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Research Paper

Feasts of Freedom: Analyzing Food and Female Agency in Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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ABSTRACT: *Desire, a complex psychological phenomenon, is considered to be the longing or need for something one feels is missing. Desire for food has been one of the most important types of desire down the ages. Where on one hand, women are deprived of desired foods, on the other, there are traces of women embodying food to resist violence and establish agency amid patriarchal norms practised by society. When it comes to talking about female repression in a patriarchal society, we find societal indulgence in shaping our personality--our gendered identity. As a result, to counter it the development of rebellious texts, from time to time, becomes very much evident in this contemporary era. Among many things, food has been considered to be another area of repression, down the ages. This paper would try to examine food as a weapon to reconcile female agency and the outburst of desires in short stories like Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" or novels like Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and how they improve or affect the situation of female agency. The paper would also focus on the characteristics of the desires present in the central figures, a commonality and how the desires led them throughout their respective storylines.*

KEYWORDS: *Desire, Patriarchy, Repression, Food, Identity, Female Agency*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Feminism came up as both a social and political movement dedicated to achieving gender equality and fairness across all aspects of life, encompassing social, economic, and political realms. Grounded in social theories, political activism, and ethical principles, feminism seeks to eliminate sexism, exploitation, and oppression, striving to ensure that everyone has equal rights and opportunities. When it comes to talk about the feminist literary criticism, needless to say, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and the like have contributed profusely to the development of this criticism. Feminist literary criticism appears to be a term which doesn't have a precise definition but broadly encompasses various activities in literary study. These include any criticism written by women, regardless of the subject; criticism by women of men's books from a feminist or political viewpoint; and criticism by women of books written by female authors or about women in general. These activities help define how female characters are portrayed and reveal sexist biases or stereotypical depictions of women's roles in the society within literary texts (Kolodny 75). Certainly, to understand the connection between food and female agency, the feminist literary criticism as a base becomes very much important. Foods are not only a source of nourishment but also reflect cultural norms and practices, community standards as well as people's rights and freedoms. Men's control of women's bodies in the patriarchal societies is seen in women's struggle with foods. In the works of female writers dealing with desire and the restoration of female agency food becomes an important symbol: "The symbolic complexity of food is particularly highlighted in the work of women writers, whose various social roles and expectations produce a myriad of complex relationships with food" (Dowbnia 567). Both in *"*The Remains of the Feast*"* (1993) by Githa Hariharan and in *The Edible Woman* (1969) by Margaret Atwood food is symbolic and a weapon in the battlefield where women's struggle for independent choices and rebellion against the patriarchal society takes place. Both the short story and the novel respectively depict their protagonists trying to regain their control and embrace their individuality by using food as a weapon. A weapon to fight discrimination, a weapon to fight repression. Ironically, the problem of repression upon the female sex has remained common throughout different nations, regardless of their tags like "developed" or "developing". A comparative analysis of texts like

Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* would provide a deeper understanding of the discrimination against the female sex as well as the statement mentioned above. In both works, food and the desire to restore female agency are central themes.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This paper will use feminist literary criticism to explore the theme of food symbolized as a form of power and rebellion in Githa Hariharan's *"*The Remains of the Feast*"*, a short story taken from Githa Hariharan's short story collection *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*(1993) and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969). In particular, the employment of feminist literary theory shows how literature subverts gendered roles and underscores the existence of women in patriarchal oppressive structures. However, beyond that, symbolic interactionism complements this approach of feminist literary theory by examining food as a symbol of resistance and identity. It helps understand the characters' food choices as expressions of their struggle against societal expectations and quest for self-definition. Another theory, which is a psychoanalytic theory, focusing on societal repression and a desire to dismantle the norm of societal repression, provides insights into the psychological dimensions of characters' relationship with food. It reveals how foods symbolise broader aspirations for freedom and self-assertion. Last but not the least, the theory of intersectionality, working with the other theoretical frameworks emphasizes on the interconnected nature of social categorisations like race, gender, and class, highlighting how these aspects shape the protagonists' experiences and resistance strategies. Integrating these frameworks, the paper demonstrates how food functions as a symbol of rebellion and empowerment, with female characters asserting their identities, resisting societal norms, and reclaiming their agency through their interactions with food.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research falls under the category of qualitative research and uses comparative literary analysis to study food and female agency in Githa Hariharan's *"*The Remains of the Feast*"* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. The process of the research involves several key steps: The researcher has conducted a close reading of both texts, identifying and interpreting the symbolic use of food and its connection to female agency and identity. By analysing the protagonists, their actions, dialogue, and narrative descriptions related to food, the researcher uncovered underlying themes of repression and rebellion, a desire to establish autonomy. A comparative analysis has been performed, highlighting the commonalities and differences in the characters' desires and acts of rebellion. To understand the portrayal of food and female agency in these texts, we must consider their cultural and historical contexts. The authors' personal backgrounds and the socio-political climates of their times shaped their perspectives. One, writing amid feminist movements, used food to symbolize rebellion against traditional gender roles. The other, from an era of restricted female autonomy, employed food to express desires for freedom and self-determination. By situating these texts within their respective contexts, we see how food serves as a powerful symbol of female agency, autonomy, and resistance, reflecting the authors' unique experiences and societal influences.

IV. "THE REMAINS OF THE FEAST": AN OVERVIEW

Githa Hariharan's short story "The Remains of the Feast" explores age, tradition, disobedience and the complexity of familial connection. The short story revolves around 90-year-old Rukmini, a widowed great-grandmother in a traditional South Indian Brahmin family, and her great granddaughter Ratna who is studying to become a doctor. As Rukmini approaches the end of her life, we find her indulging herself in forbidden pleasure and defies social expectations. Narrated by Rukmini's great-granddaughter, Ratna, the story captures a contrast between tradition and modernity, as Rukmini violates conventions in her final days. Rukmini's rebellious attitude is first brought to light by her cynical sense of humour, manifested in her unabashed laughter and unexpected admission of enjoying flatulence. It can be assumed that this humour serves as a coping mechanism for Rukmini, who has outlived her son and daughter-in-law, finding irony in the contrast between her long life and their untimely deaths, "Her sense of humour was always quaint. It could also be embarrassing. She would sit in the corner, her round, plump face reddening, giggling like a little girl. I knew better than ask her why, I was a teenager by then" (Hariharan 9). Further in the story Hariharan writes, "But some uninitiated friend would be unable to resist, and would go up to my great-grandmother and ask her why she was laughing. This, I knew, would send her into uncontrollable peals. The tears would flow down her cheeks, and finally, catching her breath, still weak with laughter, she would confess" (Hariharan 9-10). She could imitate the sound of a train whistle with her farts, a talent that filled her with the same delight a child feels when seeing or hearing a train. So perhaps it wasn't so surprising that she remained nonchalant about the death of her only child, particularly since ten years had already gone by. As Rukmini's health starts declining because of terminal cancer, we find her defiantly rebelling against the dietary restrictions imposed by her orthodox Brahmin upbringing. Despite her family's concerns, she is found conspiring with Ratna to satisfy her escalating cravings for forbidden foods like

cakes, meat, aerated drinks and even Street foods like *bhel-puri*. Unfortunately, these foods exacerbate Rukmini's terminal cancer. Her family was shocked by these cravings for taboo foods from the traditionally orthodox woman. It is noteworthy that she was "a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century" (Hariharan 12). And she is breaking the norms by herself. On her deathbed at the nursing home, a delirious Rukmini screamed for a red silk sari and fried snacks like peanuts with chilli powder and onion bondas addressing the fact that she has tried to rebel with her honest potential though the epiphany occurred quite late in her life. After her death, which happens at the end of the short story Ratna adorned Rukmini's body with her own bright red sari. However, the family cremated Rukmini in "a pale brown sari, in widow's weeds" (Hariharan 16) with prayer beads around her neck as per tradition. The short story poignantly depicts how the elderly Rukmini defiantly cast off the restrictions of her orthodox Brahmin upbringing at the end of her life to indulge in life's small pleasures that she had been denied by patriarchy. Her actions subverted long held societal expectations about how an upper-caste widow should conduct herself. In both the short stories a revolt against repression is undoubtedly very much visible.

In Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast", the 90-year-old Rukmini's rebellious consumption of taboo foods serves as a powerful statement against the restrictive norms of her orthodox Brahmin upbringing. Her defiance, supported by her great –granddaughter Ratna, highlights the potential for intergenerational solidarity in challenging patriarchal and caste-based restrictions. Through her final acts of rebellion on the deathbed, "Bring me a red sari,' she screamed. 'A red one with a big wide border of gold.' And her voice cracked. 'Bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil'" (Hariharan 15), Rukmini reclaims her agency and autonomy, subverting societal expectations and indulging in pleasures long denied to her. This narrative poignantly underscores the enduring struggle for female liberation and the reclamation of identity, illustrating how acts of resistance can transcend age and tradition. Rukmini's story, with its blend of humour and defiance, serves as a compelling reminder of the importance of individual autonomy and the ongoing fight against oppressive societal norms. Historically, in India, specific food taboos for widows and the practice of fasting for women were culturally, religiously and socially determined. A widow was expected to observe strict dietary etiquette and did not consume meat, fish, onions, garlic, or spicy food. These restrictions derived from Hinduism had purpose of purification and signified mourning and leaving worldly life. Such practices also reflected the fact that the widow was of a low status and she was expected to live a minimalist life. Among the Indian women, fasting is associated with religion and spirituality. For instance, during Karva Chauth, women who are married pray for their husbands' long life while during Teej, women pray for a happy conjugal life. Intermittent fasting is considered as tapasya (penance) that has numerous spiritual and healthy related benefits. Sometimes men and women fast on certain days of worship, according to Ayurvedic principles in maintaining the body's humours. According to Vesnaver et al. Widows have described that their eating habits shifted after losing the experience of sharing meals with others. The change resulted in irregular mealtimes, increased reliance on convenient foods, and simplified meal preparation methods. Without the social obligation and enjoyment of communal dining, they found less motivation to cook sumptuous meals (8). Such activities have changed over the years, and the contemporary society has raised eyebrows on their equity and relevance. Though the traditions, even some years ago were completely focused on female sex, nowadays, these traditions are modified to the extent that it is convenient for Indian women with their views regarding gender equality, and health concerns, though with regard to cultural and religious backgrounds.

V. *THE EDIBLE WOMAN*: AN OVERVIEW

Published in 1969, Margaret Atwood's debut novel *The Edible Woman,* tells the story of Marian McAlpin, a young woman whose orderly, consumer-oriented life begins to unravel. After getting engaged, Marian feels a growing disconnect between her body and sense of self. She starts attributing human qualities to food, which leads her to identify with it and eventually makes her unable to eat, repulsed by the idea of metaphorical cannibalism. In a forward written in 1979 for the Virgo edition, Atwood evidently described the novel as protofeminist rather than feminist. According to Moirangthem Dolly, "The novel's publication coincided with the rise of the women's movement in North America, but is described by Atwood as 'proto-feminist' because it was written in 1965 and thus anticipated second wave feminism"(91).

The Edible Woman is the first novel by Margaret Atwood, which was published in 1969. It comes as a work of realistic fiction with a focus on the position of women in the society, identity, and a consumerist culture. It focuses on Marian McAlpin, a young lady of approximately twenty five years residing in Toronto. She is employed at a market research firm known as Seymour Surveys and is in a relationship with Peter, a handsome, successful lawyer. Despite seemingly living a normal and even perfectly happy life, Marian begins to feel more and more like an outsider and experiencing significant pressure from the society. Marian lives with her roommate, Ainsley, who is determined to have a child without getting married. In the novel we find her articulating her conviction regarding husbands, "the thing that ruins families these days is the husbands"

(Atwood 45). She sets her eyes on Marian's friend, Len, a somewhat detached and intellectual graduate student who is also portrayed as a womanizer. He is portrayed as notorious for his relationships with young, innocent women. On the other hand, Marian's friend Clara, a homemaker who is expecting her third child, epitomizes conventional domesticity and motherhood. Marian's job at work is to collect answers for a survey regarding a new beer brand. She meets Duncan, a graduate student studying English, while going from home to home getting people's comments. Duncan attracts her with his peculiar and unusual responses. As the story progresses we come to know about Marian and Peter's dinner date in which Ainsley and Len were also present. Ainsley shows up dressed as a virgin schoolgirl at the dinner date. This is the first step in Ainsley's plan to mislead Len into getting her pregnant. On the other we find Marian feeling alienated from body while Peter tells Len about a gruesome rabbit hunt: "After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear" (Atwood 77). Peter follows Marian in his car as she flees the restaurant. Peter scolds Marian and tries to set Ainsley as an example. He says, ""'Ainsley behaved herself properly, why couldn't you? The trouble with you is," he said savagely, "you're just rejecting your femininity"" (Atwood 89). Without knowing that Ainsley was planning to get pregnant with Len. At the end of the night, we find Peter proposing Marian and asking for a date for the wedding. But Marian says Peter that he should take the most important decisions, thus passing on her agency, her autonomy: ""'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. The funny thing was I really meant it" (Atwood 100-01). Marian and Duncan unexpectedly meet in a laundromat, engage in awkward conversation, and share a kiss. Shortly afterward, Marian begins to empathise with a steak she and Peter both are eating, envisaging it being "knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar" (Atwood 166). This marks her aversion to meat. She "rejected anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" (Atwood 168). In the case of Ainsley, her plan to seduce Len succeeds. When Len discovers Ainsley is pregnant, he confides in Marian, who reveals that pregnancy was Ainsley's intention all along. Further, Len shares his childhood fear of eggs, and Marian subsequently fails to eat her morning soft-boiled egg. Her aversions soon extend to vegetables and cakes. Peter decides to throw a party, inviting Marian's colleagues, Duncan, and his roommates. Peter suggests Marian buy a new dress, something less "mousy" than usual. Marian complies and chooses a daring red dress. Before the party, Ainsley applies Marian's makeup, including false eyelashes and a bright smile. When Duncan arrives, he remarks, "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade. Who the hell are you supposed to be?" Upset, he leaves, and Marian follows. They end up at a cheap hotel, where they have unsatisfying sex. The next morning, Marian cannot eat breakfast. After Duncan leaves, Marian realizes Peter is metaphorically consuming her. To test him, she bakes a pink cake shaped like a woman and dares him to eat it, saying, "This is what you really want." Disturbed, Peter leaves. Once he's gone, Marian feels hungry and starts eating the cake, realizing it's just a cake.

Marian returns to her first-person narrative in the book's closing pages. Duncan shows up at her apartment, and Marian offers him the remains of the cake, which he finishes. "Thank you," he says, licking his lips. "It was delicious." When Marian becomes engaged to Peter, her sense of losing control over her life intensifies. Certainly, Peter starts to exhibit controlling behaviour, emphasizing traditional gender roles and expecting Marian to comply with his ideal of a perfect wife. Marian's work life becomes more unsettling. She starts experiencing dissociation, feeling detached from her body and seeing herself as an object. This psychological struggle is symbolized through her changing relationship with food. She starts to lose her appetite, struggling more and more to eat various foods. During this period, Marian meets Duncan, a graduate student who works part-time at a laundromat. Duncan is eccentric and nonconformist, representing an alternative to Marian's conventional life with Peter. Their relationship grows as Duncan becomes a confident and a means for Marian to explore her feelings of entrapment. Marian's aversion to food intensifies, paralleling her growing resistance to societal expectations. She develops an eating disorder resembling anorexia nervosa, losing her appetite and ability to consume food. She becomes unable to eat meat, then vegetables, and eventually, food in general, seeing them as symbols of consumption and control. This culminates in a vivid scenes where she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman. At her engagement party, Marian has a moment of realization. Peter, holding a camera symbolizes his desire to capture and control Marian, reducing her to an object for his consumption. In a moment of defiance, Marian rejects Peter and the life he represents.

The novel reaches its climax when Marian, pressured by Peter to dress up for his party, experiences a complete loss of identity. She flees the party and seeks solace with Duncan, spending the night with him in a hotel room. This act of defiance marks a turning point in Marian's journey towards self-reclamation. In the last chapters of the novel, in a pivotal and symbolic scene, Marian bakes a cake in the shape of an ideal woman, presenting it to Peter as a substitute for herself. She accuses him of trying to destroy and assimilate her, and reclaims her identity by consuming the cake herself in an act of self-assertion. This gesture is a rejection of the positional and relational consumption that the society has in store for her. Peter's refusal to take the cake symbolizes his failure to let Marian work on her own will. On the other hand, when Marian gives the cake to

Duncan, he eats it thus signifying that he accepts her for who she is. It is in the novel that one gets to see Marian's dilemma on the issue of her identity and the cultural impositions placed on women. Her dissociative behavior and general avoidance of food reflect internal conflict. Food and consumption play a major role in compiling this critique of the consumerist culture; relationships and society. The plot emphasises the restrictions and obligations of women, questioning the mould of the feminine image and the female shy demeanour. *The Edible Woman* is a powerful exploration of a woman's journey to self–awareness and liberation from societal constraints. Marian's story is both a personal and universal struggle for autonomy, making the novel a seminal work in feminist literature. In *The Edible Woman* Atwood sheds light to the life of Marian McAlpin, a young lady who experiences loss of self/identify every time she is engaged. The absence of any food in Marian's mouth, as well as her increasing distaste for any edible items, reflects her growing refusal to accept the conventional role of a woman that Peter, her fiancé, and the rest of the society insist she should embrace. What is more, the story finishes with an empowered act of baking a woman-shaped cake, giving it to Peter and eating it in order to become whole again. This act signifies escape from a consumerist objectification within the framework of patriarchy, thus bringing back Marian's agency. Thus, Hariharan and Atwood presenting life stories of female characters show how the symbols of food and consumption can be significant to defy male domination. In this way, analyzing the part that belongs to food in the representation of the main characters, this paper explores such aspects of the use of desire and rebellion in relation to female subjectivity. The fact that Rukmini and Marian are prominent characters in such stories demonstrates how people, especially women, fight for identity and freedom in a world that wants to assign limiting roles to females based on societal norms.

VI. RESTORATION OF FEMALE AGENCY IN *THE EDIBLE WOMAN* AND "THE REMAINS OF THE FEAST":

Food somewhat becomes a metaphor as well as a weapon to restore the female identity agency against the oppressive patriarchal expectations placed on Marian, the female protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman.* As we can see in this novel that Marian's inability to eat and rejection of food is a physical manifestation of her psychological rejection of the traditional female role that the patriarchal society and her fiancé Peter expect her to conform to after getting engaged. Her sympathising with the carrot being consumed represents her feeling like she is being metaphorically consumed and stripped of her own choices by the patriarchal norms. Further, the narration shifting from first person to third person when she stops eating signifies her losing her sense of identity, undoubtedly. The restoration of female agency happens only and only in the last couple of pages. We find Marian baking a woman-shaped cake and offering it to Peter, declaring "This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?" (Atwood 302). This act somewhat represents her reclaiming agency by turning the metaphor of being the consumed object back on Peter and rejecting being merely consumed by him and patriarchal society. After the determining cake scene, Marian starts eating again and the narration returns to first person, signifying her regaining identity and rejecting the prescribed feminine role. Certainly, food and Marian's relationship to it, becomes the primary symbolic battlefield where she wages her personal war against oppressive gender norms and expectations through her actions with food, both physically and metaphorically. Her agency is restored when she flips the script on being a consumable object.

In Githa Hariharan's short story "The Remains of the Feast", food becomes a powerful metaphor for the female characters like Rukmini to reclaim female agency and subvert the oppressive patriarchal norms imposed on them. The protagonist Rukmini, a Brahmin widow, had been forced to adhere to strict dietary restrictions throughout her life, denying her the freedom to express her desires and identity through food choices. In the final part of the short story which illustrates Rukmini on her deathbed, we find Rukmini demanding all the foods that were forbidden to her- non-vegetarian dishes, fried delicacies, sweets, aerated drinks and more. This act of demanding and consuming the taboo foods can be seen as Rukmini's way of reclaiming her long-suppressed sensuality and pleasures that were stripped away by the regressive traditions of widowhood. Point to be noted, even when she wasn't a widow, she couldn't eat edible items which are restricted in general by the society. This act of demanding and consuming the "taboo" foods can be seen as Rukmini's way of reclaiming her long-suppressed sexuality, sensuality and pleasures that were stripped away by the regressive traditions of widowhood. Her craving for such carnal indulgence through food symbolizes her yearning to break free from the shackles of patriarchy that rendered her identity voiceless for decades. Rukmini finds an accomplice in her great-granddaughter Ratna, who willingly smuggles in the prohibited delicacies, making her an equal partner in this defiance against patriarchal diktats. Even after Rukmini's death, Ratna keeps her rebellious spirit alive by indulging in the same kinds of taboo foods that her great-grandmother had relished. This can be seen as Ratna's way of "avenging" Rukmini's subjugation at the hands of patriarchy and ensuring that her defiant quest for selfhood does not get extinguished. Thus, through the metaphor of food and eating prohibitions, Hariharan's narrative powerfully depicts how the female characters attempt to restore their agency, sexuality and identity by defiantly overturning the patriarchal controls imposed on their bodies and desires.

VII. CONCLUSION:

In both Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, food symbolizes a powerful form of rebellion and agency for female protagonists Rukmini and Marian. Rukmini's defiant consumption of forbidden foods at the end of her life highlights her rejection of the strict dietary and societal norms imposed by her orthodox Brahmin upbringing. This act signifies her reclaiming of long-denied desires and autonomy. Ratna, her great-granddaughter, continues this rebellion, showcasing intergenerational solidarity against patriarchal control. Similarly, Marian's changing relationship with food in *The Edible Woman* mirrors her struggle against societal expectations. Her progressive aversion to eating, culminating in the symbolic act of baking and consuming a woman-shaped cake, represents her rejection of the consumable object role forced upon her. This pivotal act marks her reclaiming of identity and autonomy. Both stories use food as a metaphor for resistance against patriarchal oppression. Through their interactions with food, Rukmini and Marian assert their identities and reclaim their agency, challenging the societal norms that confine them. These narratives underscore the enduring fight for female liberation, illustrating how symbolic acts of defiance can profoundly impact the quest for self-definition and autonomy.

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