

Food as Metaphor: An Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Anju Varghese
Asst. Professor
Department of English
Assumption College Autonomous, Changanacherry, India

Abstract: Food is considered essential for the existence of living things, giving nourishment with its nutritional qualities. But far more than its nourishment value, food has surfaced as an object of interest when people began to see it as a part of 'culture.' In a cultural setting, different types of food, culinary preparations, eating events, and rituals, and food celebrating occasions carry multiple meanings that serve to drive the action of the plots, characterize the characters and reflect on aspects of the culture. Food is now recognized as an important area of study, in literature as well. Representation of food in fiction is intertwined with the issues of body, power, gender, class, religion and experience. Recent interest in food studies has opened doors in literary studies to examine how the use of food represents complex ideas and deeper meaning in literature. In this paper, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is taken for analysis. The food metaphors in this novel are analyzed within the framework of cultural studies.

Keywords – Food, Metaphor, Cultural Studies, *The Edible Woman*

I. INTRODUCTION

Eating and writing are two of the greatest pleasures of life. It explains why food and culinary practices have a strong foothold in literary narrations. Far more than its nourishment value, food has surfaced as an object of interest when people began to see it as a part of 'culture.' In a cultural setting, different types of food, culinary preparations, eating events, and rituals, and food celebrating occasions are metaphors that generate network of meanings. Representation of food in fiction is intertwined with the issues of body, power, gender, class, religion and experience. This paper endeavours to achieve the far reaching aspects of food in the light of Cultural Studies. The novel under discussion is *The Edible Woman*, the debut novel of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. The food images in this novel are analyzed within the framework of cultural studies.

Cultural Studies is a field of academic study that finds its origins in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (UK) and in the works of critics like Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and later by Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett and others. Earlier the term 'culture' was associated with the life style and behaviour patterns of upper caste people. Everyday experiences and practices of common people were considered as trivial. The qualifying term 'culture' is reserved exclusively for high culture and denied to the rest of the members of society, the actual majority, who are seen as simply without culture. This liberal elitist tradition is challenged by Williams in his works *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, Richard Hoggart in his *The Uses of Literacy* and E.P. Thompson in his *The Making of the English Working Class*, in the mid-1950s, which marked the emergence of Cultural Studies. Williams puts in his *The Long Revolution* (1961), that "culture is a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour" (58). Embedded within this statement is a particular theory of culture, that is, culture or cultural artefacts expresses meanings and these cultural expressions can be found in 'ordinary behaviour', not just 'art and learning'. Williams' phrase 'culture is ordinary' has since become a slogan for the standpoint of cultural studies.

Cultural Studies explore the meanings of everyday processes, places and actions like communication, eating, and shopping and look at how meaning is manufactured and ideology is coded into everyday life. Cultural Studies is interested in the processes by which power relations between and within groups of human beings organize cultural artefacts (such as food habits, music, cinema, sports events and celebrity culture) and their meanings. Cultural Studies looks at mass or popular culture and everyday life. For Cultural Studies today, cultural objects are simultaneously 'texts' (that is, they have meaning) and events and experiences, produced out off, and thrown back into, a social force field constituted unevenly by power flows, status hierarchies and opportunities. All texts (television, fiction, pop songs, novels, films, etc.) are basically political and they offer competing and even contrasting ideological significations of the way the world is. Ideology is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture. Graeme Turner calls it "the most important conceptual category in cultural studies" (44). James Carey has even suggested that "British cultural studies could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies" (34).

John Storey in his essay *What is Popular Culture?*, gives different definitions for ideology. In his opinion ideology can refer to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people (3), (that is the explicit idea that a text or an artifact convey) or it can suggest certain masking and distortion, that is, it can conceal some realities. He also uses the term to refer to 'ideological forms'. This usage is intended to draw attention to the way in which texts always present a particular image of the world. This definition depends on a notion of society as conflictual rather than consensual. Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict. Storey quotes the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, who said: "Good or Bad, a play always include an image of the world...there is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences" (4). Brecht's point can be generalized to apply to all cultural texts. Another way of saying this would be simply to argue that all texts are ultimately political. Subcultures, popular media, advertisements, clothing, sport, food practices etc. offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be. Storey concludes by agreeing

Hall's claim that popular culture is a site where 'collective social understandings are created'; a terrain on which 'the politics of signification' are played out in attempts to win readers to particular ways of seeing the world (4).

It is in this context, the ordinary culinary practices and food experiences become a cultural artifact, that which generate meaning and possess socio-political ideology during the production and consumption of food. Cultural Studies views such practices not simply as valueless objects and processes, but as potential producers of new social values and cultural languages. This investment in the 'popular' paved the way for new commercial trends, like food and culinary practices, to become part of Cultural Studies itself.

Meanings and values, and their exchange or circulation, constitute a particular 'culture' or community. Culture is about the role of meanings in any society; but these 'meanings' are never fixed; they are arrived at through a process of negotiation and exchange. 'Meanings' are processes of language and language here is taken to mean not just words or print but anything which would generate meanings say, speech, painting, photography, food or fashion.

As Nayar says, the preferred term to speak about 'meanings' in Cultural Studies, is 'representation'. Representation is the process of signifying (meaning generation), and includes the word/sign and its concept/meaning. Representation can be an image, a word, a sound or a concept. It uses these 'signs' in order to generate meaning (21).

As mentioned earlier, food is a language which possesses meaning, a representation in cultural studies. All food is cultural when it is produced, because man does not only use what is found in nature, but also seeks to create his own food. Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked* is an attempt to demonstrate a logic of properties based upon the opposition between what is raw and therefore part of Nature, from what is cooked and therefore part of Culture. It is Levi-Strauss' proposition that, on the plane of food, the distinction between raw and cooked is the same as the distinction between Nature and Culture. Then, food is Culture, when it is eaten, because man chooses food products, however 'natural' they are, and that too, becomes a cultural choice. Through such pathways food takes shape as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity.

Anthropologists like Levi Strauss, Mary Douglas and others see culture as a complex network of symbols and symbol system. They see culture as communication and representation. They are concerned with 'texts'. Foodways, for them, become texts to interpret and analyse.

In cultural settings, different types of food, culinary preparations, eating events and rituals and food celebrating occasions are metaphors that generate a network of meaning. Food constitutes information and it signifies. Putting this on background, food and culinary practices in *The Edible woman* are taken as subjects of study in this paper to identify the possibilities of signification.

The work under discussion is *The Edible Woman*, the debut novel of Margaret Atwood. It portrays the survival of a woman discussed in terms of her attitude towards food. The title refers to the novel's central character, Marian Mac Alpine, who is so preoccupied with food and interprets life around her in terms of food consumption. In her introduction to the novel, Atwood describes that her inspiration for *The Edible Woman* is the consumable figures of the bride and groom which are frequently placed on the top of the wedding cakes. The title of the novel suggests a doll shaped cake cooked and consumed in the novel's conclusion.

The Edible Woman shows how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self, and how woman and her images are moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man. Marian, who is in this state of conflict, is the central character and her mental state and anxiety is exhibited through her changing attitude towards food and eating.

Meals around the table are frequent scenes in *The Edible Woman*. It is something very important in Atwood's novels. It is through such occasions, one comes close to society outside their self. It also helps to give comfort and warmth to the needed person sitting beside and at the same time, it can be a manipulative act, where one can feel oppressed and subjugated by the fellow companion. Sometimes it also serves as a platform wherein some people find to make confessions. Marian sits with Clara, to give her company and support; for the 'office virgins' we see that the coffee grounds are their confession place; Marian takes care about Ainsley's food choice, like a mother or an elder sister. Marian's attitude, when she shares meal with Peter is of more complex and psychological.

Marian and Peter first met in a restaurant, over a table. Marian is drawn to him because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking. It is in a restaurant itself, she feels like being suppressed and controlled by Peter, after their engagement. In course of time, Peter's narration of hunting spree shocks Marian. She discovers that Peter enjoys shooting and killing of rabbits and other animals mercilessly as a matter of pleasure and pride and as well is very fond of non-vegetarian food. His image as the hunter and herself as the hunted enters into her mind. A kind of disapproval and protest against all that Peter represents begins. She chooses to eat very rarely and stops eating non-vegetarian food. Marian feels nervous and realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe and secure after her marriage with Peter. She begins to look at him as a destroyer of her individuality and identity. Her choice of an egg emphasizes the fragility of Marian's independence and sense of self, identified as something easily crushed and breakable. She is small and oral inside her shell, as an egg signifies.

Marian's problem with eating starts after the engagement. She feels ravenously hungry when she gets her steak, when she dines with Peter in a restaurant; but eating the meat proves to be difficult. She is absorbed in her thoughts, a chain of associations, during which she watches Peter cut his steak and eat it. Marian's thoughts go from child rearing to what Peter wants and wants from a wife. He is of the view that she fits well into a "conventionalized even stereotyped image of a woman who minus her chastity, recalls the mid Victorian Ruskinian image of a passive and dependent woman" (272).

After Peter finishes his dish and Marian is unable to do the same, Peter remarks: "A good meal always makes you feel a little more human" (151), showing that something that made Marian feel abject feelings make Peter feel better and more human. Marian tries to convince herself that it is all right to eat her steak, "Everyone eats cows, it's natural" (152), but she cannot, the abject identification is too strong. This could be compared to the common views on marriage: everyone does it, it is expected as a natural phenomenon. Peter eats up Marian's steak too, which suggests that he is very hungry and does not think about the ethics of marriage, child rearing or about meat eating. She feels like powerless before the powerful Peter; the powerlessness because of her non-eating and powerful because of his eating. Marian gradually becomes more and more anorexia. Her anorexia nervosa is of a particular

nature, through which she not only loses the ability to eat anything but is also haunted by the idea that she herself is being consumed, because she perceives everything in terms of food consumption.

There are several places, where the narrative suggests that the engagement changes Marian's subjectivity and identity. She is subconsciously aware of it and it is exhibited through her aversion to food. After the change in her attitude towards steak Marian notices that she cannot eat many other products either. Step by step, the items that remind Marian of human body become inedible and abject to her. They seem to be reminders of her own bodily existence and her identity and position as a bride, for instance, chicken is also out of the list, because it reminds her too much of "an arm with goose bumps" (153). It appears that food is too similar to herself, to her body; she is an edible like the foodstuffs she detests.

Marian suspects Peter for his personality; but she doesn't dare to express it openly. Instead she feels suspicion over food items, whether they are poisonous beneath their tasty appearance. She is afraid of what is in the food, as she is afraid of what is under Peter's neat surface. Marian's decreasing consuming possibilities echo the engagement. She feels losing control over herself and getting consumed by her marriage partner Peter. She tries to protect her selfhood by psychic distancing of her self from her body and by physical loss of weight.

At the end of the novel, Marian partially reconstructs the new persona, or concept of self, through a renewed relationship to food. She bakes and serves a cake in the shape of a woman, calls it the "edible woman", for Peter as she rejects him as her life partner. She regains the ability to eat and it is a reflection of the fact that the protagonist has found out her identity.

In the novel, the canned rice pudding is a metaphor for artificial food and eating habits. The product is repeated and it is an edible Marian can eat much longer than meat or eggs. It is also connected with her thoughts of the future wedding:

Her mother and her aunts of course had been interested in the wedding dress and the invitations and things like that. At the moment [in the supermarket] listening to the electronic violins and hesitating between two flavours of canned rice pudding-she had not reservations about eating that, it tasted so synthetic – she couldn't remember what they had all decided. (174)

The synthetic nature of the pudding suggests that it is safe: it does not threaten Marian's denial; it does not remind her of anything real. The pudding is an artificial imitation of a dessert – and her wedding an artificial imitation, a performance of the false and compliant self.

Cake is an important metaphor in *The Edible Woman*. Marian uses cakes in order to avoid speaking herself, or to be lied to. The cakes are an effort to go beyond language, to find the truth without the interference of human voice.

After Marian has escaped from Peter's party and slept with the acquainted Duncan, it is time to decide whether the engagement will continue or not. She wants to know, what to do next and she feels she needs "a test" (267), which would give her answer without words and talk. Baking the cake is a pleasurable event to her, but "it was a long time since she had made a cake" (340). She made the cake in the shape of a woman dressed in red colour. She invites Peter to have it; but Peter refuses to eat it and discontinue his plan to marry Marian. After he has gone, Marian starts eating the cake:

She picked up the platter, carried it to the kitchen table and located a fork. 'I'll start with the feet,' she decided. She considered the first mouthful. It seemed odd but most pleasant to be actually tasting and chewing and swallowing again Not bad, she thought critically; needs a touch more lemon though. (344-45)

She eats the cake without any feel of restrictions, control and fear. The food she associated with anorexia turns out to be the food which stands for her freedom, her individuality and identity as an independent woman.

Cultural Studies of food has brought a fresh lease of life to the concept of food by looking beyond the familiar notions that food carries. This emerging field of study has begun to articulate the importance of everyday processes in creating different meanings and ideologies within a society. Semiotic theory offers an explanation of how food becomes a signifier, giving out different meanings and ideas embedded within the 'concrete' food. Semiology translates food into the semiotic system as a signifier, in order to attribute meaning.

Thus, food sheds its identity as a concrete object or a sign. To eat or to cook is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends. It signalizes something else; it acts as a signifier rather than a sign.

The analysis of *The Edible Woman*, provides adequate evidences to support the point that food is a signifier. This novel contains relationships, love, hate, aggression, tradition and destiny that are all revealed through food created in the kitchen. Food connotes more than it denotes. Marian's rebellion against the patriarchal power finds expression in the food.

Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it to assert its diversity and hierarchy. Thus it constructs individual, national and ethnic identities. Food becomes signifier that unveils the politics and power contained in everyday processes. Power relation between man and woman or that between mother and daughter gets well expressed through food and consumption. It also shows in detail that, the preparation and the consumption of food carries the signature of one's own cultural and national identity. Food expresses copious emotions: love, sensuality, anger, rebellion, violence and so on. It also acts as a signifier that evokes memory.

Food, cooking and its consumption is a very effective signifier that celebrates one's freedom and its expression. Some people, especially women, develop an intricate relationship with food and their perceptions regarding the world and life would be around food as it is seen with the case of Marian. She asserts her individuality and identity through the satisfied consumption of food that she prepares.

Food, eating and cooking function as a means of exchange and take on the role of metaphor which represents complex ideas and deeper meanings. Thus meanings attached to food cover an unbelievably wide spectrum of human existence. Food is, without any doubt, the most effective and powerful metaphor by which many ideas, facts and emotions are communicated.

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