



SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

Ms. Varsba Patil, Department of English, JET's Z. B. Patil College, Dhule (Maharashtra)

Received: 30/06/2017

Edited: 08/07/2017

Accepted: 14/07/2017

Abstract: Margaret Atwood, poet, novelist, literary critic, story writer, environmentalist, is a distinguished writer in Canadian literature. Her literature has been published in more than forty languages. She has been honoured with many awards nationally as well internationally. Her book *Survival* helps the readers to understand Canada, Canadian history and Canadian literature.

Margaret Atwood has occupied a pioneering position in contemporary Canadian women's fiction in English. She throws light on the politics of gender which emerges through her novels. Her novels expose the gender oppressions and recommends for writing of women's history. Her novels show women protagonists' journey towards survival, individuality, self-identity and freedom in this mechanized and inhuman patriarchal structure. She expects a synthesizing attitude to live as a human being. In the present paper I'll make an attempt to bring forth the search for Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.

Key words: Search for identity, Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Women*.

Introduction:

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* was published in 1969. Atwood shows that male authority, hierarchy, competition, double standards of morality and discrimination, the governing elements victimize women for centuries. She has also shown that a woman is marginalized and exploited in a patriarchal, capitalistic and consumer society.

The protagonist of *The Edible Woman* Marian MacAlpin is a researcher working for Seymour Surveys- the market organization. Atwood throws light on gender discrimination which hampers woman's development and progress. The organization is the place where gender inequality prevails. Marian is qualified like men working in the same organization but she has to do less important work. Marian says:

Sometimes I wonder just which things are part of my job especially when I find myself calling up garage mechanics to ask them about their pistons and gaskets or handing out pretzels to suspicious old ladies on street corners. I know what Seymour Surveys hired me as – I'm supposed to spend my time revising the questionnaires, turning the convoluted and

overlay-subtle prose of the psychologists who write them into single questions as the people who answer them. A question like, 'In what percentile would you place the visual impact value is not useful. (Atwood, EW 13)

The Seymour Organization itself is a hierarchical structure where the top floor of this research organization is occupied by men. This floor is not accessible to Marian. Marian is not willing to go to the lower level where house wives are working. Marian notices gender discrimination in the organization which is symbolic of patriarchal society. M.F.Salat remarks, "The three layers represent the three planes of reality: mind, body and matter. The men are minds; the women are bodies." (Salat, 67) This categorization is one of the features of patriarchy. Marian faces the problem of identity crisis.

Marian's getting imprisoned in the middle layer doesn't let her enjoy freedom and individuality. She cannot use her potentials. Her growth is hampered by the patriarchal hegemony. She experiences the expectations of a man from a woman. It's very difficult for a man to see woman working as a researcher. Men like to see women

playing the roles assigned by patriarchy. Marian looks for the option to change her situation and to gain identity.

Marian thinks about Ainsley. She shares an apartment with her. Ainsley is a self-declared feminist who is fond of reading books on psychology and anthropology. Initially, she is unconventional. She doesn't want to perform the role assigned to women. She is against marriage but wants to be an unwed mother. Ainsley allows herself to get pregnant by Len. A psychologist's lecture on the importance of a strong father image for a healthy upbringing and development of a child makes her to change her view of marriage. Ainsley decides to get a husband just to give the father image to her child. When Len refuses to get married to her, she marries Fischer to provide the father image to her child. Ainsley follows the traditional set up and performs the role of a wife and mother. She becomes edible in the marriage market and consumerist society. Marian rejects this choice. Marian is constructed in such a way that doesn't allow her to select this choice. She doesn't want to let herself be edible like Ainsley in marriage market.

The second option available to Marian is her classmate Clara. Marian finds that Clara is impractical. Clara is victimized in the male-dominated society. Clara has not taken any precautionary measures to avoid repetitive pregnancies. She has become no more than a child-bearing machine. As a result she is dependent on her husband. She is subdued and has devoted herself to play gender roles dutifully. Marian rejects this choice.

The third choice for Marian is of her colleagues- Lucy, Emmie and Millie. These women are not careerists. They just want to be someone's wife and mother. They were not told to think of themselves as independent women. Marian rejects these women who allow themselves to be victimized.

Marian looks at Peter as someone who can free her from Seymour's surveys and help her to live a life of stability. She thinks that Peter is an ideal choice for her. In course of time she realizes that Peter is a manipulator. He uses her for his selfish gains. Marian realizes that she allows herself to be

sold as a consumable object. She moves towards subordination of her own self. She looks at Peter as a destroyer of her individuality. She suffers an identity crisis. Marian's survival is at stake. She doesn't want to be an edible object. She decides not to let Peter to use her as a consumable item.

At this stage Marian meets Duncan. She thinks that Duncan can provide her safety and shelter. But Duncan takes advantage of Marian's credulous nature and exploits her. Duncan seduces her and degrades her womanhood. Marian's relation with him shatters her completely.

Marian doesn't want to let herself be consumed. So she stops eating altogether. Emma Parker remarks, "Her non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness." (Prabhakar, 44) She realizes that Peter and Duncan are representatives of patriarchy. They seduce her and treat her as an object. She gets a new meaning in life after this realization. She denies her passivity. She refuses to be a victim. Linda Hutcheon says:

"As both a Canadian and a woman, Atwood protects any tendency towards easy passivity and naivety, she refuses to allow women to deny their complicity in the power structure that may subject them." (12)

Marian thinks that her complicity is also responsible for her exploitation and victimization. In the process of awareness she learns that there are different male strategies of exploitation. She also learns that a woman in today's consumerist society is treated as a commodity and an edible object to be consumed by the male. She opposes various strategies of exploitation of women.

Marian decides to fight against those people who exploit women and gain profit by using obscene posters of women. She fights against those who use technology to oppress and victimize women.

Marian wants to rise up in life by giving up passivity. She doesn't want to be a victim of exploitative male strategies. So she bakes the cake-woman to test and expose Peter and Duncan. She

offers the cake-woman to Peter as a woman substitute to him. Marian says:

You've 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 it. (Atwood, 344)

By baking a cake woman and offering it to Peter she destroys the stereotype role of a woman. Her gesture is symbolic of protest against patriarchy which defines a woman's role and treats her as a commodity. Her act is also symbolic of realization of her true self. This act symbolizes her awakening regarding her identity.

Marian is a free soul now to live her life in her own way. She becomes a representative of women who want to rebel against patriarchy. By consuming the cake image of herself she has become a consumer rather than a consumable object. Catherine Mclay remarks:

"The cake "feast" signals the celebration of Marian's new freedom and even rebirth. She is from the spell, from her identification of herself with the victim. No longer isolated and alien, Marian has rejoined society."(67)

At the end, Marian has gained a sense of identity and a new knowledge of self. The story of self-discovery of Marian is a story of woman who is a search of a meaningful human identity.

Work Cited:

1. Ashraf, Rumania. *Margaret Atwood's Fiction Self and Society*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2012. Print.
2. Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. London: Virago Press, 1980. Print.
3. Hutchinson, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
4. Prabhakar, M. *Feminism/ Postmodernism Margaret Atwood's Fiction*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999. Print.