

**Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Conflicts in  
Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman***

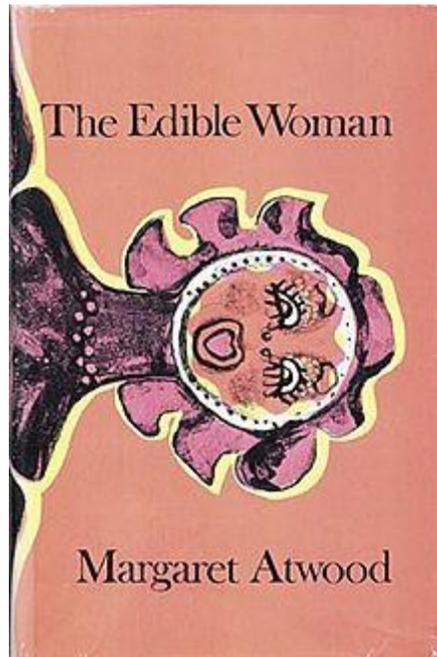
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**Abstract**



Margaret Atwood, one of the most prominent women writers of Canada has displayed remarkable insight into the working of a woman's mind. In her novel she has skillfully depicted the inner urges and conflicts in a woman's mind and her need for self-realization. She sensitively portrays the minute disturbances caused in the minds of her protagonists through various memories and experiences of life. These internal

disturbances have a strong impact on their life causing a sense of insecurity and suffocation in their relationships.

**Key Words:** Margaret Atwood, *Edible Woman*, Irrational fears, Insecurity, Abnormality, Anxiety, Self-Knowledge.

### ***The Edible Woman*, a Realistic Novel**

Margaret Atwood's maiden novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) is a realistic novel that deals with the predicament of women in a male dominated society. It projects the diverse gestures of womanhood through the lives of various women characters. It appeals for a fundamental change in the gender relations that exist in the society in order to provide women the equal status that they rightly deserve. It appeals for a fundamental change in the gender relation that exists in the society. Uday Shankar Ojha comments:

A celebrity of the millennium year, Atwood earned global reputation because of her debut novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) which became the epoch-making voice owing to her abiding and presiding commitment to women's identity, the layers and levels of consciousness in a male chauvinistic society and the myriad meanings of men-women encounter. (145).

### **Marian McAlpine**

Marian McAlpine, the protagonist's life is the central focus throughout the novel. From the society's view point, Marian seems a normal young woman, economically independent, having a sensible and perfect man as her fiancé and with a comfortable life ahead. These prospects would be every young woman's dream in life. But tracing the life of Marian, we find that her mind was not at peace with the happenings of her life. She was confused and uncomfortable about her relationships, resulting in her bodily revolts and behavioral changes which she was unable to decipher. The disapproval and protest against the socially defined roles for women began unawares in her psyche, resulting in strange thoughts and odd behavior.

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## **Role and Function of Psyche**

Psyche is said to be the centre of man's thoughts, emotions and behavior. An attempt to understand the psyche of the protagonist would account for her conscious or unconscious responses to the social and physical environment. Psyche is formed by the culmination of man's diverse thoughts and experiences right from his childhood. The stresses and strains that are laid upon man's ego help one understand the close interrelation between his thoughts and feelings and the functioning of the physical selves. The psychological conflicts that arise from the unconscious have its definite effect upon man's well being. But these physical expressions that are a component part of a transient emotional response ordinarily pass when the original stimulus for the emotional reaction is gone. Marian, the protagonist of the novel experiences many psychic disturbances and conflicts due to the various experiences that she endures in her life right from her childhood.

## **Marian's Life**

The personal bonding of love and sharing with her family is not visible in Marian's life. There seems to be an alienation from the family that is seen in her life. If she had had the emotional support and care from the family, her dilemma and sufferings could have probably been lessened. Her alienation begins when she does what she should and not what she desired. Marian always desperately needed someone to belong to. Neither did sharing an apartment with Ainsley give her that belongingness nor did the relationship with Peter. She finally finds shelter in the company of Duncan, who emotionally was more in the receiving end than providing support. In this state of crisis in the relationships, a good family support that assured security would have reduced her burdens. It is the complications in relationships that led to all the fears and anxieties that she experienced.

Fear is a reaction to danger that involves both the mind and the body. It arises from threats in the environment and gives rise to anxiety. Anxiety is a vague, general uneasiness or feeling that something bad is about to happen. Some anxiety is normal and

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appropriate, prompting us to take useful action and is therefore healthy. Anxiety becomes abnormal when it is out of proportion to the seriousness of the situation and when it does not fade away even after the passing of the danger. When fear becomes so severe causing tremendous anxiety that it interferes with normal life, they are called phobias. It is an intense fear of something that, in reality poses little or no danger. Most phobias develop in childhood, but can also develop in adults.

Fear is a major element that is expressed through many ways in the life of Marian. At times it is projected in the form of dreams, fantasies, hallucinations or it gets expressed in the form of some abnormal behavior or is tackled through certain defiance shown by her body. This fear overrules in her mind throughout the novel until she overcomes it by taking a definite decision in her life. Many a times this fear or panic is irrational and shocks her 'self' greatly. The novel presents a series of instances when fear grips Marian, making her feel insecure and helpless.

The very first instance is when she is asked to sign the pension plan in the company she works. Foreseeing herself with a hearing aid, receiving an award, disturbs her and fills her with panic. She experiences a similar panic when Peter, her fiancé narrates his hunting story to Len. As she visualizes the scene, he seemed like a predatory creature, a stranger, and she starts to panic. This fear in her was so intense that she did not notice large drops of tears fallen on the table. "I must be crying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole" (81). This sudden panic was strange to her and she was unable to control her reactions and to understand her behavior. "I locked myself into one of the plushy-pink cubicles and wept for several minutes. I couldn't understand what was happening, why I was doing this; I had never done anything like it before and it seemed to me absurd." (81).

### **Marian's Marriage**

Marian remained irresolute if her decision to marry Peter was right. The moment they got engaged, instead of feeling happy and contented that their relationship was

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taking a direction, she felt as though her mind was empty. She started viewing Peter in a new light. Unconsciously she was letting him take the reins of her life and left the big decision of fixing the marriage date into his hands. She was astonished about her own self and the unimaginable changes she experienced. The sense of insecurity and estrangement intensified day by day and gets projected through various fleeting visions, thoughts, dreams and abnormal behavior. Behzad Pourgharib comments:

As Marian McAlpine gets sucked deeper and deeper into a heady vortex of her affair with Peter, her volition starts getting eroded layer by layer, leaving her with a profound feeling of estrangement from her own real self, which she had thought to be made up of her own exclusive fancies and fears, dreams and nightmares. (89).

The fear of abnormality was one of the biggest fears threatening Marian enormously. She realized that her thoughts and behavior were not normal and would probably need to see a psychiatrist. She wanted to discuss with someone but was afraid to tell Peter, as she would be spoiling her image and Peter would think she was a freak or a neurotic and would have second thoughts about marrying her. As she did not get a sensible answer from Ainsley, her roommate, her last resort was Clara, her friend who assured her that she was very much normal. She even gathered courage to ask Peter and he too asserted that she was normal. She exhibits a desperate desire to appear normal in spite of the frustrations and anxieties that troubled her mind.

### **Panic Stricken**

Marian was frozen in panic when Peter tried to click a picture of her in her red dress. When she realized that she had not been photographed, she felt relieved that she had not been immobile in that guise which not her 'real' self was. The panic seemed similar to someone trying to shoot her with a gun. She felt as though she had become a lifeless statue meant for commercial display.

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Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn't move, she couldn't even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn't move.... 'What's the matter with me?' she said to herself. 'It's only a camera.'(291).

These irrational fears and disturbances find expression in Marian's dreams, visions, hallucinations, bodily responses and behavior.

Dream is a wish fulfilling activity; one of the ways through which the repressed content in the unconscious finds an outlet. It is a process through which the ego maintains its strength without having a dissatisfied id. Dreams are an important aspect for the physicians in psychological treatment. They have been described as the royal road to the unconscious. Initially Marian had a dream in which her feet were beginning to dissolve and the ends of her fingers turning transparent. She also had a fleeting vision of both Peter and herself lying dead inside the bathtub. These kind of strange thoughts kept arising in her mind after she was engaged to be married. While working on a questionnaire for stainless steel razor blades, she imagined a strange story about a 'miraculous razor blade'.

As the day for her wedding approaches, she becomes more restless and Peter occupies her mind more and more that she starts doubting his true identity. Her madness goes to such an extent that she doubted Peter to be "the Underwear Man" who was troubling the women in town with his weird questions. "Perhaps this was what lay hidden under the surface, under the other surfaces, that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-successes she was aware she had still not uncovered: he was really the Underwear Man" (142).

### **Marriage as A Threat To Marian's Self Identity**

The novel portrays marriage as a threat to Marian's self identity. Dressed up for the engagement party, she felt she was made a mere decorative object in the hands of Peter

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for his proud display to his friends. She felt that her identity would be reduced to insignificance after her marriage. She did not want to be trapped into a relationship where her identity and individuality would be crushed. She feared diminishing away. This identity crisis was further revealed through the reflection she saw of herself in various objects. Her restlessness was at its peak on the day of her engagement party. She developed a fear of seeing her engagement ring disappear down the drain. In the silver globes of the three taps in the bathtub, she found three bulging and distorted forms of her body's reflection on the tap. The body was bloating and diminishing and she became afraid that she was dissolving. The panic of facing the party and strange confusions clogging her mind gave rise to these weird thoughts.

... and of the body that was sitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle.... She was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer, beginning ( that would be worst of all) to talk a lot, to tell everybody, to cry. (274).

### **Eating Disorder Sets In**

The mind and the body of man is so interconnected that the unrest in the mind does have its strong impact on the body. Anorexia Nervosa, the eating disorder began the moment Marian consented to marry Peter and worsened as her marriage approached. Her mind and body started experiencing a split. It was a symptom of the fear that was gripping her mind about the kind future her marriage was going to provide her. Her body became a battlefield, unable to come to terms with the decision of the mind. The body's refusal to eat was a part of its hysterical protest. Listening to the hunting story of Peter, she identified herself with the animal victims and so the body refused to take in any non vegetarian food. She looked at food as a living being and to eat was like 'killing something'. The rebellion that her mind tried to evade turned inward, resulting in her body's sudden rebellious reflexes.

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Marian remembered the cow with the dotted lines in her cook book, the cow that stood undisturbed, and this left a great impact on her mind. She identified herself with the invalid cow which did not know its fate. She realized that she was so long happy and contented because she was unaware of what could happen to her future, her identity and her significance. This subconscious identification with the cow, and the way Peter was neatly devouring his meat made her mind relate herself to the meat, for she thought Peter would devour her personality and her identity in the same manner. This fear resulted in the body's sudden rebellious reflexes which she was unable to understand. Her condition worsened when her body gradually gave up most of the food items. This phobia became so severe that she felt as though the carrots were screaming. "She became aware of the carrot....Then they come along and dig it up, may be it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's alive...." (220). She was existing on canned rice pudding which also was rejected eventually, for she saw it as a collection of cocoons. "But all at once she had poured the cream over it her eyes had seen it as a collection of small cocoons. Cocoons with miniature living creatures inside" (253).

### **Fear, Fear, Fear!**

The sound of the carrots' screams, her fear of what laid hidden in the food or the vitamin pills, indicated her own fears of what was within Peter's perfect personality. She feared that there was some unidentified threat waiting for her in the label of marriage. All his attributes made her doubt about his true personality. There existed a strong feeling of insecurity in their relationship. Thoughts of marriage often kept interrupting her mind resulting in all those irrational thoughts and behavior. She once felt as though she was very close to an edge. She also felt suffocated at the Christmas party in her office, when the women congratulated her for her engagement. This suffocation was more of the mind than of the body. In another instance, in a super market, she feared that she would be trapped past the closing time and would be found the next day in a state of coma. These kinds of fear indicated that Marian's attitude towards marriage was that of an entrapment and a threat to her self- identity.

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## **Invisible Silent Authority**

Though the fear of losing her true identity began early, it was in the engagement party that it reached its heights, providing Marian an opportunity to break free from the suffocating relationship that was overshadowing her self-identity. She realized that Peter was a threat to her individuality and wanted the fresh air of freedom in order to grow and develop her personality. A while before the party, Marian looked at Peter's neatly lined up clothes and felt a dislike for them, for she felt that they were asserting an invisible silent authority on her. She feared that the clothes may be warm and may contain fragments of Peter in them. Sunaina Singh observes:

Peter was using her for his own benefit, and there was no thought of Marian in it. Marian would always be there for him, silent and solid, but always boosting his ego. She doesn't have to speak, it is not required. It suddenly strikes Marian that Peter was monopolizing her – both physically and psychologically and she decides to do something about it. (46).

The question asked by Duncan during the party aggravated her subconscious fear and brought it to the conscious level. She was able to realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. The party gave her the perception that her future life with Peter would demand a neglect and loss of her individuality and autonomy. When Peter wanted to capture a picture in her red dress, her fear intensified and urged her to act instantly. Sunaina Singh further exemplifies:

Marian didn't want to get bogged down by a marriage where she would be reduced to a paper woman with neither any depth nor weightage. It is from this murderous intent of the perfect marksman that she chooses to run away from. It is a choice between staying and getting gobbled up... and running away to her enclosure of identity and the ability to cope. (51).

## **Trying to Overcome Anxiety**

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After leaving the party, she tried to find some way of overcoming her anxiety in the company of Duncan. Desperation, dread and desolation, along with her eating disorder continued her even after she left the party. She was helpless when she realized that Duncan was no solution to her problems but just a momentary escape. M. Prabhakar rightly states:

Marian finds herself reduced to the state of a destitute girl. She is extremely melancholic and feels dejected about future. Gradually, she realizes the futility of starving herself to death. She begins to see both Peter and Duncan in their true colors and recognizes her complicity in her victimization. She understands how she has allowed Peter and Duncan to exploit and “eat” her. Thus, Marian is made a victim of symbolic cannibalism. (44).

### **A Glimpse of Possible Freedom**

At this juncture, her visit to the snowy ravine with Duncan helps her experience a decisive moment in her life. Left all alone, there was no choice but to decide for her life. Viewing the depths of nature’s ravine, she makes a journey deep within her own self. This encounter with her own naked self allowed her to objectively have a glimpse of her possible freedom. Initially she does not have the courage to face Peter and tries to persuade Duncan to help her. But when Duncan refused to go with her, she was compelled to act on her own. She is finally able to recognize and confront her repressed fears that were consuming her ‘self’ and decides to act on them. Patricia F. Goldblatt observes:

Marian’s suitor, Peter, with his well-chosen clothes and suave friends, his perfectly decorated apartment, and even Marian as the appropriate marriage choice, is rendered as no more than the wedding cake’s blankly smiling ornament. If appearance is all, he should suffice. Peter is juxtaposed to the slovenly, self-centered graduate student, Duncan, whose main pleasure is watching his laundry whirl in the washing machine.

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Marian is merely a blank slate upon which each man can write or erase his concept of female. (279).

The creation of a cake in the form of a woman revealed Marian's complete control over herself and complete confidence that she cannot be handled with skill by any man. The art of baking provided Marian with a way to liberate herself. The creation of a woman shaped cake provided her a confidence that designing her life was in her hands.

Her creation gazed up at her, its face doll-like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye.... ' You look delicious,' she told her. 'Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food.'... She felt a certain pity for her creature but she was powerless now to do anything about it. Her fate had been decided.(342).

This action symbolized her refusal to be consumed and offered it as a substitute to Peter. She addressed Peter saying:

'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you,' she said. You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? ... His eyes widened in alarm. (344).

When Peter refused it, Marian eats it herself indicating her final acceptance of her bodily self. It is a kind of reconciliation between her mind and body or a celebration that her ignorant self is dead and the self with awareness is born. M. Prabhakar asserts:

She has become a sculptor rather than a lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty. By creating a cake, she would like to symbolize her feelings in the wake of her experiences with Peter and Duncan. Thus, symbolically, the cake woman represents woman as an object for male consumption. It also reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the gender system of marriage. (45).

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## **To Live in Agreement With Her True Self**

Having attained the self-knowledge, she took pleasure in the consumption of her former self and indicating that henceforth she would attempt to live in agreement with her true self. This act proves to be her first step towards self actualization. Her cake, with its minutest details like pink finger nails stands as an ironic symbol of the conventional women in the society. Ellen McWilliams in her study observes: “The Edible Woman in the shape of a cake is the symbolic punch-line in Atwood’s food metaphor in the novel, representing Marian’s exposure of the threat posed by Peter to her autonomy and her reclamation of agency” (70). At the end of the novel, Marian’s own voice, a new confident voice is seen. With the reversal of the first person narration, we understand that there is a return to position zero. Marian comes back full circle to where she had begun.

## **Renewal and Reformation**

The cleaning act in the final section of the novel further signifies her renewal and reformation, a daring attempt which she did not dare to do earlier. In disposing all the junk that was rotting in the fridge and cleaning the house, she had also cleared all the fears that were eating her mind. She gets ready to start her life afresh even though it was from the beginning. When she confronts the fears and disturbances of her mind, she is able to come to terms with her ‘self’ and the others. She is able to make rational decisions for her life boldly and faces life with a confidence. Survival after overcoming struggle is the general concept in most of Atwood’s works. Patricia F. Goldblatt rightly says, “In her novels, Margaret Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self reliant personae in order to survive” (275).

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