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GENDER IMBALANCE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN ATWOOD'S *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Identity crisis in the marginalized group is one of the major concerns of the post-colonial literature. It emerged as a momentum against the oppression, inequality, exploitation and politics of "otherness" prevalent in the society. Woman has always been treated as the second sex and was left to bear the burden of patriarchal domination. Subsequently silence was adopted as a mechanism to save the self and ego from further loss and mutilation. This passivity and submissiveness resulted in the suppression of their self and identity. In the history they remained succumbed to their roles unaware of their identities. Many conscious women writers tried to articulate the plight of women and gave a voice to their silence in order to make them aware of their position. Margaret Atwood is one such Canadian woman novelist who has tried to demolish the existing codes of patriarchy, that have been one of the main cause women's oppression, at the same time she tries to create a new world where all human beings are equal at all levels of existence. Though Atwood's feminist thought is pro-woman but it is not anti-man. She tries to reinsert the particular representation of sub-alterns in a verbal construct which is peculiar in post-colonial literature- the center and the periphery, the dominant and the marginalized, the oppressor and the oppressed. Her first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) deals with the theme of rejection of gender roles and crisis of identity.

The present paper aims to investigate Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* as a novel dealing with the theme of gender imbalance and identity crisis.

Gender imbalance is a menace to our society as it gives rise to many other deleterious and nefarious practices in the society. It not only creates differences between two sects of human beings but also gives rise to the questions of identity of the marginalized groups. Gender imbalance is a result of patriarchal social structure. Patriarchy is a form of power structure; hence it bears a similarity with colonialism. It promotes and emphasizes the differences between male and female resulting in gender imbalance in the society. Therefore domination of male over females, suppression of female by males, assumed male superiority, forced female inferiority etc become the salient features of patriarchal social structure. When we take a glimpse at the social history of the world we find that women have been considered as inferior beings and have been victimized in the patriarchal societies. The status and rights were given to them within the framework of patriarchal social set up. Even great scholars like Aristotle, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Machiavelli have considered women as inferior beings. On the other hand psycho-analyst like Sigmund Freud, finds her problematic and baffling. Manu, the law-giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, has given secondary position to woman in relation to man and

clearly endorses the servile existence of woman, hence curtails her growth and development as an individual. In Christianity also, male-superiority is emphasized, the husband's authority over his wife is considered as the God's authority over his pupils. These religious sanctions have worsened the condition of women to a great extent. Women have always been projected as meek, docile and submissive creatures without any identity of their own. Even the media brings forth these stereotypic images of women. Hilary.M. Lips has made the following observations regarding portrayals of men and women –

“Portrayals of women and men based on stereotypic notions of masculine strength and feminine weakness bombard us through the media” (Lips, p.20)

Hence, the underestimation of women has its ground in religion and consequently it has become so deep-rooted in society that it is a real challenge to alter it. Men have always dominated women and in the patriarchal social structures laws are made according to the benefits and advantages of men. In the Western countries, Canada is not an exception as far as women's position is concerned. The Canadian history of women gives a glimpse of patriarchal structure existing in society. In Canada women have faced suppression and have been subdued in every field as men have always held powerful positions. It has been observed that-

“Positions of power and prestige have been occupied primarily by white, affluent, educated and propertied men and Canadian society has been built around the values that these men stand for.” (Changing,p.9)

Thus in Canadian society men have been given a stronger position and the entire set up is constructed around the values represented by men. Canadian social structure is so influenced by patriarchy that it grants for separate social spheres of men and women –men in public world and women in private world. There men are meant for competitive, political and market place activities, while women are restricted to domestic and caring activities. In this patriarchal and hierarchical scheme of orders the so defined male activities are considered to be on a higher platform as compared to the tasks reserved for women.

In such a social set up Canadian women came out to find her place because she found herself totally lost in the world. She made an effort to shift the boundary existing between private and public domains. It has been observed that –

“Throughout the twentieth century and most notably since the 1960's, Canadian women have been engaged in vigorous efforts, both practical and theoretical to contest these systems of power and to challenge patriarchal social structure and values.” (Changing,p.9)

Thus women's suffrage rights, legislated federally in 1918, provided a noteworthy example of boundary shifts. Women attained access to public political realm and demanded legal changes, employment opportunities which could enable them to strive towards a secured position. Though in this era women are seen in every field but still discrimination exists in the Canadian society. Women do not get equal employment opportunities; they get lesser pay and there are lesser possibilities of growth for them.

Many conscious women writers of Canada tried to articulate this plight of women and Margaret Atwood is one of them. In most of her novels she deals with feminine issues and concerns that exist in Canadian Society. In *The Edible Woman* (1969) she dealt with the theme of rejection of gender roles and crisis of identity. In *Surfacing* (1972) she lays emphasis on marginalization of women in professional lives, while her novel *Bodily Harm* (1981) deals with the theme of falseness of feminist ideals etc.

In *The Edible Woman* Atwood has dealt with the theme of rejection of gender-roles and search of identity,. The protagonist Marian McAlpin is “a fairly sensible, intelligent young woman, decently liberal in her views and somewhat defensive about her own individuality and her responsibility to others.” (Devi, p. 110) She works in a market research company Seymour Surveys. The company is layered like a sandwich consisting of three floors – the upper, the middle and the lower layer. The upper floor is the office dominated by men – the psychologists and the executives. All the important and decision making tasks are assigned to men as women are not considered capable enough to take any position of responsibility. Moreover the office of men is in much better condition than the office of the ‘others’ – “carpets and expensive furniture and silk-screen reprints of Group of Seven paintings on the walls.” (*The Edible Woman*, p 14). The middle floor, where Marian

works, acts like a link between the upper and the lowest floor. The department is responsible to interview people whenever a survey is conducted. It "deals primarily with housewives, everyone in it, except the unfortunate office boy, is female" (*Woman*, p. 20).

In her professional life Marian is a victim of gender imbalance engrossed in society. The economic independence given to women gave rise to a new kind of oppression and imbalance in the professional lives. Being capable of owning a much better position in the office, Marian is doing a job which is below her caliber. It is due to the gender imbalance that Marian faces identity crisis in her job life. She finds herself unable to identify with the machine person or one of the questionnaire marking ladies." (*Woman*, p. 20). Thus she identified herself with Mrs. Bogue, but she knows that "that would take a long time" (*Woman*, p. 20) to take her position. Moreover Marian was not sure whether she would like it or not. She is unable to accept the male patriarchy therefore it becomes difficult for her to adjust in her professional life.

Marian faces identity crisis in her personal life also. Her boyfriend Peter, a hypocrite and domineering person, is a typical adherer of male chauvinistic ideals. He has his own definition of a woman and prefers one who is submissive and docile. Marian met Peter at a garden party after her graduation and both of them came close to each other. Peter became interested in her because he believed her to be different in his own sense. Marian confesses about Peter's fascination towards her that –

"..... he told me later that it was my aura of independence and common sense he liked: he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life. He had recently had an unpleasant experience with what he called "the other kind"." (*Woman*, p. 61).

Thus Peter considered Marian unlike "the other kind" as a woman who has no shape of her own and who would mould herself according to his desires and expectations. In the beginning of their relationship Marian too was under the false impression that she is in love with Peter but soon this mirage is broken. Marian finds herself in a dichotomy between herself and her femininity. It is as though her entire personality is torn apart into two halves. Her 'self' always dominates her femininity as a result of which Marian rejects her femininity. Marian regularly goes to meet Peter, unaware of the fact that she is not able to accept him completely. She does as he wants her to do but the frustration with this relationship flows as an undercurrent. We first notice this when Peter and Len melt each other in a restaurant. Peter narrates his experiences in the forest to Len and his voice was faster and louder than his normal one. Marian's frustration and disappointment comes out in the form of tears. It was something that she was carrying inside her that needed an outflow Marian confesses.

"I must be carrying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to break down and make a scene, and I couldn't." (*Woman*, p. 70).

Marian was so disgusted that she is not satisfied and relieved of the burden of the relationship even after crying. Somehow, in her attempt to avoid making a scene she controls her feelings, but again she finds herself caught in a maze where she does not understand what to do and where to go. Thus Marian perplexed and bewildered starts running when Peter, Len & Ainsley come out of the restaurant and walk on the street. She is caught by Peter and Len and is taken to Len's place. There too Marian still hysterical and frenzied hides under the bed. At this stage Marian's thwarting and frustration goes to the extent of fanaticism. She loses control over herself and behaves in a wild manner. It is because of the dilemma for her search of her identity that she behaves in this bigoted manner. Marian fails to accept her femininity, though she does not understand this at this juncture. When Peter goes to drop her to her place he in his annoyance for her improper behaviour charges that, "The trouble with you is", he said savagely, "you're just rejecting your femininity." (*Woman*, p. 80). Marian tries to be meek, submissive and docile but these characteristics are not a part of her personality. It starts raining heavily when they are going, Peter says that it's good that he didn't let Marian walk home. His tone was authoritative and implies the male patriarchal confidence that he has taken a firm and proper decision at right moment. Marian, as usual could only agree with him.

Peter comes to Marian's place and proposes her. This time he appears to be "a provider of stability" and "a rescuer from chaos." But in her silent acceptance Marian feels that an invisible hand is wiping away her

signature from Seymour Surveys. Thus Peter's marriage proposal is no less than a threat for Marian. After marriage she would be reduced to mere a housewife, a child bearing machine like Clara obeying the orders of her husband. She envisions her identity being crushed in the name of marriage. Though Peter said that after marriage he would leave big decisions on her but Marian inverted the falsity and fabrication in his words. She could not understand how Peter could be so fortuitous about what he says, as she had really meant whatever she had said. She says, "I was astounded on myself. I 'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it." (*Woman*, p.90). Marian knows the reality that Peter would never leave any decision on her, till now he had been deciding everything on his own. Thus Peter's marriage proposal aggravates Marian's dilemma. She knows she likes Peter and would like to marry her. Still there is something which been disturbing her. This is her self, her subconscious which is trying not to be crushed. She feels that her subconscious was getting ahead of her conscious self, and she knows that the subconscious has its own logic. She says, "It was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self, and the subconscious has its own logic." (*Woman*, p. 101). At this stage of her life Marian finds it difficult to respond to the voice of her subconscious. She understands that life is not run by principles but by adjustments. Therefore she accepts Peter's marriage proposal and tries to get involved in daily routine life ignoring the constant reminders of herself.

On one hand Marian tries to adjust and accept the situations as they are, while on the other hand she is encountered by anomalous changes in her personality. She notices strange fluctuations in her eating habits, especially mysterious and unnatural dislike for certain foods. Her body refuses to accept meat in any form, though Marian tries to resist this but she discovers that gradually she is losing control over her systems. Once she is dying to go for lunch and she had been starving but when she goes out have lunch with Peter she finds "She wasn't even hungry." (*Woman*, p. 112). She just takes cheese sandwich.

It seems that her resentment with Peter and her abhorrence for meat goes simultaneously and gets intensified day after day. When she goes out with Peter for dinner her body repudiates to consume meat. Atwood remarks, "She picked up her fork, speared a piece, lifted it, and set it down again". (*Woman* p. 152).

Marian observes that all the varieties of meat are becoming inedible for her and gradually her mouth is rejecting all those things which consisted of bone, tendon or fiber and her detestation increased to such a degree that she felt that she would become a vegetarian. Marian stopped eating egg also, and to her shock and surprise rejected items seemed alive to her. She becomes tiresome of eating salads and felt like a rabbit, crunching all the time on mounds of leafy greenery she gets irritated by her body's rejection of certain foods but finds herself helpless to do anything. We are told –

"She was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous, whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it as adamant; and if she used force she rebelled" (*Woman* p. 177-178).

She concludes that it is the ethical ground due to which she had stopped eating things, that "it simply refused to eat anything that has once been, or might still be living" (*Woman*, p. 178). There is a synchronous relationship between Marian's rejection of food and her resentment against Peter. Marian does not accept her relationship with Peter wholeheartedly, symbolically she takes off her engagement ring when she goes to Duncan's place for dinner. Her act of taking off ring makes her feel liberated off the clutches of male chauvinism, represented by Peter. In order to give importance to herself she invites some of her friends to the party without asking Peter. Marian is searching for her identity and by doing such things she tries to create a space for her 'self'. But Marian's subconscious is not satisfied, it is not ready to accept the ideals of patriarchal society. Consequently Marian feels disconsolate and cheerless despite all her efforts to be happy. She dresses up and Ainsley gives a final touch to her make up, Marian feels she is completely transformed into a "two – dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman and smiling, fluttering in white empty space" (*Woman*, p. 250).

She is afraid that she would lose her identity and individuality. Sunaina Singh has rightly observed:

"Marian would diminish into insignificance, her total individuality would turn paper thin, fluttering away in ostentatious surroundings – a mere decorative object. (Singh, p. 50).

In the party Marian is surrounded by friends, hers and Peters, but she does not feel happy there. She encounters a strange vision – she sees Peter's future and discovers that she is nowhere to be seen. She is chilled by the discovery. We are told:

"She opened the door to the right and went in. There was Peter forty five and balding but still recognizable as Peter, standing in bright sunlight beside a barbescue with a long fork in his hand. He was wearing a white chef's apron. She looked carefully for herself in the garden, but she wasn't there and the discovery chilled her". (*Woman*, p. 243).

The truth about her subconscious is revealed in the vision. Marian's dilemma is ended and she understands that she cannot accept Peter as her husband. She does not see herself which means that her identity and individuality would be lost completely. If she marries Peter it would result in the destruction of her identity. Peter wanted a plastic doll with which he could play whenever desired and which he could mould and shape according to his expectations. Marian does not want this to happen. She wanted to live like an individual with her own identity. Peter's obsession with camera and pictures seem endangering to Marian. For Marian Peter's camera is the final trap laid to grab her entirely. She does not want to be caught in the posture of marriage, of total passivity, docility and acquiescence. She feels –

"Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly, in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change." (*Woman*, p. 252).

Marian does not want a marriage where she would lose everything of her own. She feels that Peter sees her as his prey and she is getting into the trap laid by him. She has the fear of becoming an edible woman and this fear stops her from eating many things. She is afraid that Peter after a perfect shot and a clean cutting and slicing without any spilling of blood would gobble her up. Marian considers it to be wiser to make an attempt for her safety :

"It occurred to her also that she didn't see any point in starving to death what she really wanted, she realized has been reduced to simple safety." (*Woman*, p.271).

A critic has rightly observed:

"..... Marian is faced with a choice of being 'edible' to her husband and remaining single as an individual and assisting herself, [She] chooses the latter and thus refuses to be an edible woman." (Hariprasanna, p. 118).

Marian runs away from the party and goes to Duncan, to whom she had been escaping earlier also. She spends the night with Duncan, she had always found his company more releasing and redeeming. With his frank confession of not being emotionally attached to her and she being just another substitute for the Laundromat, Duncan becomes relieving for Marian. At least she could read Duncan's mind, but with Peter this was just impossible.

Marian comes to know what she wanted, she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman which "looked like an elegant antique China figurine" (*Woman* p. 270). After running away from the party and spending the night with Duncan, she was afraid of facing Peter. But after baking the cake all her fears disappear and Marian emerges as a confident and firm 'new' woman. Peter comes to her and she charges Peter that he wanted to destroy and assimilate herself into his. She presents the cake to Peter as her substitute and offers him to eat it. Marian firmly asserts:

"You've have 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? I'll get you a fork, she added somewhat prosaically." (*Woman*, p. 271).

Peter does not eat the cake and leaves. Mariane eats the cakes, symbolically it means that she eats her femininity in the shape of a cake. She rejected her femininity and the constant struggle between her identity and femininity ends up in her choice for her 'self'. She boldly refuses to accept her femininity as her weakness and takes a firm stand against male patriarchy which has always tried to annihilate and destroy women not

allowing them to make an independent identity of their own. Sunaina Singh rightly observes.” Marian is probably where she was socially, but as a woman she definitely has changed from the meek traditional woman to the bold conscious woman” (Sunaina Singh. p. 52)

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