

The Edible Woman – Searching for the Lost Appetite

Julia Pei-Hsuan Hsieh

1. Introduction
2. The Loss of Power – The Female Body as a Useful Body and an Intelligible Body
3. Protest or Retreat? – The Female Body Takes Over?

1. Introduction

“Whatever I do I must
keep my head. I know
it is easier for me to lose my way
forever here, than in other landscapes”
-- Margaret Atwood, “Journey to the Interior”

Although Atwood does not admit being a feminist, her novels show her concern with women and certain contemporary problems which are strongly related to female bodies, such as hysteria and anorexia. In her first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, for instance, Atwood reveals her concern with feminist issues and women’s problems, such as women’s limited work opportunities, their expected goals of marriage and pregnancy, as well as the other social stereotypes and their reactions. As many critics suspected, Marian MacAlpin is the shadow of young Atwood when she just graduated and got into a research company. When Karen Stein introduces the background of Atwood’s writing *The Edible Woman*, she regards Marian as Atwood’s protagonist “who resists marriage as she struggles to find her place in society” (43). Moreover, to illustrate that Marian is in some way Atwood’s advocate character, Stein refers to Valerie Miner’s interview of Atwood that mentioned Atwood’s fear of marriage when she was still young and with James Polk, Atwood’s first husband.

Yet, Marian’s confusion and dilemmas in life are not simply Atwood’s observation of herself but those of all women. When Atwood wrote *The Edible Woman*, the “the new ‘single girl’ phenomenon” began to get popular in society. In the fifties, women were expected to perform a role of sexy housewife and remained in the domestic circle. Marriage, for instance, is one thing that has been so big an issue that women of Atwood’s time and perhaps even nowadays have to face. There was, after the Second World War, a call for women to go home when men returned from the battlefields and expected to return to a life of “normality.” In the sixties, however, new definitions of

'femaleness' and of female sexuality began to form in Canada in response to the Civil Rights Movement and feminist movement in the States. Canadian women in the sixties began to think more of themselves and organize groups, forming sisterhood to help each other. With the popularity of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Canadian women, like their American counterparts, became more and more self-conscious, and hence learned the latent power in their bodies gradually. In the light of the Ziegeist of her time, in response, Atwood draws her readers' attention to certain women's situations in the patriarchal society. As Atwood mentioned in an interview in 1973, "what [women] were supposed to do was pay attention to the diapers and the washing of dishes" (209). Through Marian the fictional character, Atwood accounts for the fact that women are confined still to domestic space by their family and social roles, and certainly in their bodies. And from my perspective, all of these issues are centered on woman's body, how it is conceptualized and used. These issues of woman's body and social roles get embodied in the life of the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*. Marian's experience and observation of different women's roles at her work place, the multi-layers of the structure of her company, and her dilemma of whether or not she is going to get married and what could come out of this marriage, could only be the tip of the iceberg of women's problems. And through Marian's physical and mental responses to the changes in her life and her society, I think Atwood illustrates how the female body can be a possible site for a woman to rediscover herself. Yet, how does Marian's self-contradictory physical and mental responses help assert herself? Why does Marian appear to be indecisive and passive toward patriarchal control and submissive toward what society teaches her to be; that is, to be an attractive candidate for the marriage market? In the process of restoring her lost appetite and finding a way to survive, why do the consecutive flooding images of the female body become closely connected with those of food? And finally, how do these images function in her life and thus help her find her way to survival? Marian's responses to patriarchal demands, I think, are in a zigzag fashion and thus frequently self-contradictory. Even after her overcoming the anorexic symptoms, Atwood still makes Marian's self-assertion a puzzle, an ambiguous reaction which can both mean a new beginning and a compromise with patriarchal society. The struggle between submissiveness and self-assertion happens when Marian's first physical response occurs. A symptom may be an indication to a certain kind of mal-function of the body or mind, against which some physical and/or mental response may convey repulsion. What trigger Marian's abnormal behaviors are actually her fears of being abnormal and being consumed. The fear of being abnormal reflects her conventional and conservative attitude when facing society, whereas the fear of being consumed like food she eats makes her reject food and feel repulsive at

men's eating and hunting. Since she is engaged with Peter, Marian finds that her body does something that is not quite herself, and this unusual behavior become more and more frequent. Another incident indicating her confusion happens at the dinner table: she suddenly feels the tears on her face, and next, she collapses in the powder room; after the dinner, all of a sudden she starts to run, making Peter chase her for quite long a distance; then she hides herself under the bed so that no one in the house could find her. It is not until she is alone with herself under the bed that she realizes that something in her has challenged her to make her own decision of what she is going to do next. Her strange physical reactions along with the fear of being consumed awake her to face her unusual transformation phase, or the crisis of losing her self-identity. To be short, Marian acknowledges that something in her is rebelling against who she used to be and what she does to meet social inspection and expectation. With her gradual loss of appetite, Marian realizes that her body has been separated from herself, and she might lose her subjectivity little by little. The fear of being abnormal makes her alert to her status in society while at the same time, the fear of being "consumed," that is, being minimalized in society, makes her identify with food and prey. These symptoms and worries arouse her awareness of a crisis in which she is threatened by the dominant suffocating masculinity to which she surrenders her power, as well as by the social construction of femininity that turns her to a desirable and appealing object of consumption.

In this chapter, therefore, I will argue that *The Edible Woman* shows how a woman's body is always a site of constant struggle between social control and self-assertion. I will first lay out the theoretical framework of social control of woman's body by discussing Foucault and Bourdieu's concepts of the body and the feminists' theories on femininity and anorexia. After examining how social expectation stifles women and lick women into shapes with various destined roles women are to fulfill, I intend to continue to discuss Marian's fear of being abnormal and being different from other women of her time, and move on to inspect the causes that make her feel intimidated. Then I will turn to discuss the effects of her responses to the threatening power, which, as I have pointed out, pushes her to more and more self – awareness despite her frequent attempts to return to the so-called normality. Finally, I will scrutinize the ending, and discuss how Marian finds the way out of the crisis, even if it is just a temporary way out by looking into her intriguing restoration of appetite.

2. The Loss of Power – The Female Body as a Useful Body and an Intelligible Body

As a career woman, Marian is not much different from the women of her time who received college education but were expected to see marriage and childbearing as their goals in life. At Marian's time, very possibly the post war period, women were used to working and getting hold of money. It was a time when most women were given chances of serving mostly in domestic labour works, sales and secretary, and the age of marriage has become to rise slowly . Marian is one of the new "single girls" at work, but is expected to be married and form a family of her own. She has a mediocre job as a market researcher and desires no fancy life but a plain role of a normal woman who is suitable for marriage. In other words, she asks herself to be capable to act according to her society in which normal women end up with family and marriage life whereas unmarried women are looked down upon and are suspected as "abnormal" in certain ways. As a matter of fact, society controls women like Marian and their bodies by expecting them to be both "intelligible" and "useful." As is discussed in the introduction, body, according to Foucault is a site through which social discourses not only control, discipline, penetrate, empower individuals but also produce their subjectivities. Under the influences of social discourses, bodies, especially those of women's, can function both as an image and a capital. As images, women need to fit into social conception of their figures, behavior, manners and appearance. As capital, on the other hand, a woman can use her body to gain some recognizable space in society.

To begin with, Chris Shilling explains how Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction may have indicated how one's body functions in the society. According to Bourdieu, the body bears a symbolic value (Shilling 89). That is, a body is not simply a biologically defined body any more. Instead, it contains meanings of different levels because of its being treated like capital (88). Originally, the capital is a physical one that a person contains as a natural-born asset. Then, moving from the physical level, it is possible for one to convert his or her physical capital in exchange for money, goods or services, etc. By doing this, the physical capital is changed into economic capital. What's more, one could make good use of this economic capital to gain more education in various arenas or to employ his or her relationship with people in society. In that case, the physical capital is firstly brought to the level of an economic capital and then 'upgraded' into a cultural or social capital. Body, therefore, contains a symbolic value that can be taken as one's capital and this capital could be dynamically changed and upgraded by a better shape or through training and decoration.

Shilling is not the only one person that stresses Bourdieu's concerns about the idea that human body is a made body. Feminists such as Moira Gatens and Susan Bordo

have learned from Bourdieu and Foucault to discuss how the female body is constituted by society and the possible consequences. The idea that power controls one's body can be seen in feminist theories such as Gatens'. When Gatens suggests that women's bodies are very much confined to the roles of the wife, the mother and the domestic worker, she also indicates that the power these women possess is really very scarce. Gatens refers to her understanding of Foucault's discussion of the relationship between power and the body, "The human body is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a 'neutral object' upon which science may construct 'true' discourses" (230). Because of the idea that the human body is always a signified one, Gatens further concludes, "power is not [] reducible to what is imposed [] on naturally differentiated male and female bodies, but is also constitutive of those bodies, in so far as they are constituted as male and female" (230). In other words, the constituted power in male bodies is never the same power in female bodies; there are differences between the bodies of men and those of women not simply because of the relative "physical" differences, but more importantly, because of the different social constructions of gender powers as well.

On the other hand, Susan Bordo, in her famous discussion of femininity and anorexia, starts with Bourdieu's and Michel Foucault's concepts on human body and society. She not merely illustrates how body functions as "a medium of culture," but also makes a connection between Bourdieu and Foucault because they both consider the body as a text of culture as well as a practical, direct locus of social control. Applying their ideas to the case of femininity and the body, Bordo especially thinks that female body's forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and "improvement," in terms of physical changes and conceptual changes. These external controls and disciplines have long carved into women's mind and made women accustomed to the idea that their bodies should function in two ways; that is, as I explains in the introduction as the intelligible body and the useful body. The former includes our scientific, philosophic, aesthetic representations of the body whereas the latter means the training and shaping our bodies into useful ones by the power of "the useful body." Inferring from the concepts of the intelligible body and the useful body, Bordo believes that "the contradictory and mystifying relations between image and practice" may be the causes of female eating and body disorders. Namely, the contradictory standards that women are expected to fulfill, such as the quality of being as capable and reasonable as men and being as tender, gentle, amiable, adorable and supportive as women at the same time, create a double bind for women. And Bordo refers that this double bind for women somehow renders women to a more difficult and complicated situation which further mystifies the collaboration of the image and practice, in Foucault's terms: "the useful body" and "the intelligible body."

To apply Bordo's theory to and if it is as Bordo supposes, Marian's eating disorder and queer behavior may have, in a way, explained her bewilderment at not knowing how to coordinate and strike a balance between her intelligible body and her useful body. Whereas the female body is to be expected to function as an intelligible and useful one of femininity, the male body is also required to be masculine. In the novel, Marian is very much concerned with her image and women's images in general; in addition, she also notices how the men in her life are different in their ways of being and being seen. Marian is aware of the feminine images around her and how those images somehow result from the manipulations of patriarchal society. She has to mind her countenance and make her appearance attractive enough to be a preference in the marriage market. In a way, Marian's body is a "docile body," and this could be exemplified by how her body is manipulated by the hairdresser, Ainsley and Peter. It is quite obvious that Marian is conservative in clothing, for Ainsley thinks that Marian "choose[s] clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration" (6). Compared with Marian, Ainsley and the office virgins in Marian's company are more apt to be Barbies that are "artificial blondes," who are apt to dress in "neon pink" with their hair "elegantly coiffured" (16). Conservative as Marian is, she cannot help but yield to social views of fashion-trend and the definition of a beauty. In view of the images of a contemporary beauty, Marian has to endure something being put on her. She has to be "operated upon" through rituals when she is in the beauty salon, getting ready for the engagement party. Due to others' views, she has to be dressed like a Barbie doll by the beauticians and Ainsley. And then, there is Peter who is totally satisfied with her look with heavy makeup and alluring evening gown. He assures Marian his love by saying, "I love you especially in that red dress" (263), with his particular humouring attitude. The social fashion trend teaches Marian and executes on her the definition of beauty, which Marian disagrees with only when she sides with Duncan, a social misfit. And yet, to conform to standardize beauty is part of the price that Marian has to pay, for being normal in the eyes of her society.

As a "useful body," Marian is aware of the hierarchical structure of her company, where she is situated in the bottom of the middle part. At work, she serves for the companies to 'monitor' their target consumers, who are mostly housewives. That is, her job reminds her from time to time of the fact that women, at work as well as at home, are controlled, conditioned and expected to be productive. In the paragraphs where she describes what she works on and who she works with, she expresses the reluctance and helplessness from the dead-end stifling job. The obligatory Pension Plan of Seymour Survey could be a solid example to prove the concealment of her dissatisfaction. When Mrs. Grot brought the documents for Marian to sign, Marian reflects that her submission to signing on the document of the Pension Plan actually is

something that she has long learned from the school days.

It wasn't only the feeling of being subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making: you get adjusted to that at school. It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it. Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, pre-formed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. (15)

She imagines her signature "going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked" (15), and that echoes the image of the structure of Seymour Survey, which is layered by fixed power structure: "the men upstairs" on the top, female staff in the middle, and machines and the machine operatives down on the bottom. Marian, as a junior staff in the company, does nothing more than what she is demanded to do. She seldom has the freedom to choose so that she feels being stuck in her work. To sum up, she learns to be accustomed to being manipulated in her work even though she has a different voice in her head, and she is somehow used to concealing what she really thinks.

What is Marian Afraid of? – Constructions of Femininity and Masculinity

According to Ann Parsons, Marian has two kinds of fears: fear of the loss of freedom and fear of the loss of identity. In Parson's viewpoint, marriage, as well as the pension plan, "make [Marian] fit into a performed role" (100), but this seeming life-guaranteed matrimony "also closes her into one of the performed identities she dreads" (101). In my view, Marian is afraid of losing her identity in face of constructing her body as feminine as well as the pressure she faces from Peter's masculinity. While masculinity threatens Marian and upsets her in a way, femininity also casts a chill over her. As she has realized, almost everyone around her is with the quality of either femininity or masculinity, even Marian herself is taught to get accustomed to social norms about genders. But what is unexpected to her is how much femininity could have de-powered a woman whereas masculinity empowers men. From the very beginning, there is a strong comparison between Marian and the three office virgins and Ainsley, her roommate: the former is quite plain and never wears heavy makeup or neo-colored dresses, but as a contrary, the latter two always appear to be attractive with distinct hairdos, heavy-makeup, and tend to be careful about their looks. Surrounded by feminine colleagues in an almost all women working environment, Marian is surprised at her obligation of being a woman, characterized by the conventional gender stereotype: to be obedient, to be cooperative, to be capable to "catch" a husband, to be reliable and stable in work, and perhaps, to be capable of being a mother. Just as Duncan once reminds her, "every woman loves an invalid. I

bring out the Florence Nightingale in them” (105), Marian realizes what a woman is expected to be, and though she does not intend to participate in mothering, nursing, or being a wife, her drastic physical response warns her of the possible tasks she is going to face after getting married to someone macho like Peter.

Speaking of the image of women, in the office Christmas party, Marian reveals her observation on women, on food which are made by women, on how women are presented to fit into society and how women’s bodies resemble the food that she eats every day. Watching women’s bodies from a distance of her colleagues, Marian falls into a dilemmatic situation: she feels that she is not one of them and yet, she is also one of them. She is not one of them because she does not decorate herself to celebrate or stand out her femininity; moreover, she does not feel safe or oriented in her work; also, she is bothered when she is asked to do works of bits and pieces and to sign anything that she does not agree with. As a result, there in the party, she finds herself unable to fit in. She is different from the virgins not only because she is not like them in terms of exterior appearance, but she is a wife-to-be. She feels, however, herself is one of the female colleagues in some ways. No matter how she dislikes the work, she accepts what she is expected to do, like everyone else. Although she sees her body different from other women’s bodies, Marian realizes her destiny of being the same as the women she observes:

At some time she would be – or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick Sargasso-sea of femininity. She drew a deep breath, clenching her body and her mind back into her self like some tactile sea-creature withdrawing its tentacles; she wanted something solid, clear: a man; she wanted Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down. (181)

The overstressed feminine characteristics, which she has observed in every way from her female colleagues, make her stifling and panic. Likewise, Clara’s confinement in family makes Marian anxious about the feminine destiny of her time – motherhood and pregnancy. With the sight of Clara’s pregnancy, Marian reveals her fear of being like Clara. She regards Clara as “everyone’s ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity” (33) and she perceives Clara’s transformation after she steps into matrimony:

The babies had been unplanned: Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her, and her second with dismay; now, during her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism. Her metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock. (33)

Clara’s unplanned pregnancy and motherhood have driven her desperate and

impatient. When Marian visits her in the hospital, Clara refers to her newly-born as “Christmas present” and she wishes she could just “hatch them out of eggs.” Clara’s casual and insensitive attitude certainly has effected Marian and made her see pregnancy with fright although Clara talks “as if she was recommending a handy trick for making fluffier piecrust or a new detergent” (139). These images of pregnancy connected with food brought Marian discomfort, for she is sure that she will face the same destiny sooner or later because “Peter had begun to make remarks with paternal undertones” (139). Clara’s casual attitude towards her own experiences of parenting and consecutive pregnancies, and Peter’s remarks with a paternal voice make Marian dread for being married and pregnant. Her anorexic reaction goes from bad to worst when she faces the food she eats and Peter’s mentioning about children altogether. In the restaurant dinner with Peter, Marian gets to be more and more aware of her interaction with Peter and the secret repulsive reaction of her body:

Peter talked theoretically, about children as a category, carefully avoiding any application. But she knew perfectly well that it was their own future they were really discussing: that was why it was so important. Peter thought that all children ought to be punished for breaches of discipline; even physically. [] Marian was afraid of warping their emotions. (159)

Marian is aware of her letting Peter make decisions on almost everything and talk as if he has patronized her, but she does nothing because “she never know[s] what she want[s] to have” whereas Peter appears to be determined all the time. When facing Peter’s disagreement, Marian stays low-keyed and realizes that Peter does not take her seriously and blames her mildly for her innocence and ignorance, because she has “led a sheltered life” (159). She foresees her future marriage life as a woman giving birth to children who may be well-disciplined under the instruction of the father, not the mother. In other words, Marian is more and more aware that before long, it is a sure thing that she loses her autonomy in life.

For Marian, therefore, being a mother is as powerless as marrying Peter. In the novel, Atwood’s character Clara serves as an exaggeration of women burdened with babies. With her empathetic and pitiful attitude toward Clara, who is caught up with consecutive pregnancy, Marian brings out her fear of being pregnant, being a mother, and being with children. Her imagination of Clara’s pregnant body is collided with images like “boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon” (28). Likewise, she pays special attention when Clara names her children with terms like “bastard,” “demon,” “goddemned fire-hydrant,” “bugger” or “leech.” Also, altogether Clara and her children remind Marian of the food she eats: “She lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower” (28). Even the dress that Clara

wears attracts Marian's attention because she links the pattern of the smock with the process of vegetation: "the stylized petals and tendrils moved with her breathing, as though they were coming alive." Ironically, these vivid images of vegetation or food appear to be a strong comparison and contrast to Clara's trapped situation: the food is a comparison to Clara because she is like a prepared food whose core is invaded, according to Joe Bates, her husband. On the other hand, the image of vegetation is a contrast to Clara's motionless life, and a metaphor for her conceiving the babies. Somehow, Marian has been affected by the powerlessness and helplessness of Clara. Furthermore, she is much troubled with the scene of pregnancy and baby-raising, for she considers Clara's body beyond control and is powerless. Although she defends for Clara when Ainsley acclaims that Clara has left everything to Joe and is being treated like a thing, Marian cannot help feeling pity for Clara and being afraid that she would be as powerless as Clara once she is pregnant after marrying Peter. Observant and imaginative as Marian is, she notices that Clara's own body is "somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of her" (34). And these scenes later have become such a nightmare that she cannot face them which make her reluctant to visit her best friend again; what's more, the sight with Clara and her children, Clara's her trapped and powerless life, adding up to Marian's imagination of the connection of objects, animals and food that she eats everyday, further brings forth her plight and accelerate her total rejection to food.

As to the images of men, although Marian is concerned with conforming to proper images of women in society, she is keenly aware of and resistant to the differences between men and women, and the power in them. She acknowledges that women are powerless, whereas men remain the powerful. Nevertheless, not all women or men are equally powerless or empowered. For women, pregnancy and the quality of femininity make women powerless. On the contrary, men is empowered especially when they are proved masculine and with men-like characteristics, such as being rough and strong at appearance, being reasonable and less emotional, appealing to manly sports or exciting competitive activities. Somewhere in between the images of femininity and masculinity, character like Duncan is treated like a child with even less power. From time to time, Marian feels uneasy and suffocated. She can hardly stand the violent talks of men about hunting, nor is she able to bear the overwhelming femininity that makes her associate nauseatingly with food.

The social demands for Marian's body to be both "useful" and "intelligible," her physical reactions demonstrate a rebellion against the norms of a useful and intelligible body in one. This contradiction converges in the issue of marriage in her life, which may lead her to both a way out of her sense of oppression from her workplace and apartment, and further constraint her in the new family with Peter. In

Marian's case, marriage guarantees her a secure space and perhaps higher social status if she marries the right person. That is to say, by marrying Peter, who has a promising future in a law firm and is "rising in it like a balloon" (56), Marian will be better off and free from worries, compared to her dead-end job in the Seymour Survey. If Marian performs well in her role as a woman who "[has] to adjust to [Peter's] mood" (61) and who can be "the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over [Peter's] life" like Peter has expected, she will get her reward by marrying up. And that marriage may secure both her social status and her position of being a "normal" woman. Therefore, for the sake of fulfilling the concept of a normal marriable woman, Marian learns to behave to meet the marriage market's needs, and to be "manipulated into the bedroom" (62).

But being manipulatable is not all she needs. To be a "desirable babe" and a suitable woman for marriage, against her will, Marian also have to force herself to manage her countenance and appearance, and to behave properly. For instance, she is always the person who speaks, to the landlady, a traditional housewife confined both in her household and in the mind. Likewise, most of the time, she cooperates with the order from her superiors at work, even if she does not agree with them. Marian conceals what she really feels so as to exchange the harmony of her life and to fulfill the expectation from others.

The dilemma between her self-awareness and the fear of being abnormal takes shape in Marian's uneasiness. She is uneasy about the images of absolute masculinity and femininity (as referred previously in the scene of the office party and bloody dinner story that Peter tells), as well as her gradual loss of power. The conventional social norm of masculinity is, many a time, exemplified by the images of perspiratory male body, violent sports such as hunting, and the image of responsible man, being in charge as a head of a household and taking care of the needs of his family members. As a market researcher, Marian serves in the company's design to control the consumers and, to use Althusser's word, "interpellates" their identities. At the same time, however, her very body can be threatened by the male targets she meets in the downtown area, as she looks for candidates for her interview of the Moose beer commercial. She is threatened by the second man she interviews, who drinks beer as usual drinks, sweats a lot, and is just like a showpiece of masculinity:

When we finished and I had written down the name and address, which the company needs so it won't reinterview the same people, got up, and began to thank him, I saw him lurching out of his chair towards me with a beery leer. "Now what's a nice little girl like you doing walking around asking men all about their beer?" he said moistly. "You ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you." (46-7)

After giving him the pamphlets she has got from the previous interviewee, Marian

unconsciously “flees” away from him. She feels threatened by the “sweating” masculinity and phallogocentric patronizing attitude of the man, whom makes her somehow sense the possibility of herself being philandered or perhaps attacked by the man, who is much stronger than she.

But Marian’s phobic physical response does not take place merely in the interview. When Peter talks of his experience of hunting and gutting the prey, she reacts physically and violently through her hazardous and abnormal behavior. That Peter has never talked to her much about the hunting, but to Len, somehow explains his discriminatory attitudes toward women. And it further reveals Peter’s opinions about masculinity and femininity. To Marian’s friend, Len, Peter shares his experience of hunting, killing and photography, whereas with Marian, Peter always patronizes her as if he is guarding a fragile woman. Whether Marian is sick of the brutal and violent scenes, or she is just overwhelmed by the other side of Peter whom she has never known, she realizes how masculine Peter is, and that is someone she is not familiar with, and yet someone she may marry. In the dinner, Marian suppresses her real feeling of abomination and ignores her own uneasiness:

The quality of Peter’s voice had changed; it was a voice I didn’t recognize. The sign saying Temperance flashed in my mind: I couldn’t let my perceptions about Peter be distorted by the effects of alcohol, I warned myself. (70)

Worst of all, upon recognizing the change of Peter’s voice, Marian feels even more distracted from Peter and Len’s conversation, and she is so overwhelmed by the bloody scenes in Peter’s story that she feels threatened, scared and not herself. A sense of being intimidated by Peter’s masculinity has awakened Marian’s self-awareness. Before she acknowledges what happened and what she should react to the circumstance, Marian thinks, “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” (71). With the least understanding of her own impulse to cry, Marian tries to discipline her self by giving it orders, “Get a grip on yourself,” and “Don’t make a fool of yourself” (72). This sense of getting a grip of oneself is Marian’s first response to the unreasonable physical reaction on perceiving Peter’s other side of brutality. This weird nonetheless strong physical reaction, to me, is Marian’s unconscious repulse against her fiancé as well as her role of a soon-to-be wife to Peter. That is, seeing the brutal and absolute masculine side of Peter makes Marian be more aware of the fact that she is going to marry, be a wife and possibly a mother, who can be confined in the marriage, the roles and sex, in terms of the expected submissive attitude.

The issues of marriage and sex are Marian’s concerns, but two major issues involving ideological constructions of not only femininity but also masculinity. In Marian’s case,

Peter's absolute macho deeds pose a threat to her in more ways than through telling his hunting stories. One glance at Marian's sexual relationship, it is obvious that Peter's of-all-time missionary position explains how he dominates Marian. Just right after being informed of his best friend's wedding, Peter's love-making with Marian is like a release of his fear of having his bachelorhood threatened by his friends' marriages. The sexual intercourse for Marian, on the other hand, is uncomfortable and even reminds her of death instead of pleasure (60). Likewise, Peter's attitude toward his friends' marriages and their wives echoes that of Len's. To these masculine men, women are like leeches who incline to pursue men, stick to them and run after them; moreover, they are also like baseballs as Len describes, "You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out" (67). Peter and Len share similar point of view about women and have the same interest in photography. For Peter, women should be school-girl-like obedient as Ainsley pretends to be on her first encountering with Len; and for Len, gals who look innocent like a babe in the wood are appealing. Peter and Len's social conventional masculine viewpoints on women are not the only views Marian beholds. Additionally, Joe Bates, Clara's husband, illustrates similar masculinity which regards protecting women as a heroic obligation. When Ainsley asks him about Len, Marian notices that Joe frowns, for he "tends anyway to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection" (32). These masculine viewpoints, along with Marian's drastic and dramatic physical responses, have enlightened her on the difference between men and women in the regulations of social norms.

These masculine viewpoints on femininity can, nonetheless, be defiable and ironical. Ann Parsons points out that most men in *The Edible Woman* hold demarcated opinions on both genders: "Their prescriptions are reinforced throughout the novel by the presence of minor women characters who see helplessly encased in stereotyped images[]" (99). These men take women as innocent and needy to be protected. Likewise, J. Brooks Bouson thinks Atwood attacks the traditional marriage economy and romantic discourse, which generate gender politics, and hence "encodes and naturalizes the essentialist constructions of feminine selflessness and masculine self-assertion and conquest" (Bloom 76).

In terms of the power status of men and women in *The Edible Woman*, Marian gets to be more and more aware of her powerless status. Worst of all, she acknowledges the danger of being even more powerless after her engagement. The evidence of Marian's scarce power in her relationship with others and in social contact with people are everywhere in the novel. Like her roommate Ainsley complains, Peter is "monopolizing" Marian. When recalling her dates with Peter, Marian admits that "[she] had allowed [herself] to be manipulated into the bedroom" (62), and many a

time, she is aware that she hides her complaints or real feelings in their intercourses and to other issues in life. Instead of showing how she really feels, she “had to adjust to [Peter’s] moods”(61). She does not even justify herself when hearing Peter complaining that she never cooks, she feels hurt. Then there are some small gestures that explain Marian’s powerlessness. When they are walking, Marian is cautious enough not to lay her hands on the top of Peter’s hands; when they first made love, Marian asked Peter not to mind the smashed Champaign glass, yet Peter reacted as his territory invaded and snapped so that he would not listen to Marian and even stopped calling her for a while. Marian reveals her observation of the sexual position that Peter is taking: “he liked his comforts, and besides it wasn’t his flesh that was being mortified: he had been on top” (62). In short, Marian is aware of her diminishing power; thus gradually she has grown a sense of finding a way out of this trapped relationship.

As the story goes on, there are times she cannot recognize herself. On the one hand, she is afraid that she would be as feminine and powerless as the women whose fragmentary images of bodies she correlates with the food that are prepared by those women themselves. On the other hand, Marian also submissively regards Peter as a way out of traditional femininity exemplified at work place, like the image of traditional housewives. In a way, Marian’s contradictory attitude traps her in dilemma: her fear of losing identity and her subjectivity prevents her from identifying with the office ladies; nevertheless, the same fear makes her want to seek for refuge in men, either Peter or Duncan, and thus she appears to be submissive as the old her, like the Marian at the very beginning of the story.

3. Protest or Retreat? – The Female Body Takes Over?

Under social control and with all her fears and worries, Marian, however, is not always submissive. If she listens to her body, which reacts to her decision of being married to Peter, and gives up the engagement, she may become a spinster working her life away. Her inability to solve the dilemma since she looks decent, henceforth, has made her anorexia worse. Her fear of being viewed as an abnormal and unmarriageable woman is, in other words, as strong as her desire to rebel. That is why she does not simply perform in accordance with the social expectation from others, and the first sign of her need to rebel is made by her body. Nonetheless, when her wild behaviors arouse her attention to the heed for changes inside her body, her fears also push her to act according to what she is expected to behave. Marian hence faces a dilemma between a controlled social being and her loss of appetite. To be specific, if

she continues to be a normal and suitable woman for marriage, she has to face the consequence of being deprived of her subjectivity by Peter and society, for she has to cooperate with society and remain docile to fit the social norms.

If it is Marian's body that awakes Marian's self-awareness, why does the body take action through not eating? In the following, I will scrutinize the relationship between Marian's body and her fears so as to figure out why eating may serve as a gesture of rebellion against Marian's submission to Peter. With these threats and fears from her surroundings that subdue her, her very feminine colleagues and friends and her very masculine fiancé, Marian's anxiety becomes more and more dominant, expressed inadvertently by her food rejection. Although Marian is not certain about the reason that causes her nausea, she pays attention to her bodily reaction and to her own reasoning and feeling. When she is dining with Peter, she is aware of Peter's constant gaze and his neglect of her opinions or her feelings. When discussing about children's education, Marian's intent attitude in the topic appears to be not at all important for Peter:

Peter chuckled warmly. His disapproval of that incident and his laughter at her for it had become one of the reference points in their new pattern. But Marian's serenity had vanished with her own remark. She looked intently at Peter, trying to see his eyes, but he was glancing down at his wineglass, admiring perhaps the liquid richness of the red against the white of the table cloth. (160)

Later that night, Marian also notices how well Peter operates with his knife. The narrator carefully depicts Marian's observation of Peter's skillful management of his food with his knife, and her uneasiness which is resulted from Peter's constant gaze on her as if "she was on a doctor's examination table that she would take hold of his hand to make him stop" (162). This uneasiness later turns to be worse when she finds the food on her plate is nearly intact, and she has almost lost her appetite.

That her body rejects food may reveal a reflection of the real self, calling for help because of the fear of losing identity and subjectivity. This warning of possible loss in Marian's identity and subjectivity takes shape and calls for Marian's attention to the matter of losing herself by rejecting food. I intend to illustrate how food is closely connected to Marian's life, how Marian is affected once she realizes her loss of appetite may be a warning to her, and finally how she manages to turn the situation and retain her identity and subjectivity.

Food has been one of the essential elements of Marian's life. When the story begins, she is asked to comment on the pudding sample and to write an apologetic letter to a client who found a housefly in the food sample. She characterizes the structure and the personnel in her company with a simile of food: "The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our

department, the gooey layer in the middle” (13). When she visits Clara, she refers to Clara’s bulged belly as a swallowed watermelon. In the office party, she is amazed at her colleagues’ bodies which remind her of food:

[S]he could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge’s back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly teacosy over those rounded shoulders; and the others too, similar in structure but with varying proportions and textures of bumpy permanents and dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones, without by a carapace of clothing and makeup. (181)

Nevertheless, Marian feels choked by these feminine images connected with food, and she dreads to be like them. These translucent exposures of female body parts with food apparently make Marian uncomfortable. She begins to feel suffered in two ways: firstly, her body refuses more food even though she acknowledges the hunger; then there is a close connection of women’s bodies and the food she is used to eating. What’s worse, she observes Peter’s operation on food is as forceful and planned as the butchers’ dismembering the cows into different parts for steaks.

How does food play a part in Marian’s anorexic physical reaction? And what is the meaning of her changing body and appetite? I think of Marian’s failure in eating as an explanation that she identifies with the food she eats, including the prey, hunted by Peter and his male friends. In terms of power politics, Marian gradually grasps the idea of her losing power and being the prey in society. It is because she sees herself as the victimized prey, which is to be cooked as food, that makes her empathize with the food her body takes in. Many critics have commented on Atwood’s usage of food and society, and there are some critics who associate the relationship among food, human and society with cannibalism. Among them, Karen Stein considers Atwood a writer that portrays her female protagonists striving for their identities in a conservative society, which “perceives women as decorative objects and consumers, or even items to be consumed, rather than as acting subjects or producers of art” (45). She thinks that Atwood deals the boundaries between humans and other animals with a blur as if humans and animals are exchangeable. This essential concept correlating human society and animals, or women and prey, for many critics, is one of the foundation stone for Atwood’s novels, such as *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*.

The Edible Woman is strongly related to the symbolic cannibalism which is often related to its social analysis social study. More than one critic agree that cannibalism is a primary theme in the novel, and Emma Parker and T.D. MacLulich are two of them. Parker indicates that cannibalism is a phenomenon that Atwood has long

discussed in her novels, such as *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*. In her novels, Parker notices, “men and women hunt each other like prey and metaphorically consume each other just as hunters once devoured animals” (127). Similarly, MacLulich brings together the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s study of the dichotomy between culture and nature. In view of the cultural habit of cooking the food and making the rare into cooked food, MacLulich reflects on Strauss’ ideas: “the cooking of food is the motif which signifies an attempt to bridge the gap between artificial human society and the natural world” (181). To further exemplify his thinking that *The Edible Woman* is a parable picturing the complex nature of society, in which everyone cooperates with one another as a unity and at times self-sacrifice for the integrity of that unity, MacLulich is determined that “everyone is both eater and eaten” (184) and he compares Marian to fairy tale figures, such as ginger-bread man story and the figure of Little Red Cap. With MacLulich’s association of Strauss’s idea, I gather that Marian can be the food prepared for society, and somehow she is aware of that. In that case, the process of her adapting herself to social expectation can be the process of food preparation. On the one hand, Marian, as well as women or vulnerable beings, can be sacrificed as food for the integrity of a symbolically cannibalistic society; on the other, it is also possible that they reverse their position and be the eater once they find their prey.

In addition to the connection between Atwood’s novels and social cannibalism, critics hold different attitudes in analyzing Atwood’s characterization. Most critics agree on the idea that Atwood’s novels often allude to fairy tales or parable. Just as MacLulich and Linda Rogers, Sharon Rose Wilson interprets Marian’s encounter in the perspective of rereading a fairy tale. In this adult fairy tale, Wilson considers Marian to be someone that is afraid of being consumed by society and male power, hence an identity crisis emerges in this novel which she proposes as a fairy tale cannibalism. Wilson affirms that the fear of being symbolically consumed actually results from the sexual politics that underlies Atwood’s characterization and story structure. Moreover, rituals of eating are merely an instrument for Marian to demonstrate power relations. In addition, the reversed power struggle and revenge by Marian convince Wilson that Atwood makes the story a happy ending by letting Marian preserve her self-identity and rebuild her subjectivity through her assertion of rejecting to be food.

Whether the novel is a self-construction story as MacLulich views or is a social analysis with a positive result as Wilson believes, after Marian realizes her lost appetite may have been a warning about her diminishing power and subjectivity, she strives to maintain her identity and subjectivity as an independent woman. While her body begins to reject food and reject eating, she acknowledges the conventional patriarchal society is taking away her power and her identity as an independent

subject. This physical reaction to the control of society or the social norms which women have internalized, in a way, explains that the meaning of eating may conceal more indication of power; furthermore, the seeming anorexic reaction may be a symbolic resistance against society that is taking away the power of Marian, an independent subject.

The more powerless she feels, the less food her body takes in. Marian's anorexic repulsion to food can be taken as a symbolic gesture of resistance. She refuses to be treated as a docile body when she is more and more conscious of her body differentiated from the identity. That is, in the second part of this novel, the narrative voice changes from first-person narration to a third-person narration. I assume that the "I" narration may be taken as Marian's voice in the first part whereas the "she" may suggest an unknown narrator keeps telling the story. Whether or not the voice is Marian's is not the focus of this thesis; yet this change in the voice foretells that Marian progressively realizes that her body is separated from her identity. Namely, her body does not follow her demands; instead, her body reacts irrationally and that is definitely not the usual or normal Marian, and is certainly beyond her control. In this stage, her body does not long for food even when her mind tells her that she should eat something: "Marian was surprised at herself. She had been dying to go for lunch, she had been starving, and now she wasn't even hungry" (119). This uncertainty of what she really wants to do bewilders her again when she says something against her mind when Peter asks her the time of their wedding:

"When do you want to get married?" he asked, almost gruffly.

My first impulse was to answer, with the evasive flippancy I'd always used before when he'd asked me serious questions about myself, "What about Groundhog Day?" But instead I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. (94)

This thinking one thing and doing another reaccounts for Marian's anxiety of her drastic physical reaction, and the thing inside her "dashes about" and is panicking. More and more, the differentiation of Marian's awareness of her body and her identities awakes her. That her body refuses to be docile as usual makes Marian alert and start to notice how her self is docile and passive when it comes to getting along with people and this society. She has fallen into a dilemma of listening to her body as a warning or controlling herself, keeping it normal like in the old time.

Starting from the bodily rejection of meat, then eggs, vegetables and finally everything, Marian's body rebels and refuses food bit by bit. Her physical reaction, then, leads to escape. Marian's going to Duncan is only an escape because she cannot evade the social stereotypes of women's being caretakers. She runs to Duncan, again,

to help him with his first sexual act when they have the engagement party in Peter's apartment. When Duncan refuses to be her refuge, Marian cannot eat anything. As a result, after realizing that she can escape no longer, she is forced to face her problem. As Lorraine York connecting Marian with the mothering and nursing figure of Florence Nightingale, she thinks through nursing and mothering Duncan, for instance, Marian realizes she is not a "cannibal woman" but a "cannibalized" one (16). That is to say, Marian may be used and eaten by Duncan, who is never a masculine nor a mature man in terms of social norms, and chances are, Marian could have mistaken Duncan for life-saver, who is actually another cannibal that tries to "consume" Marian. After having sex with Duncan, Marian finally realizes her body rejects food completely; in the narrator's terms, "It had finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off. The good circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outsidess" (283). This interesting image reminds me of various discussions about anorexia nervosa. Susan Benson, in her articles reasoning the connection between the body and eating disorder, has linked anorexia with three purposes; in her ways of seeing, anorexia is an eating disorder that has much to do with selfhood, assertion for autonomy and rejections. Similarly, Bordo also takes the symptoms of disorders (such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa), as a text that contains symbolic or political meanings, which can be taken as reflections upon the constructed and existed gender roles (Bordo 168). Although Marian's anorexic body is never a result of her dread of being obese, nor does she agonize over any weight loss, it is true that her anorexic physical reaction appears right after her engagement, and gets worse along with her self-awareness and her identification with food and prey. Like what Bouson notices that Marian sees Duncan as a possible mirror of herself, Marian's attraction to Duncan is not without a reason.

Just as Marian's fantasies of her body/self as distorted and dissolving give evidence of her extreme narcissistic vulnerability, so her anorexia concretizes the fragility of her self. As if intent on rescuing Marian from her anorexia, the text does not depict her as becoming dangerously thin. Instead, this threat to Marian's self becomes figured in Duncan's "long famished body" (263). (4)

It turns out her retreat from eating, however, first makes her panic, then helps her study, watch (instead of being watched), reason out and figure out what she will do. As Sarah Sceats mentions, Marian "is led by her body; its sensuous and maternal memories and appetite resist regulation and maintain her subjectivity" (113). Originally, she and Duncan use each other as "escape" from reality: Duncan uses her to escape from the reality of his writer's block in his career as a graduate student whereas Marian (unconsciously) uses Duncan back to avoid both her work, which stifles her with femininity, and her fiancé, who makes her feel threatened and

uncomfortable with a disposition of absolute maculinity. Not until she has sexual intercourse with Duncan and found out that her body rejects food completely does she realize the full, frontal rebellion of her body may be the last straw on the survival. Just as what Marian says to Duncan, she can neither run away from society, nor can she go back. Likewise, Duncan admits that Marian is no longer “an escape” to him because she is “too real” (284). All in all, her eating disorder can be taken as an effect of her own rejections of her femininity, which demands her to be “docile” and manipulable, and of the diminishing identity, which has always been constructed by society. The end of *The Edible Woman* is, however, quite ambiguous and controversial, unlike Marian’s obvious awakening. Marian makes a cake that resembles herself but has an ideal female body. That she offers the cake to her lovers and herself to eat is, I argue, an act of asserting her subjectivity and rejecting absolute femininity, although her subsequent acts may not be all in support of this self assertion. Having the anorexic response of her body, Marian strives to live and become capable of eating again. Therefore, she makes the cake, which has her feminine shape with a vacant and doll-like face. By offering the cake to the two possible male predators in her life, Marian seeks to keep her self and body intact and unviolated. In terms of this symbolic cannibalism in society, it is getting clear to her that it is either she that gets to be eaten up by the predators or vice versa. In this last scene of the novel, Marian asserts her subjectivity by distancing herself from the cake and by being able to eat again after she offers the cake to two major male characters in the novel. What interest me in the last cake-eating scene are how the cake is made and the reaction of Peter and Duncan, for this scene contains Atwood’s delicate deliberation on Marian’s self-asserting act of cake-making.

To begin with, the gesture of making the cake and the design of the cake is intriguing because it could be a conscious act of resistance, which can also mean her resumption of traditional images of women. The cake lady that Marian makes for other consumers and her own is a representation of Marian herself. Through the appearance of the cake, it is obvious that Marian deliberately puts emphasis on the cake lady’s femininity. The appearance of the edible cake woman suggests that Marian intends to use the cake lady as a miniature of her image. In her perspective, being a woman is like being an edible thing: not only the appearance of a temptress is important but also the capability of being silent, manipulated and controlled is essential. As she coats her cake with sugar and colorful decoration, she is actually reenacting her own experience of being dressed, having cosmetics put on her, and being coached to look more feminine and tempting to men. In addition, the cake lady that looks like “an elegant antique china figurine” (298) insinuates the fragility of women in Marian’s mind. For Marian, being a woman is like being a prey or food for society. It is this sense of

fragility and vulnerability that makes women controllable and conformable. To be more specific, in view of social norms, Marian is expected to remain elegant, silent, calm and controllable just as the cake lady is expected to be ostentatious, delicious and appetizing.

Besides the meaning of the cake-making, the look and the ingredient can also be significant. The cake lady has a vacant look just as Marian dressed like a doll, the target of the engagement party. Yet, Marian feels empty and blank inside. The blank look on Marian's face also resembles the cake lady's blank eyes when Marian hesitates to decide with which color she would use for the eyes of the cake lady – green, red or yellow. When she finally picks green as the eye color for decorating the cake lady, she reveals her hidden desire for a new life. Although she accounts for the reason she uses the color green is because there are only three possible food colorings she can use, the decision of the color for the eyes of the ice-coated lady implicates more than a simple icing of the cake. In previous chapters, as Marian's anorexic reaction gets worse, she finds herself identifying with the food she eats, such as the yolk of a boiled egg, which she regards as something “looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye” (174). What's more, when Peter asks her to pose her head and body with his collections of guns, Marian feels as if she is the rabbit that Peter hunts, chases after and later kills. In many ways, she identifies with food and Peter's prey, and thus the color she uses to decorate the cake lady's eyes is green, which may stand for hope and a new light/life; and by eating the new life, which is symbolized by the green eyes of the cake-lady, Marian demonstrates her power over herself who is able to eat. Subconsciously, she tries to avoid the color red, which is the color of the rabbit's eyes, and the color yellow that reminds her of a yolk staring at her in her plate. In short, she discloses the message that she wants to be able to eat again.

As a consequence of sympathizing and empathizing with the prey and food, Marian is more conscious of her subjectivity in the symbolically “cannibalistic” society compared to the old Marian at the beginning of the story. After finishing making the cake, she finds her creature appetizing, and yet she also feels pity for her creation, for “she was powerless now to do anything about it” (298). On the one hand, the pronoun “she” indicates both Marian and her creation: they are both powerless about society that takes them as food, the target of consumption. Marian is taught to comply to the authority and stay in control all the time; nevertheless, she is tired of being submissive to what she does not like to do but has to do just because of her role as a suitable woman for Peter. On the other hand, as Marian's self-consciousness grows, she does not seem to be as vulnerable and powerless as a victim like the cake lady. She offers the cake to Peter and Duncan, asking the question to the former and condemning him

for trying to make her someone she is not, abuse her with extreme femininity and expect her to be docile; with the latter, she shares the remains of the cake with him, offering him the torso and the head of the cake lady and watching him swallow all, and then she receives his appreciation. As a result, accusing Peter of his attempt at destroying her, Marian makes Peter feel so offended that he rages out of her house. With an opposition of Marian and the cake lady, therefore, Atwood ends the story with a suspicious position. Whereas the cake lady is made for food, as Marian claims, "Her fate had been decided" (298), Marian's fate is yet to be determined.

Body can be a site of resistance, and this resistance is latent but conspicuous in *The Edible Woman* as a result of Marian's dilemmatic gestures: in a way, she wants to remain under controlled, and in another, she notices the reality that she may be losing her self to the hand of a totally-controlled man or society. She moves back and forth with her submissive attitude and her resisting body. At times she asserts herself, then reverses her assertion. But through the anorexic reaction of her body, this concealed resistance of her body, which accounts for Marian's self-awareness, reminds her that she is gradually losing her subjectivity. In other words, her body works as a site to first reject falling prey to the dominant views and exploitation of femininity, which threatens her as an individual, then to construct her power. It is her growing consciousness of her body's reaction of rejecting food and her awareness of having to handle it all by herself that finally pushes her to fight for the autonomy of her body and being through, however ambiguously, the act of cake-making.