RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Vol. **11,** Issue **2 (April-June, 2026)** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications**

Body Politics and Consumerist Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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Paper Received on 06-03-2026, Accepted on 28-04-2026
Published on 30 -04-26 | DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.02.291

Abstract

Feminist literary criticism is a movement, flourished in the late 1960s, in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature. It plays a pivotal role in analysing and reinterpreting literature from the perspective of gender dynamics and power structures. Keeping this in view, the paper primarily examines the growth and evolution of feminist literary criticism and its application to Margaret Atwood's *magnum opus The Edible Woman* focusing on the idea of body politics within a consumerist society.

The paper is structured in three main parts: Firstly, the introduction traces the early pioneers of feminist critical theory such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf to post-war or second wave thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. It tries to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the gendered power dynamics of mid-century society. It explores how societal powers regulate the human body and how the body serves as a site of resistance focussing on the analysis of the concept of 'body politics'.

Secondly, the paper examines Marian McAlpin, the central character of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, as a victim of a consumerist society that treats the female form as a commodity fit for consumption. It probes into an investigation of the novel's food metaphors, character archetypes such as the 'Office Virgins' and the symbolic utility of Marian's developing anorexia. It even argues that the somatic self becomes a vehicle for expressing rebellion against patriarchal assimilation. Thirdly, the study interprets the climactic act of baking a woman-shaped cake as a radical re-appropriate of identity, signalling the transition from a 'docile body' to an autonomous subject.

The conclusion affirms the enduring relevance of feminist literary criticism in reshaping knowledge production and fostering gender equity in the literary canon.

Keywords: Feminist literary criticism, gender dynamics, phallocentric ideologies, somatic self, docile body

Feminist literary criticism emerged as a transformative movement in critical theory and literary evaluation during the late 1960s and continued to flourish ever since. It is fundamentally an approach to describe, interpret, reinterpret, and reconfigure the female experiences as depicted across various literary genres with a special focus on novel and to a lesser extent, poetry and drama. It challenges the long-standing, dominant, and male-centric ideologies, often described as phallocentric, that have historically prioritized patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literary texts.

Elaine Showalter, in her essay "The Female Tradition," a seminal work on feminist literary criticism, founds gynocriticism and a phased model that elucidates the gendered progression of women's writing. She "empowers women as subjects of literary history rather than marginal appendages by challenging patriarchal canons and advocating for the recovery of a collective female tradition" (Singh, 2026: 5).

The movement systematically critiques traditional notions of literary value. It achieves this by dismantling the established notions of value and by scrutinizing how male author represent both men and women. It simultaneously privileges women writers to provide a more balanced literary canon. It rejects prescriptive ideas about how women are 'supposed' to feel, think, or act, instead highlighting the diverse ways in which women actually respond to life and society. Its critics expose the frequent tendency of male writers to relegate female characters to limited, stereotypical roles questioning the prejudices and assumptions embedded in texts.

This inquiry within the feminist studies has raised several pertinent questions. One of the most important inquiries is the concept of *écriture féminine*, or 'feminine writing'. It suggests that women writing is essentially feminine and often reflect their distinct experiences and perspective. This idea has led to another debate. Some scholars argue that making such distinctions is either productive or it may merely reinforce 'sexual polarization' and traditional marginalization. This thought creates differences of opinions. Some believe that women's writing expresses a unique identity, while others argue that focussing too much on this idea may repeat the same patterns of marginalisation that feminism seeks to challenge.

The origins of feminist criticism are deeply rooted in the broader struggle for women's rights that gained momentum in the late 18th century, most notably with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). It emphasizes the importance of women's education and intellectual opportunities within an

Enlightenment framework. It responds to the negative portrayal of women in the writings of influential thinkers such as Milton, Rousseau, and Burke. It even throws light on the early feminist criticism that focusses on showing how women writers and female characters were pushed to the margins in a literary tradition dominated by men. It also stresses that women should have equal opportunities for learning and rational thought as men.

These intellectual ideas continued to gain momentum even in the 19th century with the writings of Margaret Fuller and John Stuart Mill. Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) supported the idea that women should have the freedom to develop their individuality while John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) argued for equal rights in law and fairness within marriage and society. These works eventually laid the groundwork for the suffragette movement of the early 20th century, which brought the demand for women's rights into the political sphere.

In the early twentieth century, feminist thought showed a clear distinct approach focusing mainly on self-awareness. Eminent writers like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler addressed issues such as identity, agency, and the intersectionality of gender with race, class, and sexuality thereby paving the way to modern feminist ideas. Woolf, a central figure during this era, produced essays that highlighted the economic and cultural barriers faced by women in a 'patriarchal' society. Her work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), highlighted the necessity of economic independence and intellectual space for women writers. On the other side, Dorothy Richardson introduced a new revolutionary 'stream of consciousness' technique, through her thirteen-volume, including a final posthumous volume, novel sequence *Pilgrimage* which examined the inner thoughts and female consciousness. Woolf praised this unique prose style calling it as a significant development in representing women's consciousness and experiences.

In the post World War II, feminist thought entered a new phase with the solid contribution of Simone de Beauvoir. Her *The Second Sex* (1949) is a foundational and an influential work that questioned the role of women in society and offered a comprehensive critique on how women are treated as inferior and defined as the "Other" in relation to men. This paved the way for the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s as the activities turned their attention to issues like workplace inequality and social roles. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) exposed the dissatisfaction of women who were confined to domestic life, describing it as 'the

problem that has no name'. These thinkers together addressed most essential aspects like education, identity, legal rights, economic independence, and everyday experiences of women. Thus, their collective contribution led to the expansion of feminist criticism. Chandra (2024) says that they investigated "the implications of stereotyping, the historical context of art and aesthetics, and the representation of gender in contemporary artistic practices."

In the course of time, feminist literary criticism diversified into multiple branches, incorporating a range of theoretical perspectives such as Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial feminism, radical feminism, and cultural feminism. In the modern context, it is "increasingly relevant as it engages with contemporary works, media representations, and the evolving role of digital platforms in shaping narratives about gender. The field not only critiques literature but also offers transformative potential by advocating for the inclusion of diverse voices and narratives, challenging patriarchal norms, and fostering a more equitable literary landscape. This ongoing evolution highlights the importance of feminist literary criticism in understanding both historical and current cultural contexts, as well as its potential to inspire social change" (Ahamed, 2020).

The term 'body politics' is an important part of feminist thought. It refers to the diverse practices and policies through which society controls and regulates the human body as well as the efforts made by individuals to maintain control over the somatic self. This idea includes the influence of laws, institutions, economic systems, and intimate relationships. It gained prominence during 1970s especially when activists started fighting against the objectification of the female body and reproductive rights.

Feminist body politics emphasizes a woman's power over her own body. It often questions social practices that draw attention to gender differences and encourages self-awareness and independence. The slogan 'the personal is the political' captures the essence of this movement, suggesting that domestic contests for rights within the home and sexual relationships are integral to the broader struggle for equality.

The idea of body politics is closely linked to the work of Michel Foucault. He believed that the human body is an important place where power operates. According to him, modern institutions such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces control people through discipline and constant observation. He called this

'disciplinary power,' a process that slowly into 'docile bodies' that are trained to follow social rules without resistance. This kind of control, for women, is often seen in social expectations about appearance and behaviour. There is constant pressure to follow certain standards of beauty, maintain a particular body weight, and behave in socially approved ways. Susan Bordo developed these ideas further studying how the female body is understood. She explained that society often separates the mind and the body, linking reason with masculinity and emotion with femininity.

Bordo also discussed the idea of the 'slenderness ideal.' She argued that the expectation for women to be thin is not just about beauty but also about control. It limits women's freedom and expression. It shows how society tries to manage and restrict women's desires and power through their bodies.

In literature, body politics is often explored through characters who feel disconnected from their own bodies. For instance, when a female character experiences alienation from her own body, it is frequently a response to social pressures that try to shape the body for specific roles like domestic labour or reproductive functions. At the same time, the body can become a means of resistance. When characters reject these expectations, it means that they challenge the systems that try to control them. In Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, this resistance is projected through Marian McAlpin's eating disorder. Her refusal to eat is not just a personal problem but a symbolic act. It represents a rejection of a society that treats individuals as objects to be consumed. In the novel, "food takes a new resonance in the feminist and postcolonial discourse of Atwood's fiction" (McWilliams, 2006: 63).

English literature in general and Canadian literature in particular has responded strongly to these feminist ideas. Most of the writers have used the novel form to explore the complexities of female identity. Margaret Atwood is considered as the foremost writer of this tradition. Her novels often discuss gender difference and conflicting power relations. *The Edible Woman* (1969), her debut novel, critically examines the aspects of consumerism and objectification of women. Krausz (2025) says that,

> *The Edible Women* highlights women's struggles in 1960s Western society with a particular focus on consumerist culture, … its argument is not limited to the challenges women have to face: it implies that hegemonic understandings of gender affect every

> member of the given society, including men. In the novel, publicity images and photographic portraits are place this content. (44)

The novel explores the relationship between gender roles and consumer society. The novel is frequently described as 'proto-feminist' because it anticipated the core concerns of the women's liberation movement before they were widely popularized. The protagonist, Marian McAlpin, is a sensible and marvellously normal young university graduate who finds herself caught in a sane, structured, but ultimately dehumanizing consumer world. Kisiel (2021) comments that, "she is a figure trapped between two forms of protest, that of her body and that of her self" (53). She embodies the quest for an authentic self.

Though *The Edible Woman* is widely studied from feminist and psychological perspectives, many readings tend to treat Marian's eating disorder either as a personal crisis or as a general symbol of identity loss. Comparatively much focus is not paid on the aspect how her bodily responses function within the framework of body politics, especially in relation to consumer culture. A comprehensive analysis is required to study the connection between consumption, control, and the female body. Keeping this in view, the paper argues that *The Edible Woman* presents the female body as a contested space shaped by consumerist and patriarchal forces, where Marian's refusal to eat becomes a symbolic act of resistance against being treated as an object of consumption.

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis, let us look the summary of the novel from the perspective of body politics. *The Edible Woman* can easily be examined through the concept of body politics, where the human body becomes a place of control, power, and resistance. The story revolves around Marian whose life appears normal at first. However, she slowly begins to lose control over her own body when her relationship with Peter becomes more serious. She finds herself that she cannot eat certain foods. This change is not only physical but it also reflects her inner fear of being controlled and shaped by social expectations. Her body reacts even before she fully understands what is happening. The pressure to become an ideal woman, especially within marriage, makes her feel as if she is being reduced to an object.

As the story progresses, Marian's refusal to eat becomes stronger and stronger. She begins to identify herself with the food she cannot consume. This shows her growing awareness that she is being treated like something to be "consumed" by others, especially by society and her partner. Her body becomes a way of resisting

this control. A turning point comes when she makes a cake that is shaped like a woman. She offers is to Peter and asks him to eat it. This act clearly shows how she sees herself being objectified. When he refuses to eat it, she eats the cake herself. This moment marks that she regains control over her body and identity. Thus, the novel presents the body as a powerful place where control is imposed but can also be challenged.

At the centre of the novel is the metaphor of 'emotional cannibalism,' a term used by George Woodcock to describe how people can use and consume each other emotionally. It also suggests that individuals need to protect themselves by maintaining distance and boundaries in relationships. This cannibalism is a product of a society that has converted its entire environment into a commodity market, where even human beings become items fit for consumption. The novel critiques the way men view women as property or decorative objects intended to enhance their social status.

Marian's professional life at Seymour Surveys, a market research agency, provides the initial setting for her burgeoning identity crisis. She describes the company as an 'ice-cream sandwich' layered like three floors which reflect the gendered hierarchy of the corporate world. The top floor, manned exclusively by men, represents the intellectual and executive mind of the organisation. It is completely inaccessible to her. The middle floor comprises women like Marian who work in the 'gooey' centre of product testing while the bottom floor operates older housewives and 'machine persons' who mark questionnaires. Marians considers this role as a stagnant and mindless end.

The novel explicitly lays stress on a divided social structure in which men control the prestigious executive positions while women are relegated to subordinate positions. Marian's work involves tasting canned rice pudding and calling mechanics, tasks that underscore her alienation as she realizes the company evaluates only how she can be exploited as a consumer product. The company further enforces traditional norms by prohibiting marriage and pregnancy among its female employees, viewing these life events as acts of disloyalty to the corporate authority.

Marian, being trapped in the fixed middle-point, feels as though her future self is already performed – a mere cog in the machine waiting for a pension. In her own words, "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" (Atwood, 1969: 18). This realization triggers a crisis of feminine coloration, leading her to look for alternatives to the present situation. This alternative is represented in her colleagues, "the Office Virgins" (*TEW* 16) – Emmy, Lucie, and Millie – and her college friend, Clara. These women view marriage as an ultimate and inevitable destiny. But Marian sees inadequacies in their attitude and comments on the attitude of Clara thus:

> Clara simply had no practicality, she wasn't able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time. … Her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going in its own without reference to any direction of hers. (*TEW* 34)

These lines throw light on the new attitude of Marian towards marriage.

The central conflict of the novel intensifies with Marian's engagement to Peter Wollander, a young lawyer. It precipitates her decline into somatic alienation. Peter represents the archetypal 'conventional man' of the 1960s, seeking a wife who will complement his image of success. He views Marian as a 'sensible' girl, largely because she allows him to make all the major decisions in the relationship. However, Marian experiences a growing sense of alienation. She begins to feel that Peter does not see her as a person, but rather as a 'lavatory fixture' or a commodity to be possessed. Reflecting on herself in the tub, she thinks "he had intended it as an expression of my personality. … he really think of me as a lavatory fixture. What kind of a girl did he think I was?" (*TEW* 64). These words confirm that she is not very happy with the advances made by Peter. Unfortunately, her existence at Seymour Surveys compels her to accept the hand of Peter.

Marian's engagement proposal marks a turning point where her psychic distress manifests physically. She perceives the impending marriage not as protection, but as a form of 'socially acceptable suicide' – a metaphorical death of her individuality. This internal conflict is expressed through 'body language' in the form of anorexia. Marian resistance appears through her body, especially in her changing relationship with food. She gradually loses the ability to consume food that was once felt normal. Meat is the first to become unbearable and later even simple foods like eggs, cheese, and even vegetables. She connects so strongly with 'the hunted and the consumed' that the act of eating becomes a source of horror.

In this context, Peter is viewed as a 'master-chef' who controls and shapes while Marian as a 'puff pastry' who is fragile and easily shaped by others'

expectations. This 'emotional cannibalism', discussed by George Woodcock, explains the relationship. It suggests that men can use and absorb others emotionally, especially in a society that expects women to be 'edible' or easily consumed by the needs and values of men.

The novel employs a pervasive 'hunter/prey' metaphor to characterize Peter's dominance. Marian begins to identify as the 'hunted' following a dinner where Peter narrates the act of killing a rabbit. Peter's amateur photography serves as a modern extension of this hunting instinct. His camera becomes a tool of the 'panoptic gaze,' objectifying Marian and making her feel like a passive 'lavatory fixture' or a 'morsel' to be assimilated. Marian's reaction to his attempts to photograph her – screaming and covering her face – demonstrates her unconscious rebellion against this surrender to male authority.

Marian is confronted with various female characters who represent the 'fates' available to women in the society. These women serve as social models that Marian ultimately finds inadequate for her own self-actualisation. Her colleagues at Seymour Surveys – Lucy, Emmy, and Millie – are collectively known as the 'Office Virgins'. They symbolise the artificiality of mid-century feminine roles, prioritizing their appearance and the goal of marriage above all else. Lucy, the glamorous women, 'platinum and elegantly coiffured', works in the section of public relations and eventually attempts to secure Peter for herself after Marian breaks the engagement. Emmy is a sickly typist and her flaking skin symbolises the physical toll of her attempts to conform. Millie is the assistant to Mrs. Bogue and looks like an athletic and less nervous than the others but still adheres to the conventional path. These women represent 'docile bodies' that have been fully victimized by media and social conventions. They view marriage as the ultimate destiny, and their competitive attitudes toward beauty and men illustrate the way patriarchal society encourages women to monitor each other and themselves.

Clara, Marian's friend from high school and college, represents the demands of domestic life. She is a very bright student in the university but drops out of it to marry Joe Bates. Since then, she becomes a 'constantly pregnant housewife'. Marian sees Clara's life as empty and wasteful. She strongly believes that Clara has become a 'victim of her growing family'. The description of Clara as a 'boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon' highlights Marian's horror and acts as a warning of what her own future might become.

Ainsley, Marian's roommate, appears to offer a radical alternative. She decides to have a child without a marriage. She views the traditional family unit as a destructive force and deliberately chooses Leonard Slank to be the father based on his suitability as a 'specimen'. However, Ainsley's radicalism is revealed to be another form of social performance. She fears that a fatherless child might develop psychological issues, decides to marry Fischer Smythe, and criticises Marian for her rebellion nature. This shift shows how strong society can be, even for those who try to resist them.

The most significant indication of Marian's crisis is her developing aversion to food. This physical disorder, which mirrors the symptoms of *Anorexia Nervosa*, is interpreted as a 'symbolic protest' against her powerlessness and the patriarchal consumption of her identity. Marian's inability to eat begins immediately after she accepts Peter's marriage proposal, signalling that her body is rejecting the 'subservient mode of womanhood' foisted upon her. She, while eating in a restaurant, observes her plate with a sense of horror. In the words of Atwood,

> She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. But most of the time you never thought about it. (*TEW* 164)

Marian's rejection of food follows a progressive logic where she increasingly identifies with the substances being consumed. She perceives the food as having once been alive and 'fleshy' like herself, making the act of eating feel like 'metaphorical cannibalism'.

Marian's eating problem shows her growing psychological struggle and her strong reaction to the idea of consumption. At first, she is unable to eat red meat like steak because it reminds her of a living animal being cut and controlled. This makes her feel as if she herself is being treated like something to be hunted and used. This marks the beginning of her discomfort with the idea of being treated as an object.

Marin then begins to reject pork and lamb. These foods make her think about animals that are carefully raised and prepared for consumption. This creates a fear of being shaped in the same way by society. Her refusal to eat these foods shows her resistance to being controlled or treated like a commodity. As her condition becomes stronger, she also avoids eating eggs and peanuts. She begins to see them as forms of

life that could grow and develop. This shows her increasing sensitivity to the idea of life, even in small and simple things. Later, she stops eating vegetables like carrots. She feels that carrots represent a kind of passive existence without choice. This reflects her rejection of a life where she has no control over her own decisions.

In the final stage, Marian cannot eat rice pudding. She imagines each grain as something living and delicate. This shows that she now fully identifies with what is being eaten. At this point, her reaction becomes very intense. It clearly shows how deeply she identifies with what is being consumed and how strongly she resists taking part in such a system. This gradual withdrawal from food becomes a clear form of rebellion against the 'consumer role'. Her body expresses what she cannot openly say. By refusing to eat, she physically shrinks, which serves as a resistance against the construction of femininity that views women as 'inexhaustible bodies' available for others. This 'corporeal language' communicates what her mind, still aligning with society's rules, cannot yet verbalize.

Marian's path to self-understanding and liberation is facilitated by her interactions with Duncan, who offers a different, albeit erratic, perspective on identity. During her engagement party, she reaches a moment of clarity while wearing a red dress that functions as a masquerade of conventional femininity. She realises that Peter has been devouring her identity. At this time, she decides that she must reject the roles prescribed to her: the unawareness of the office virgins, the resignation of the conventional housewife, or the victimhood inherent in her current path. She wishes to test Peter by baking a pink cake in the shape of a woman. The cake is decorated with a bouffant hairdo and a lipsticked smile, serving as a surrogate for her 'artificial self'. She offers it to Peter stating 'This is what you really want' and accuses him of trying to 'assimilate' her. Peter refuses to eat the cake and subsequently departs, unable to confront the reality. Marian feels that she is liberated from her false notions of womanhood.

In a final act of self-reclamation, Marian eats the cake herself. This 'gluttonous and transgressive eating' signifies the restoration of her appetite and her 're-embodiment'. She is no longer a 'status symbol' for Peter, and her act of consuming the substitute she created demonstrates her 'self-determination' and her rejection of the victim role. The novel concludes with Marian speaking in a new, confident voice, having completed a journey from diffidence to self-realization. She says, "I am able to chew and swallow again … it tastes wonderful". It "signals her

regained control over her body and its boundaries. The very act of baking the cake is a satire of socially constructed feminine norms" (Wu, 2025).

The structure of the novel mirrors Marian's fragmentation. Atwood utilizes a shift from first-person to third-person narration in Part Two to signify Marian's alienation from her somatic self. In Part One, Marian is the narrator of her own life; however, following her engagement, her story is 'restricted by someone other than herself,' represented by the transition to 'she'. This shift conveys her 'existential misery' and her loss of identity, as she feels like a 'slab of flesh' or an 'object' in a masculine script.

The return to first-person narration in Part Three coincides with Marian's 'regaining of identity' and her willingness to take control of her life again. This structural choice emphasizes that Marian's quest is for an 'authentic self' that transcends the roles imposed by a cannibalistic society.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* serves as a profound critique of the mid-century patriarchal and consumerist order. Through the protagonist's descent into somatic protest, the novel reveals that identity for women is often defined primarily by relationships that seek to 'consume' their autonomy. The concept of 'body politics' is essential to this reading, as it illuminates how Marian's physical symptoms are not mere illness but a 'narrative of resistance' written onto the flesh.

The novel demonstrates that financial independence, such as Marian's job at Seymour Surveys, is insufficient for true liberation; the awareness of being subjugated must come from 'within the self'. By deconstructing gender roles and using the food metaphor to highlight the 'cannibalistic' nature of society, Atwood provides a vision of a woman who moves from a note of 'diffidence' to a 'note of realization'. Marian's final triumph is her recognition that she must define herself beyond the 'edible' commodities offered by the social system, ultimately achieving a 'new and confident voice'. D'Antonio (2020) remarks thus:

> *The Edible Woman* highlight the inherent cannibalistic quality of the consumerist society in which human beings are commodities and their roles are dictated by commercials and the ferocious rules of profit. (37)

To conclude, feminist literary criticism provides the necessary tools to unpack the layers of oppression and identity formation found in works like *The Edible*

Woman. Atwood's novel illustrates the process by which a woman gains awareness of her own subordination and finds the strength to protest against dehumanizing social structures. She, through Marian's experience, shows that identity is not fixed but influenced by external pressures. The idea of body politics helps to explain and understand this process more clearly. Marian's refusal to eat is not simply a personal reaction but a form of resistance against a system that seeks to control and define women. The novel ultimately suggests that self-awareness is the first step toward change. Marian begins to regain control over her identity when she recognises the forces acting upon her. The novel thus stands as a testament to feminist literary emphasising the relationship between body and power, the pursuit of the authentic self, and the rejection of a superficial society that seeks to devour individuality.

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How to Cite this Article:

APA (7th Edition):

Rani, Usha. (2026). "Signs of Liberation in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*." *Research Journal of English*, 11(2), 000-000. https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.02.05

MLA (9th Edition):

Rani, Usha. "Signs of Liberation in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*." *Research Journal of English*, vol. 11, issue 2, April-June, 2026, pp. 000-000. https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.02.05

IEEE:

Rani, Usha. "Signs of Liberation in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*." *Research Journal of English*, vol. 11, no. 2, April-June, 2026, pp. 000-000. https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.02.05

CMS:

Rani, Usha. "Signs of Liberation in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*." *Research Journal of English* 11, no. 2, April-June (2026): 000-000. https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.02.05