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Female Body as a Site of Power and Resistance: The Sexual Politics of Eating in Fay Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.

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Abstract: Patriarchy insists that the hallmark of an ideal woman is slenderness and a beautiful physique. Women often try to conform to the patriarchal standards, by deliberate undereating and also by undergoing various cosmetic surgeries. Women resort to various eating habits in order to be a part of the media and film industry. Both Fay Weldon and Margaret Atwood endeavour to examine the 'sexual politics' associated with gender images and how women imprison their bodies into an ideal image trap. The heroines of Weldon and Atwood, in the novels,*The Fat Woman's Joke* and*The Edible Woman*, resist the commodification of the female body, in their own ways- one by excessive eating and the other by restricted intake of food. For them, the body becomes a means by which they can assert their individuality and not a manipulated identity, as defined by the phallocratic culture.

Key words: commodification, anorexia, bulimia, fetishized, emotional cannibalism.

One of the least sentimental and highly imaginative of writers, Fay Weldon is one of Britain's most admired and translated writers. She renders with humour and high drama, the self deception and pain, which men and women inflict upon themselves and upon each other. She does not portray women as despicable creatures of dependence, passivity and indecision, with a propensity for excessive self-sacrifice. She lays stress on the positive value of feminine qualities, which include sensitivity, gentleness and an ability to co-operate and nurture. Weldon feels that women are not just 'decorative'; a major share of the world's work is imposed on them.

In world literature, the 'commodification' and humiliation of women have become favourite fictional themes. Fay Weldon leaves no stone unturned in holding upto ridicule the oppressive effects of the model of femininity popularized by the fashion industry. Her novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke*, reveals Weldon's strong disapproval of the prescriptions and prohibitions for femininity prevailing in and promoted by the phallocratic culture, which insists that women should be petite, demure, receptive and above all attractive. To put it otherwise, to be unattractive is to be unwomanly. It is no wonder that many a woman, in order to pander to the sexist views of men, finds herself under compulsion to re-model herself along petite lines. This tendency on the part of women to rise to patriarchal expectations of feminine behaviour and appearance is what comes in for Weldon's sharp castigation in the novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke*.

Naomi Wolfe, a major figure in post-feminist criticism, in her monumental work, *The Beauty Myth*, focuses attention on the false positions that women are constrained to take, in order to conform to standards of beauty laid down by the fashion and cosmetic industry. She points out that anorexia (starving oneself to become slim, as a result of distorted perception of weight) and bulimia (overeating followed by inappropriate methods of weight control) are offshoots of such standards. The insatiable appetite of bulimia is often interspersed with bouts of anorexia. Deliberate undereating enables a woman to obtain male approval and gain control over her body. But in doing so, she may lose grip on her mental faculties. This amounts to an exchange of one kind of bondage for another and this idea finds expression in Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke*.

Margaret Atwood, the celebrated Canadian writer, known for her feminist perspective in her debut novel, *The Edible Woman*, focuses on consumer culture and the stifling social conventions of the mid-sixties. The novel explores the theme of identity crisis along with restrictive expectations placed on young women of the time. Gender stereotypes and consumerism are dexterously woven into the fabric of the novel, and the heroine Marian MacAlpin is beset with a sense of 'emotional cannibalism.' Just like Esther Sussman of *The Fat Woman's Joke*, Marian MacAlpin, also attempts to resist the patriarchally encoded female body. Both the novels examine the various aspects of female appetite, relating them to power and identity, and at the same time foregrounding the cultural meaning of eating disorders.

Fay Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke* centres around two women, Phyllis Frazer and Esther Sussman, who form an "antithetical pair" (Palmer 32). They provide a striking contrast in

their attitudes to the prevailing concepts of femininity advocated by the patriarchal society. It is Alan, Esther's husband, who suggests that the best way to fight middle-age flab is to go on a diet. But Esther disapproves of the idea, and her attitude is different from that of Phyllis. In a bid to satisfy her husband, Gerry, who wants her to be slim and slender, Phyllis "finely boned, neat, sexy and rich, invincibly lively and invincibly stupid" (Weldon 10), undergoes cosmetic surgery, notwithstanding frugal food habits, and she mutilates her body by surgery. Phyllis finds pleasure in dancing to the tune of her husband in all matters and conforming fully to his cherished notions. But Esther is made of sterner stuff and she is a striking foil to Phyllis. She deliberately eats without any restraint, to her heart's content: She ate frozen chips and peas and hamburgers, and sliced bread and bought jam and fish paste, and baked beans and instant pudding and cakes and biscuits from packets. She drank sweet coffee, sweet tea, sweet cocoa and sweet sherry. (Weldon 9)

Esther defies her husband and rebels against the concept of slenderness as the criterion for feminine attractiveness. Her ravenous appetite coupled with her substantial figure symbolizes an exhortation for women to be self-reliant, active and assertive, instead of being weak-willed, meek and submissive. She thus becomes a spokesperson for what Chernin would call, "a unified condition of the self" (Palmer 32) as opposed to the fragmented image of the female body. Weldon here seems to chastise a society that considers the female body to be a conglomeration of fetishized parts, as the media would have it to be.

It is worthwhile recalling here Susan's pertinent question to Peter, "You don't think women are things, do you? You believe they are people, don't you" (Weldon 43)? It seems strange that the slim and willow-like Susan, secretary to Esther's husband Alan, "fresh from a charm school, with a light in her eye and life in her loins" (Weldon 24), who even plans to snatch him for herself, is in agreement with Esther's views about what man expects a woman to be – a silent sufferer of all indignities, a creature of flesh created for his pleasure, devoid of independent judgment, reason or a capacity to protest. She is at a loss to understand why man is being honoured for physical and mental strength, whereas the very same qualities are taboo for women. She wonders why petite women are objects of men's approval, and attributes their deliberate attempts at slimming to a sort of self-negation, which alone seems to enhance her charm in man's estimate. She says: "A woman has all too much substance in a man's eyes at the best of times. That is why men like women to be slim. Her lack of flesh negates her" (Weldon 49).

Thus Esther Sussman, the fat woman in *The Fat Woman's Joke* refutes her husband's proposition to reduce her intake of food in order to make her slim and appear attractive. In fact, she "ate and ate, and drank and ate" (Weldon 9), posing a challenge to the concept of femininity popularized by the fashion and cosmetic industry. Esther defies not only her husband, but the prevailing notion of slenderness as a criterion for feminine charm. Weldon satirizes here the attitude of certain women to forgo their physical and psychological power in order to cater to the interests of those who hail feminine passivity as a laudable virtue. Esther's defiance is a manifestation of her protest against those, who, motivated by a sense of misogyny, seek to reduce women to "a piece of docile flesh" (Weldon 105) and treat the female body as the site of women's oppression.

The appearance of the novel in the 'swinging sixties,' had almost created a sensation in the fashionably free society of the era. The period witnessed the emergence of many fashion models like Twiggy whose newly acquired prominence and fame gave rise to the widespread belief that extreme slenderness is the hallmark of a woman's beauty. In the inordinately sexist atmosphere of the times, strife between the slender maid and the fat, wedded lady was taken for granted and approved of widely.

In *The Edible Woman*, we find Marian deliberately restricting the intake of food in order to prevent herself from being pressured into a prescribed feminine role. By not eating, she rebels against those who insist on the female body to be reconstructed to suit their concepts of domesticity. She endeavours constantly to empower her mind by a total negligence of her essential body. This is to say that the erasure of the body results in mental strength for women to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchal control. In this way, she is trying to liberate herself from the femininity that stifles and suffocates her. Whenever food items are served before her, she starts viewing them as living entities. She finds it difficult to eat carrots which remind her of the terrible pain they suffered when pulled out from the ground. "It's a root, she thought…Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive…" (Atwood 220).

When she looks into a boiled egg, what she sees is a yellow eye staring back at her. At a psychological level, her relationship with Duncan induces in her a strange feeling that he is slowly consuming her just as he consumes food. Finally she comes to a stage when she starts taking vitamin pills as a substitute for food. Later when she awaits marriage, she is tormented by an inner rebellion and "marriage à la mode, Marian discovers, is something she literally can't stomach" (Cover copy) and she finds it difficult to conform to the societal

and patriarchal norms of an ideal wife. One fine day, she bakes a cake and gives it the shape of a woman, the 'edible woman'. The cake, in fact, symbolizes the concept of an ideal woman that Peter wants her to be. She requests Peter to eat the cake, but quite unexpectedly, he spurns the request and leaves the room in a fit of fury, on account of her strange behavior. As soon as Peter leaves, Marian regains her lost appetite and devours the cake, part by part, in triumphant joy. "So Peter hadn't devoured it after all…It looked up at her with its silvery eyes, enigmatic, mocking, succulent. Suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry" (Atwood 344).

Marian's consumption of the cake is a powerful act of defiance against a system that defines women as commodities and devours them. The insistence on over-decoration and ornamentation associated with the system of marriage is also thrown to the winds by her act of devouring the cake. By eating the cake she proclaims to the world her refusal to fit into the patriarchal standards of femininity. She seems to be convinced that she had better consume herself than let others consume her. Marian is extremely pleased with herself and a feeling of contentment descends on her. Marian's eating the cake, to borrow a term from Maggie Humm "is a cannibalism of the female stereotype" (68). Here Atwood is exhorting women not to shun their bodies but to eat to their heart's content so that they may assert their individuality and re-inhabit their own bodies.

Esther Sussman in *The Fat Woman's Joke* is defiant to the core. Extreme slenderness is often hailed as a mark of feminine charm and this makes a woman sacrifice physical strength to appear attractive to men, and thereby obtain indirect access to social and material power. But Esther rebels against the concept of slenderness and resorts to deliberate overeating. Her gluttonous appetite and uncontrollable eating habits represent a protest against the tendency of women to make themselves slim by eating less than what they need.

There is an obvious contrast between Atwood's heroine Marian and Weldon's Esther Sussman. Esther musters the courage to defy her husband and his idea of slenderness as a mark of feminine beauty. But the truth about the power of the female body dawns upon Marian only much later. We find in her in the beginning, a tendency to abide by the wishes of her lover. But in due course, she realizes her folly and starts regaining her lost appetite for food. At the same time, both Sussman and Marian transform themselves from their state of being preys to the level of predators.

Food signifies gender power and social control. There is sexual politics involved in eating disorders and produce Foucault's 'docile bodies' mainly through invisible forces of power. But in Fay Weldon, the same forces are used to resist the conventional stereotypes of 'docile bodies.' Weldon's 'fat woman' and Atwood's 'edible woman' renounce professional help and resort to self-therapy as a means of protest. Both Weldon and Atwood employ a corporeal language of resistance and view the female body from a new perspective, depicting it as a site of power and resistance.

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