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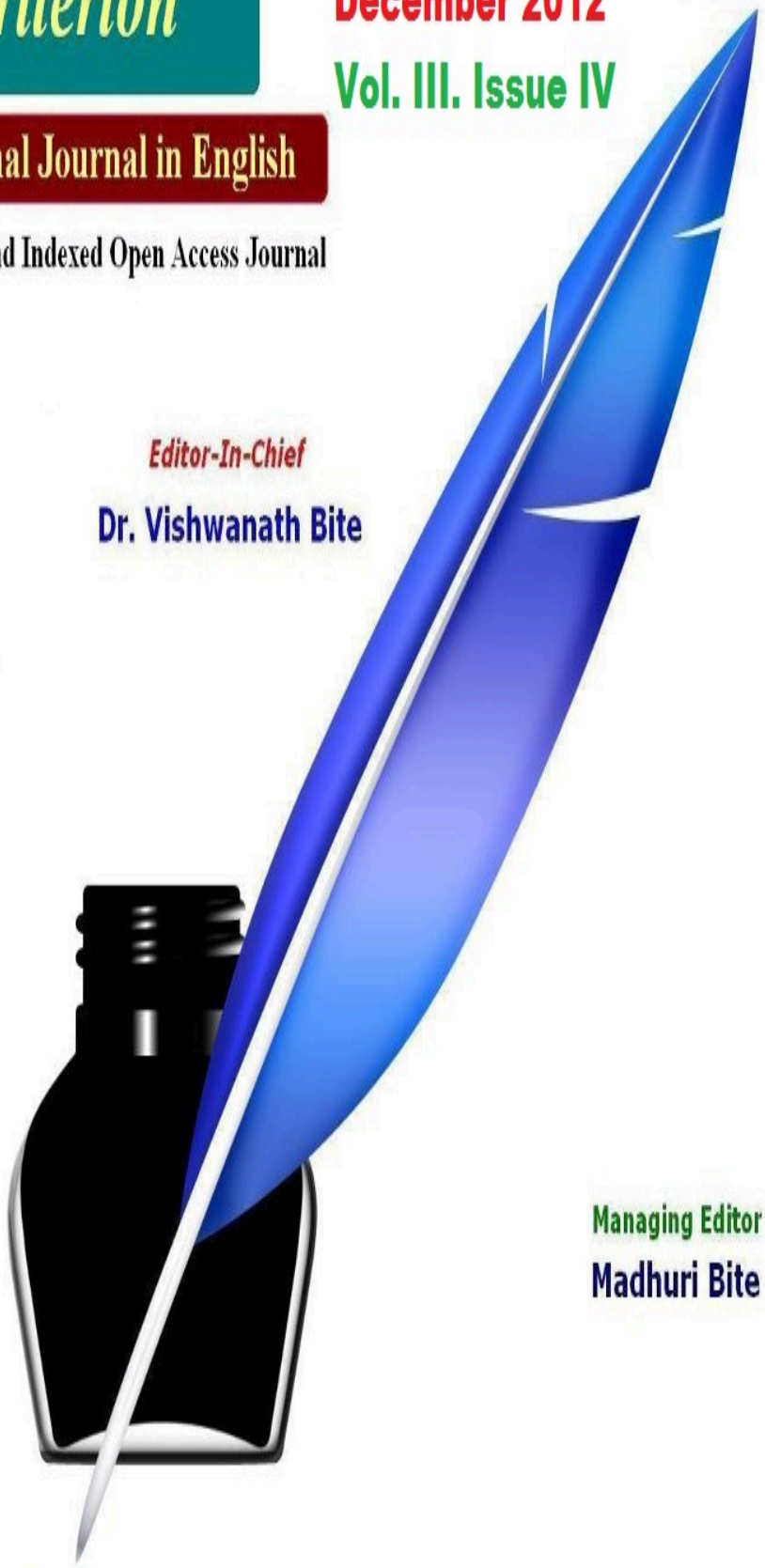

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Marian's Search for Self in Margaret Atwood' s *The Edible Woman*

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Atwood's novels deal with women characters struggling to define their identities in an environment that is either hostile to, or at least not in harmony with their sensibility. Her heroines can be categorized into certain stages of depending upon their personality traits and mental make-up. It is captivating to study the progression of her women from one stage of evolution to the other. The present paper seeks to focus on Marian, the heroine of Atwood's first novel *The Edible Woman* as she embarks on her journey from 'feminine to female'.

Marian is a working woman in a relationship with Peter and their relationship is a non-interfering one, based on non-expectations of the future. The novel takes a turn when Peter proposes marriage to Marian; she accepts his proposal, inspite of her uneasiness. She defends her choice to herself: "As Peter says, you can't continue to run around indefinitely; people who aren't married get funny in middle age,……."[1] It is clear that she is just echoing Peter's words and is seen accepting the role that is traditionally foisted upon women.

The morning after she accepts Peter's proposal, she feels mindless: "…….. my mind was…..as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skill like a cantaloupe and left me only with the rind to think with." (*EW*, p.21) Significantly after this chapter, Atwood switches the point of view from the first person to the third. Marian, who now onwards will refer to herself as 'she' believes she has been saved, that Peter is her "rescuer from chaos" (*EW*, p.107), but she has not been rescued. She is stuck.

Peter is the kind of man who depends on easy instruction books on various articles that he possessed- the camera instruction book, the car manual and others, so it is logical for him to buy a book on marriage, now that he was going to get married. This act of Peter makes Marian feel he was: "Sizing her up as he would a new camera,……..trying to find……(her) weak points, the kind of future performance to be expected……"(*EW*, p. 189) What begins to disturb Marian now is the realization that Peter wanted to monitor her, transform her according to his needs and happiness.

As the marriage nears Marian begins to wonder whether she was doing the right thing by being meek, by allowing Peter to dominate. Could it be that this overpowering authority of Peter would eventually become a threat to her individuality? What is she turning into other than a pleasant and entertaining object? She finds herself caught in the clutches of atrophy.

It is when she is about to take this extreme step that her body intervenes and confronts her with the reality of the situation. The rebellion in her is carried on through the 'body language' in which the body makes it impossible for her to eat one thing after the other.

First, her body refuses to eat anything that may at one time have been alive. It begins with meat when she goes to dinner with Peter: "Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes … 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…….. She set down her knife and fork." (*EW*, pp. 190-191)

To Marian this comes as a shock and it leaves a tremendous impact on her. She reacts to it by refusing to eat. After this, one after the other, the pork chop, the planned cow, the planned sheep are crossed out of her of eatables.

She relies on omelets, peanuts and cheese, but slowly finds it impossible to eat these too, as she identifies herself with these things also. She turns to salads, vegetable and juices for survival, but there comes a stage when she heard the shriek of the carrot on being cut and gets panicky: "Oh, no," she said, almost crying, "Not this too!" (*EW*, p. 227)

Marian reaches a stage when she is unable to destroy the lowest form of life -- mould. She finds herself unable to clean the used vessels and the kitchen sink: "…..the mould had as much right to life as she had." (*EW*, p. 279) She begins to doubt even the vitamin pills she took: "I wonder what they grind up to put into these things……" (*EW*, p. 289)

As Peter begins to gain control over her in every aspect, her identification with the hunted and the consumed reaches the precipitation point. She comes to view 'eating' as a violent action concealed behind the social facade of dining.

She goes about asking Clara, Ainsley and even Peter whether she is normal. All assure her that she is wonderfully normal, and tell her it is nothing more than "bridal nerves."

Preparing for her engagement party, Marian's presence in the beauty parlour reminds one of the preparations of animals for the sacrifice. She decks herself out in all her finery but when she looks up in the mirror she fails to see the rightness of it, as she is unable to recognize the true Marian behind the glittering facade.

As the party progresses, it dawns on Marian that she is nothing but a saleable commodity wrapped up as a wife. She realizes what married life with Peter would be. She would have to assume the role of a meek and docile woman, dependent on her husband, allowing him to devour her slowly and relishingly. Peter was all set to devour her personality and identity. And the moment she awakens to Peter's control over her, she begins to counter it, by running away from her own engagement party.

What follows is Marian's act of liberation, through the most crucial image of the novel, the cake-woman or 'the edible woman'. Marian takes all pains to bake a cake-woman, a symbolic representation of the woman, and presents it before Peter to be eaten. When Peter refuses to eat it and leaves, she eats some herself, beginning with the feet. Her carefully anatomized eating is the culmination of Marian's behavior throughout the novel, her repeated running away. Up until this point, "she has been evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing."(*EW*, pp. 353-354) Running away, then, is clearly not defined as an action, as shown in Marian's comically futile attempts to run away from Peter.

Once Peter leaves her apartment and her life, her body returns to normal metabolism, as she eats the cake herself. With her new consciousness, she has a new perspective. The transference of victim-identity she has projected onto food disappears and she suddenly acquires the psychic energy to break her engagement, look for another job, clean her apartment, and go back to using the first person point of view.

Marian's baking of the cake and eating it could be said to be a gesture of defiance, a way of saying no to a system that defines women as commodity and devours them.[2] Thus the novel is a convincing narrative of personal growth, and 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.[3]

Marian, after being battered in body and psyche, emerges as a New Woman as she finally passes into a state of raised consciousness. The circular plot that leads her into an engagement

with Peter, leads her out of it again, it does not conclude with the traditional ending of a wedding cake.

Through her intense interest in the psychological undercurrents in her characters lives, Atwood traces the genesis of change, the way the imagination might leap from what it is to some other state of being. The emphasis in each of her novels is the movement from product to process, or the realization of her protagonists that they are not merely objects to be acted upon, but dynamic subjects. The kinds of responsibility that Atwood's heroines assume as they metamorphose from states of acquiescence, confusion and powerlessness into other, imperfect, but less helpless states, are extremely varied, but all involve degrees of refusal of the position of victim as sole definition of the self.

In all the novels of Atwood, the ending marks the beginning of the process of 'becoming' which may eventually lead to 'being'. As Atwood says: "I never make Prince Charming endings because I don't believe in them. But I do believe that people can change. May be not completely but some."[4] Atwood does not believe in one-{wo}man revolutions: but she does believe in progressive evolutions that may eventually lead to the humanization of the woman in the socializing and idealizing male world.

Works Cited:

[1]Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, [Canada: Random House, 1978,] p. 25. All further references to this work (*EW*) appear in the text.
[2]Gayle Green, "Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: Rebelling against the system," in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, [Edinburgh: Pan American, 1987], p. 117.
[3]J. Brooks Bouson, "The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responsibility in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*," in *Style 24*, [Summer 1990], p. 23.
[4]Alaln Twigg, "What to Write; Margaret Atwood," *For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers*, [Madeira Park: Harbour, 1981]. p. 25.