Hunted) at the hands of Peter (Hunter). She feels colonized at the hands of colonizer. Her eyes turn translucent and she could hardly see anything around as they get filled with tears and drops of salty liquid starts to roll down her cheeks. She mentions:

After a while I notice with mid curiosity that a large drop of something we had materialized on the table near my hand. I packed it with my finger and smudged it around a little before. I realized it with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to breakdown and make a scene, I couldn't. (Atwood, 82)

The noteworthy thing is the imagery of hunter and rabbit which is at the heart of ecofeminism as they believe that man is ruthlessly destroying ecology and woman. For Ecofeminists woman has always been close to nature, as here in this case she is consciously identifying herself as a part of ecology (rabbit). Furthermore ecofeminists believe that it is patriarchy which destroys ecology. Here Peter is the representative of patriarchy who destroys Marian and rabbit. Marian is wholly and solely governed by Peter. She is a toy manipulated by him, as she has become an abiotic person whose body has been taken over by electro-mechanical device (Peter). It is who bridges even her eating habits as we see no verbal confrontation on part of Marian to Peter's controlling and commanding nature yet pushing away of unfinished meals manifests Marian's protest and powerlessness against it. She gradually develops an eating disorder which is scientifically known as Anorexia. It gets manifested for the first time when she and Peter are dining out. Emma Parker remarks "Her non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness". (Parker, *You Are*).

The Ecofeminist concerns find its manifestation through the animal imagery used in the novel. She feels pain in every muscle even at the cooked steak that Peter is skillfully consuming at the restaurant. Marian draws a parallel between the barbarous act of slaughtering the animal and the polite etiquette Peter is possessing while slicing, chewing and swallowing a thick, flat piece of meat:

She watched the capable hands holding, the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures cutting, and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. How skillfully he did it: bit tearing, no ragged edges, and yet it was a violent action. (180)

After the steak episode Marian feels a complete change in her behavior. Step by step she gives up eating various other products because that brings to her mind that every living soul has lifeblood, be that cow, chicken or carrot. After no time chicken too is out of list as it reminds her "an arm with goose bumps". (Atwood, 193) It comes forth that food too is very much alike to herself, to her physique. She is an eatable thing as she intensely dislikes foodstuffs. When Marian cooks food for guests, even a carrot seems to her alive and victim of hard-hearted people who are not able to feel its pain, its scream while peeling its crisp orange skin, carrot seems to her personified as a living human being. In such male dominated society in which Marian lives, the otherness of woman and animal is reinforced by the act of disguising their true nature. The transmutation of animal into meat and rendering different names into body parts such as rib, loin, shank etc. conceals their real identity likewise women is objectified either she is seen from front (breasts) or back (butts) by men. The patriarchy wishes her to create the continuous reformation from the perfect to most perfect. She is also fancied in terms of chunks as breasts, butts, thighs, abs etc.,

Marian comes to agreement that man living in the material world has also turned materialistic because he turns the fair foul and foul fair as the advertisement provides clean and a clear picture of a barbarous act with clean hands justifying the innocence of a hunter. But for ecofeminists in Macbethian terminology all the perfumes of Arabia and all the water of the world can't wash the inhuman act done by the hunter to hunted.

In the patriarchal society, male domination is directly responsible for the pathetic condition of women. In the novel Peter forcibly wants to imprison Marian in her luring dress behind the camera and put her under the dark film forever. During the party, Peter tries to click a photograph of Marian wearing red dress keep his collections of guns in the background. The conspicuous thing to look at here is the guns which is the symbol of power. Marian in due time pinpoints the 'black light meter' (Atwood, 299) which dangerously and phallically protrudes from the camera. Marian withstands against it by starting to lean against the wall to abstain from the lens of camera arranged by Peter. She presumes herself to be a slaughter or a sexually assaulted victim. Here Marian's state of affairs can be co-related with sexual object or blood-soaked rabbit as Marian acknowledges herself as a target to be consumed, silenced or assimilated according to the Peter's instructions. Besides camera, Peter is conjoined with guns, knives, and hunting magazines. His apartment is suffused, "with books that hold Peter's collection of weapons and two rifles, pistol and several wicked-looking knives (Atwood, 189-190). The weapons thus reflect the power to suppress and subjugate others by destroying both ecology (rabbit) and woman (Marian).

Marian towards the end realizes that it is her complicity which makes her an object to be exploited and victimized. She also learns that the female body in present consumerist society is merchandised as an edible object to be devoured and consumed by the patriarchy. She decides to expose and fight all the exploitative strategies of man who gain profit not only by marketing women and ecology but also by suppressing and victimizing them in the backdrop of technology and the phallogocentric power structures. Marian altogether gives up her passivity and wants to rise up. She no longer wants to be tamed, being under the exploitative strategies of man. Eventually she starts to bake the cake – woman to expose the folly of Peter and at the same time revolt against the patriarchy. She eventually offers the baked cake- women to Peter and says, “you have been trying to destroy me. You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made a substitute something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted along. Isn’t?” (Atwood, 352)

The Baking scene is the heart of the novel as it has literal as well as symbolic meaning. Marian who initially had developed an eating disorder eats her own cake image and ends up her starvation and relationship with Peter. Metaphorically, baking of cake symbolizes giving up passivity. It also means that she breaks the stereotypical and conventional role of woman from recessive, meek, tamed, control and consumed to dominant, bold, wildish, powerful and consumer. Marian realizes her true self after eating the cake herself which she initially had offered to Peter who refuses and walks away. Gloria only reviews, “Marian’s eating of cake woman destroys a false image and reabsorbs her culturally split-off female self”. (Onley,74)

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