

MARIAN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S  
NOVEL 'THE EDIBLE WOMAN', A STUDY OF CANADIAN  
LITERATURE

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**Abstract :**

*This paper is an attempt to study a female writer of the Canadian Literature, the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the perspective of feminism. Feminism is a movement, which got focus in the 1960's. So as a worldwide movement one finds its impact on Canadian Literature also. Margaret Atwood is one of the dominant figures in it; hence her first novel is taken for the study. Here, as per the title of the paper it implies Marian's or protagonist's search for identity but it is not only about her but also represents 'female as a race.'*

**Key Words : Feminism, Victimization, Survival, and Cultural Conflict.**

**Introduction :**

**About the Author :**

When we hear or read the name of Margaret Atwood our thinking automatically goes towards the Canadian Literature as she is one of the pioneers and prominent writer in the history of Canadian Literature. She says about herself that She - *"tried very hard over the past few decades to demonstrate our own existence our own right to exist."*

Margaret Atwood is a representative novelist of the contemporary world so she becomes aware of the real problems which have been faced by the *Canadian people*. Her most of the novels deal with the *Canadian consciousness* and the cultural conflicts between the *Canadian people*.

Her full name is Margaret Eleanor Atwood. She was born in the 1939 in *Ottawa* and moved to *Toronto* with her family in the 1946. She studied at *Victoria College, University of*

Toronto, where she received a bachelor's degree in 1961. Then she received the master's degree in Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1962. Her work includes poetry collection, novels, a collection of short stories, children books, non fictional books as well as works on criticism.

It is very praiseworthy that she got various awards for her literary contribution. Her contribution to Canadian literature was most recently recognized in 2000, when she received Britain's highest literary award, **the \$47,000 Booker Prize**. Atwood donated the prize money to environmental and literary causes. Her generosity is not at all a surprising development to her many fans.

#### **About the Novel :**

*The Edible Woman* is the first novel written by Margaret Atwood. It is the novel of the 1960's. It centers on **Marian MacAlpin**, a single working woman who is also the heroine of the novel. The novel 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**.

Thus, through the descriptions of the above mentioned characters it is observed that all the characters are related to its heroine, i.e. **Marian MacAlpin**, who tries to search her own identity throughout the whole novel.

#### **Marian's Search for Identity :**

In *The Edible Woman* the novelist Margaret Atwood has presented the struggle and conflict in the mind of the protagonist to search her own *identity* through various point-of-views, such as feminism, victimization, survival, cultural conflict, narrative technique, and Marian's success. These points are studied in the novel as follow.

#### **Feminism:**

It is a novel written during the period of 1960's and according to the world survey

in this period there was a big success of the feminism. There were some books or essays, which talk about feminism. These are *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by **Mary Wollstonecraft**, *The Subjection of Women* (an essay, 1869) By **John Stuart Mill**, *A Room of One's Own* (an essay, 1929) by **Virginia Woolf**, *The Second Sex* (1949) written by **Simone de Beauvoir**, French writer and *The Feminine Mystique* (a book, 1963) by an **American writer Betty Friedan**. This is all about the world survey but during this period there were lots of things or events which happened in the Canada which encouraged the Margaret Atwood to write or to point out the issue of feminism through her work, for e.g. in the 1965-69 forty women in the Canada are reported to have died because of illegal attempts to end their pregnancy and finally we also find that the number of abortions in Canada exceeded to one lac.

It is also noticed that in the introduction of the Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* she says : ***"It is pro feminist rather than feminist, there was no women's movement insight when I was composing the book in 1965."***

In the novel two characters *Marian* and *Ainsley* are dissatisfied with the man made values. They are not happy to be mere wives because according to them it would be lost of one's own existence.

At the beginning of the novel, as per the description of *Ainsley* it seems that she is a *feminist*. She hates men. She wants to become a mother but she doesn't want husband so she uses *Len* for her purpose. But later, when she meets a psychiatrist, she learns the importance of a father figure in a child's life. Then she tries persuading *Len* to get married to her for the good of unborn child because she fears that her child may become a homosexual if he doesn't have father figure in his life and finally she gets marry with *Fish*, *Duncan's* roommate and settles down with him. In this way she becomes a pseudo feminist character in the novel.

### **Victimization point-of-view :**

The striking title of the first novel *The Edible Woman* clearly shows *Atwood's* basic theme and also gives information about the plot and motifs of the novel. The novel is about *Marian MacAlpin*, a young Canadian woman, who as her wedding day finds herself unable to eat, eliminating the first steak, then all meat, eggs and finally even carrots also, which

cried out for mercy.

At the beginning of the novel there is a fine description about *Peter*, *Marian's* boyfriend. He has been described by *ordinariness raised to perfection*. He is a successful person. His appearance, lifestyle, mannerism and beliefs suggest the same perfection. In their relationship *Peter* has made some terms which are accepted by *Marian* though she doesn't want, for e.g. *Peter* asks *Marian* to mourn on his best friend *Trigger's* marriage. *Marian* as expected by *Peter* pretends to be very upset and convulses him. *Peter* also decides not to get married but will meet twice in a week.

When *Len*, *Peter* and *Marian* meet up at the 'Park Plaza Hotel', *Marian* is particularly revolted when she watches *Peter* describes the 'act of gutting a rabbit'. She fails to realize that how any person could get pleasure in killing of an innocent animal.

Then from the chapter 17 onwards it is observed that 'an unmistakable food phobia in *Marian's* mind'. It is the first time when *she* and *Peter* are dining in restaurant after their engagement. She sees *Peter* very neatly slicing the chunk of meat on his plate and actually imagines a cow being slaughtered. She finds herself unable to eat meat as she connects herself with the subconscious identity of the cow. She finds herself in the position of oppress and this manifests as nausea towards food as all food articles shape the common platform for victimization.

It is also seen that in the scene of 'shooting,' *Marian* becomes a victim. Once *Peter* plans a party and for the sake of *Peter* she wears a red dress and changes her hairstyle though she doesn't like. But later on she finds herself unable to recognize. On the other hand *Peter* seems to be impressed by her appearance and he takes out his camera in order to 'shoot' her. Here the word 'shoot' implies the 'physical act of shooting' or 'taking a picture' and 'a metaphorical act of shooting a prey with a gun'. Here, while *shooting*, *Marian* thinks that she would die symbolic death and her identity would be erased if she were trapped in a shot.

### Survival Point-of-View :

When the novel is studied through the survival point-of-view, one learns *Marian's* desire to search her *Identity* for e.g. in one of the episodes we find that *Marian* urges to survive under the bed in *Len's* apartment. This act again symbolizes *Marian's* search for breathing space – an alternate world in which there is no *Peter*. Here, *Marian* is fed-up in the

relationship with her boyfriend i.e. *Peter*, because *Peter* actually doesn't understand her. He looks at her by his point-of-view only. He always thinks that whatever he likes it would be *Marian's* choice. But he is not satisfied with her choice. He doesn't like when she invites her friends *Clara* and *Joe* for dinner. On the other hand it is *Marian*, who always wants to please him but finally it is out of her limitations, later on she cannot bear her relationship with him as she feels uncomfortable and finally decides to separate from him.

#### **From the Cultural Conflict's Point-of-View :**

In many of the novels *Margaret Atwood* expresses one or more contradictions of woman in the Western World. As per the English tradition women are often criticized and punished for the sin of 'narcissism' for loving her-own image and abilities. Atwood in her fiction challenges this traditional image of woman presented by patriarchy. Atwood is mainly concerned with deconstruction of gender politics in *The Edible Woman*. According to her, women (like *Marian*) are responsible for preparing gender related inequality in allowing them to be colonized. In the novel *Marian* does not want to adopt the posture of powerlessness. Even it is her passivity that allows other to subjugate her. In one of the scenes *Peter* proposes to marry her and *Marian* sees him as - "***A rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability...***"

Here, marriage of *Marian* and *Peter* implies having someone who would always make decisions for her. She tells that her dependence on *Peter* is quite complex that she would like to leave the big decisions on him. Thus, Atwood exposed gender politics that perpetuate male hegemony as in men.

#### **From Narrative Techniques' Point-of-View :**

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 can be observed by the very first line of the novel, as the first chapter begins with - "***I know I was all right on Friday...***"

But in this first section *Marian's* self gets lost and the chapter 13-30 are told from the third person's point-of-view. Here, chapter no. 13 begins with the following line - "***Marian was sitting listlessly at her desk...***"

Again like things in the part II all things are not all right in the final chapter i.e. Part III. In this part *Marian* gets her-self and Miss Atwood returns to the first person point-of-view. Here, the whole narration is presented through *Marian's* eye. All the language in the novel is her and can therefore be introduced as a reflection of her changing psychological constitution.

#### **Marian's Success Point-of-View :**

Throughout the novel *Marian* tries to search her identity and finally she becomes able to get herself. In this way it is *Marian's* Success. Here one observes that in the party *Marian* become uncomfortable and escapes from there with the help of *Duncan*. *Peter* goes on searching her as he wants to take a group photograph with her but he becomes angry when he cannot find her and finally phones her. On the phone *Marian* tires to give excuses but finally calls him at her home. And when *Peter* reaches there she 'serves a cake in the shape of woman' and says him :

***"You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you ?***

***You've been trying to assimilate me.***

***But I've made a substitute, something you'll like much better.***

***This is what you wanted all alone, isn't it ?"***

*Peter* looks at the cake and stares at her as he understands that what she means and goes away without telling anything. Thus, *Marian* refuses to be 'The Edible Woman.'

#### **Conclusion :**

*The Edible Woman* serves as 'a prelude to all the novels' of Margaret Atwood. In the climatic and the most symbolic scenes of the novel, *Marian* elects to run, escaping not only form *Peter* but also from *Ainsley*, *Clara* and the office virgins, and decides to escape with *Duncan*. 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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