

**Food Metaphor in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*.**

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America in the second half of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing number of women dramatists discussing in different technical formats the conditions of women in a male-dominated society. Among those who gained recognition were Tina Howe (1937-), Emily Mann (1952-), Beth Henley (1952-) and the most notable Marsha Norman (1947-), among many others. A Louisville-born and a recipient of many awards and prizes including the Pulitzer Prize for *'night, Mother* in 1983, and the author of a number of critically acclaimed plays, Marsha Norman is ranked as one of the most prominent American feminist playwrights. Among her plays are *Getting Out* (1977), *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (1978), *The Holdup* (1983), *'night, Mother* (1983), *Traveler in the Dark* (1984), *Sarah and Abraham* (1992), *Loving Daniel Boone* (1992) and *Trudy Blue* (1998). Most of her plays focus on the plight of women particularly their suffering, their yearning to have a self or be a self and also their relationship to men in society. Women's persistent desire for 'leave taking' is a theme which runs throughout all Norman's plays. Lisa J. McDonnell explains that "Norman's tendency is to underscore the theme of 'getting out,' moving beyond familial bonds (even loving ones), to establish one's own place as a human being" (101). Appropriately, she crafts women characters who rebel against the traditional role of a woman, "to clear up the mess" (Betsko and Koeing 339), and who struggle to substitute subordination for centrality in their lives and societies. Darryll Grantley perceptively observes that Norman "shows herself capable of rendering very powerfully the crises of identity which arise

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from the position of her women imprisoned in a social structure dominated by patriarchal power and values" (143).

As much of the research work on Marsha Norman's plays focuses on the feminist issues in her plays, this paper aims at studying a striking technical feature in her dramaturgy; namely the use of food. Using a blending of the formalistic, the feminist and the psychological approaches to studying literature, the researcher argues that Marsha Norman uses food as a defining factor of her characters' suppressed desires and repressed feelings of confinement. A character's relationship to food reveals traits and attitudes toward the self and others ranging from keen insistence on breaking the social shackles to full control over self and destiny. Significantly, Norman's plays, particularly the ones under study, celebrate many food items; few of which nourish; still many others are non-nourishing junk food.

Marsha Norman's two plays *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother* are selected to be the focus of analysis for several reasons. In addition to being the most notable among the playwright's dramatic corpus, these two plays in particular chart the possibilities of female survival within the confines of patriarchy. *Getting out* is viewed as "a critique of the most sacred tenets of capitalist and patriarchal ideology" (Mohideen) and *'night, Mother*, as "a Psycho-drama of female identity" (Spencer 364). In both plays, Norman moves to center stage silenced and marginalized women who endeavor to transform their silence into speech and their subordination into autonomy. More important, however, is that the two plays uniquely work to create a relationship between the protagonist's changing attitude to food and the underlying moral development. Lynda Hart finds out that in the two plays

Norman's hunger imagery captures the elemental struggle for autonomy that her characters undergo; no metaphor could be more basic to convey the deprivation and determination of these women. The tension between rival selves, one

## **Food Metaphor in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*.**

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nurturing, one destroying, is quite similar to the psychology of women with eating disorders. (73)

In the light of Hart's explanation quoted above, the two plays feature food as a vehicle through which the dramatist digs out the consciousness of her characters who, as the ensuing analysis will show, are either obsessed with food, or, rather paradoxically, obsessed with the denial of food.

*Getting Out* and *'night, Mother* are realistic plays demonstrating the potential power of formal realism when used to discuss feminist issues. Norman strictly observes the unities of time, place and action. The space between theatrical time and real time collapses; this is particularly clearer in *'night, Mother* in which the action occurs within the limit of two hours. The domestic interior setting in each play celebrates details suggesting women traditional culture. The characters are those abandoned women who, in the words of Kate Stout, "are rarely seen and never heard" (29). Structurally, the two plays are linear in action development; the plot, which revolves around the major character's life, chronologically moves to a final resolution. Skillfully, Norman infuses this formal realism with experimental techniques such as the split personality, the circulation of action back and forth as exemplified in *Getting out*, and also the metaphoric use of food traceable in the two plays depicting the thwarted interior lives of the women protagonists.

A two-act play, *Getting Out* features the physical release from an eight-year imprisonment of Arlene, a juvenile delinquent confined for a second degree murder of a taxi driver. The play opens with the arrival of Arlene to her "dingy one-room apartment" accompanied by Bennie, the former prison guard who seeks to 'take care' of her (*Getting Out* 5). Arlene looks back in anger at her past determining to start anew. She is shocked to find the outside environment as oppressive and restrictive as that inside the prison. Her history of prostitution, robbery and violence is still confining her. Her boyfriend and pimp, Carl,

interrupts her moral evolution by trying to drag her back into the prostitution life. Her mother does not welcome her home lest she should spoil the other children. The society at large offers very limited job chances for her as an ex-convict. Even Bennie, the former prison guard, drives her home not for a humanistic attitude but for the possibility of sexual favours.

Dramatically speaking, the play always refers backward in time; certain events from Arlene's past are recalled and presented on the stage to juxtapose with events from the present. Christopher Bigsby explains that these memories of the past are "prompted by word cues, by associative fears, subtle echoes and reverberations" (214). A violent event in Arlene's present life summons another similar one from her past; the two events are simultaneously acted on the stage. For that purpose of showing the protagonist's past in contrast with her present, Norman presents the action on a two-part stage; center stage is the one-room apartment Arlene comes to after her release; on raised levels are the prison catwalk and the prison cells, one of them was Arlene's.

In Marsha Norman's words, *Getting Out* "is about an attempted reconciliation between an earlier, violent self and a current passive, withdrawn self" (Savran 181). Appropriately, the protagonist of the play is presented in two forms and is played by two actors: Arlene of the present, and Arlie of the past at different stages of her life. This surreal technique of doubling or splitting aligns Norman with other dramatists and novelists who use that technique to dig deep into the complex psyche of their characters. Dramatists such as Adrienne Kennedy in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and Ntozake Shange in *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: a chorepoem* (1975) present groups of on-stage characters who collectively constitute one self. In fiction, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) presents two women as the novel's protagonist suggesting the difficulty of psychic wholeness in misogynistic societies. In Norman's play, this technique is particularly useful as it helps show

## **Food Metaphor in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*.**

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the protagonist's transformational journey towards spiritual survival and psychic wholeness.

Underneath the play's narrative is Norman's skilful display of her protagonist's relationship to food which metaphorically suggests various layers of abuse practiced over the female body. Arlene's denial of and then her longing for food are the objective correlative of her rebellion against the exploitation of the patriarchal society and also her integration into that society by means of love, care and respect.

Making a connection between food and the violent physical dominance in sexuality, the prisoner Arlie frequently rejects the food brought by the male prison guards. She violently throws the tray of food at them as she understands they offer food in return for sexual favors:

GUARD (CALDEELL): Gotta see you get fattened up.

ARLIE: What do you care?

*(Arlene goes into the bathroom.)*

Guard (CALDEELL): Oh, we care all right.*(Setting the food down on the table.)* Got us a two-way mirror in the shower room.

*(She looks up, hostile.)*

Guard (CALDEELL): And you don't know which one it is, do you?

*(He forces her onto the seat.)* Yes ma'am. Eat.*(Pointing to the food.)* We sure do care if you gitting too skinny.*(Walks away but continues to watch her.)* Yes ma'am. We care a hog-lickin' lot.

ARLIE: *(Throws the whole carton at him.)* Sons-a-bitches! (13)

Arlene also understands that when she makes herself skinny, she will certainly be less appealing to the prison guards' sexual appetites. Her mother notices, "You always was too skinny"(14). Overwhelmed over the realization that the woman's body is "a commodity to be bought, sold, manipulated and controlled, that it belonged to others and gave them a certain power over her" (Hart 70), Arlie sets her body afire, a desperate attempt to rid herself of that flesh which

leads others to dominate her. She reasons, "There's ways of . . . getting outta bars" (10).

Looking back, Arlene can see that her body has always imprisoned her, made her the subject of other men's molesting, created a prostitute of her, then a thief, and finally a murderer sentenced to an eight-year confinement. As long as this female body is there, imprisonment will always accompany it. It is worth noting that even after her 'getting out' from the Pine Ridge prison, Arlene finds herself living in an apartment which is no better than the prison cell. The stage directions describe Arlene's place as:

*A dingy one-room apartment in a rundown section of down-town Louisville, Kentucky. . . Dirty curtains conceal the bars on the outside of the single window. There is one closet and a door to the bathroom . . . The apartment must seem imprisoned. (5)*

This variety of enclosures "suggests the way in which feminine consciousness is constructed, maimed, reconstructed and finally validated in . . . society" (Spencer 365). The outside is also equally oppressive. The bars are "a constant reminder of her past as well as a visual symbol connecting her formal imprisonment with the barriers confronting her after her release" (Hart 70).

In the same context of food rejection as a metaphor of maintaining power over one's body or over others', Arlene rejects Bennie's offer of food which, as she understands, is a coated call for having sex:

BENNIE: You hungry? Them hotdogs we had give out around  
Nashville.

ARLENE: No. Not really.

BENNIE: You gotta eat, Arlene.

ARLENE: Says who?

BENNIE: (*Laughs.*) How 'bout I pick us up some chicken, give you time  
to clean yourself up. We'll have a nice little dinner, just the two  
of us.(11)

## **Food Metaphor in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*.**

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It is significant that after her raging denial of Bennie's explicit sexual attacks, Arlene rewards herself by consuming all the food Bennie brought. Nourishing the body is a sign of victory and self-satisfaction.

The relationship to food reveals another deep layer of the abusive patriarchy Arlene confronts in the outside world. Carl, Arlene's former boyfriend and pimp, steps into Arlene's apartment. Carl's demonic appearance is accompanied by his vulgar devouring of her food and by throwing groceries on the floor, a dramatic suggestion of his intended violation of her body. As Arlene talks to Carl in the present, a flashback of past indignities is highlighted:

ARLIE: You always sendin' me to them ol' droolers...

CARL: You kin do two things, girl...

ARLIE: They sloberin' all over me...

CARL: Breakin' out and hookin'!

ARLIE: They tyin' me to the bed!...

ARLIE: (*Now screaming, gets further away from him.*) I could git killed  
working for you. Some sicko, some crazy drunk . . . (28)

Carl seduces Arlene into resuming prostitution in New York streets in return of a luxurious, comfortable life. Though he cruelly plays on her hope to provide a convenient life for her child – a strong temptation which might give her life some meaning – Arlene declines his offer; Carl, in consequence, throws all her preferred food on the floor.

Thus, whenever food is associated with the possibility of bodily violation, Norman's protagonist is featured to reject it, insisting on a self-annihilating attitude. From the very beginning of her life, Arlie has been subjected to males' sexual harassment in return for an offer of food. Men in Arlene's life are thus regarded as "symbols of abuse and authority" (Kane 261). Arlie used to hurl back all her father's food offers as the latter had several sexual advances towards her. Arlene's mother reminds her that he had to beat her to force her into food. In one of her flashbacks to childhood, Arlie screams in apprehension, "No Daddy!

I didn't tell her nuthin'. I didn't!" (17). The other men Arlene encountered throughout her life were similarly seeking her body, either for economic purposes as is the case with her pimp Carl, or for sexual pleasure as is the case with all the prison guards including the recently retired Bennie.

In one of the most poignant metaphors in the play, Arlene herself is identified with food, a chicken, over which Carl and Bennie struggle to possess, or consume:

CARL: (*Walking toward him.*) Oh, it's a guard now, is it? That **chicken** break out or what? (*Grabs the **chicken**.*)

BENNIE: I don't know what you're doin' here, but-

CARL: What you gonna do about it, huh? Lock me up in the toilet? You an who else, Batman?

BENNIE: (*Taking the **chicken** back, walking calmly to the counter.*)  
Watch your mouth , punk.

...

BENNIE: Arlene, tell this guy if he knows what's good for him...

CARL: (*Walking to the counter where Bennie has left the **chicken**.*) Why don't you write me a parkin' ticket? (*Shoves the **chicken** on the floor.*) Don't fuck with me, dad. It ain't healthy.  
(*Bennie pauses. A real standoff. Finally, Bennie bends down and picks up the **chicken**.*) [Emphasis added.] (29)

The only exception to this patriarchal abuse is the attitude of the prison chaplain. A symbol of religion, the chaplain provides Arlie with the spiritual nourishment Arlene is desperately in need of. The chaplain calms her down, accommodates her and plants in her a hope for a coming better life. As Ether Harriot remarks, the chaplain is the first one to call Arlie by her full name and to treat her as a human being. The chaplain gives her a Bible with her name in the front of it, and he teaches her that animals are wild not people and that God will take away her evil self so that she could be good (131). Norman's fundamentalist, religious upbringing surfaces here; only in religion can Arlie find redemption and

salvation. Arlene's changing attitude to food suggests a new stage towards self-reconciliation and survival.

Food acceptance replaces food denial, suggesting Arlene's moral growth. No longer obsessed with self-annihilation, and more determined to posit a positive image of herself and of others, Arlene voluntarily shops for the food she likes. Having achieved reconciliation with her mother, Arlene shows interest in the food the latter brings for her: "I liked those potatoes with no skins. An that ketchup squirter we had, jus' like in a real restaurant" (21). She also informs her mother that she prefers to be called Arlene, not Arlie, and that she intends to hold a job to get the money for herself and her child, "I wanna work now, make something of my self" (21). She also has the picture of Jesus hung on the wall opposite the apartment door. Though the mother's attitude is offensive, Arlene stays peaceful; she fights back her accustomed physical and verbal vulgarity against the insulting mother, "No! Don't you touch Mama, Arlie" (25). She does not even forget to ask the leaving mother about "what kind of meat makes a pot roast?" (25).

In their article "Fearlessly Looking under the Bed," Janet Brown and Catherine B. Stevenson find that Arlene's "real progress toward self-scripting takes place in her apartment as she learns to use words not as weapons of assault but as descriptors of reality, particularly the reality of her emotions." (192). Evidently, in defending herself against Bennie's sexual assault, she shocks him into an awareness that what he is doing is *rape*. When he mockingly reminds her of her past self, Arlie the prostitute, she quietly and painfully responds, "Arlie coulda killed you" (34). Similarly, Arlene verbally denies Carl's offer of a convenient life in prostitution; she quietly reasons that this also means a continuous imprisonment. Arlene prefers instead a menial labor to achieve dignity as a human being. Significantly, throughout a long dialogue between them, Arlene is presented busy with retrieving her favorite scattered cookies,

another strong implication of her keen desire for physical and spiritual emancipation.

Attaining self cohesion entails integration between past and present lives. Thus, Arlene's complete sense of 'getting out', states Lynda Hart, necessitates a reconciliation between Arlie and Arlene. In Norman's play, this stage is reached through female nourishment which Arlene receives, strangely enough, not from the mother but from her upstairs neighbor, Ruby, an ex-con like Arlene (74). While the mother's reception of her daughter is accompanied with "repeated criticisms of Arlene's appearance and behavior," Ruby's is marked with consolation and encouragement (Keysser 164). Ruby teaches Arlene to face Arlie to admit her and also to forgive her, and that actual 'outside' lies in one's sovereignty over where to go and what to eat. Ruby offers Arlene good company, protection, comfort and also food:

ARLENE: I did. . . (*Very quickly.*) I didn't know what I . . .

*(Arlene breaks down completely, screaming, crying, falling over into Ruby's lap.)*

ARLENE: (*Grieving for this lost self.*) Arlie!

*(Ruby rubs her back, her hair, waiting for the calm she knows will come.)*

RUBY: (*Finally, but very quietly.*) You can still . . . (*Stops to think of how to say it.*) . . . you can still love people that's gone.

*(Ruby continues to hold her tenderly, rocking as with a baby.)* (55)

Arlene's newly-acquired relationship to food betrays her determination to make that stage work. The stage directions read, "*Slowly, but with great determination, she picks up the items one at a time and puts them, away in the cabinet above the counter*" (58). In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora's slamming the door behind marks the moment of her autonomy; so here, Arlene's arrangement of her food on shelves suggests similarly a self-constructive desire. Brown and Stevenson also remark that Arlene's stocking of her food on shelves is a sign of

## **Food Metaphor in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*.**

---

"her new freedom and self control" (189). Arlene promises Ruby to join her upstairs for a game of old-maids and some food.

Support of the community, exemplified in Ruby, heals. "Arlene learns the importance of female bonding. . . [She] comes to value the companionship and sympathy of a woman who, like her, has lived a lifetime of varied imprisonments, and who will not exploit or demean her" (Schroeder 108). The play ends with Arlie and Arlene, *now center stage*, joining voices in imitation of their mother's voice, "Arlie, what you doin' in there?" (58). Arlene's process of getting out is complete. The audience leaves the stage with the smiling and the self-assured Arlene who is capable of outliving the entrapping environment around, looking ahead for a more nourishing future.

*'night, Mother*, Norman's "significant achievement in the American theatre" (Harriot 130), presents a similar preoccupation with food. In one act, the play features a deceptively simpler plot moving in a linear manner without a break. A mother [henceforth Mama], Thelma Cates, in her late fifties; and her epileptic, overweight, middle-aged daughter, Jessie Cates, occupy the stage. The life of the two women is devoid of any significant action; Mama spends most of the time busy with her needlework and her food; Jessie, on the other hand, finds nothing to do except caring about her mother's manicure and food supply. The isolation of the two women is visually suggested; they inhabit a remote house, "*out on the country road*" (*'night, Mother* 3). The peculiar relationship between Jessie's bedroom, the symbol of her coming death, and the kitchen, the symbol of the false nourishment she has received, is given attention by focusing the light on them at times. An "atmosphere of mundane domesticity that is maintained throughout the play" is established (Brown 65): the hall celebrates chaos exemplified in the scattered stuff of Mama's needlework catalogues, magazines, ashtrays and candy dishes. Captivated in this monotonous, valueless life, each of the two women formulates her own philosophy of survival away from the other.

Unusually, the two get involved in a long dialogue prompted by the suddenly-declared decision of the daughter to commit suicide. The mother's reaction develops from "disbelief" to "vain supplication" and ends in "a numbed acceptance" (Grantley 154). Meanwhile, the two women exercise self-purgation from feelings of husband-desertion, failed self-recognition and emotional deprivation of all kinds.

Unlike *Getting Out* in which Arlene's method of survival is the focal point, *'night, Mother* foregrounds two opposing methods: that of Jessie who finds it in her self-inflicted murder and the other of her Mama who finds it in her engagement with the trivialities of life. Like in *Getting out*, however, the character's relationship to food brings into the forefront various layers of the struggle for survival.

The very beginning of the play throws the audience into the heart of the turmoil. Mama is depicted struggling to get her 'cupcakes' from one of the kitchen cabinets. The stage directions demonstrate her effort:

*She can't see them, but she can feel around for them, and she is eager to have one, so she's working pretty hard at it. This may be the most serious exercise MAMA ever gets. She finds a cupcake, the coconut-covered, raspberry-and-marshmallow-filled kind known as a snowball, but sees that there's one missing from the package.(5)*

Mama's "voracious appetite" for food and her madness over the loss of some of it are very suggestive of the spiritual kind of hunger she longs to satisfy (Kaplun 1). It is worth noting that the food which Mama desires is that sugary, non-nourishing food (sweets, snowballs, candy and cocoa); a strong implication that this kind of food enables her to escape from the bitterness of her life. Katherine H. Burkman argues that Mama's strong attachment to food symbolizes "her need for a slave for her death-in-life existence, a way of filling up an emptiness and of hiding from her fear of life and death" (258). Deserted, physically and

emotionally, by a husband who rarely spoke a word to her, "but had those quite little conversations" with Jessie every night (47), Mama finds in that sugary food the sensual pleasure she has long been deprived of. Commenting on her loveless marriage, Mama blames the husband who "wanted a plain country woman and that's what he married, and then he held it against me the rest of my life like I was supposed to change and surprise him somehow" (46). Mama painfully declares:

It didn't matter whether I loved him. It didn't matter to me and it didn't matter to him. And it didn't mean we didn't get along. It wasn't important. We didn't talk about it. (50)

Laura Morrow asserts that for Mama sweets "are a happy substitute for genuine human interaction; they provide Mama with the sensual gratification and the sense of fullness she failed to obtain from her marriage" (24). Justifiably, Mama, in many exchanges, addresses her daughter as 'sugar' and 'honey'.

Mama realizes the destitute life she is leading; she frankly informs her daughter, "We don't have anything anybody'd want, Jessie. I mean, I don't even want what we got, Jessie"(10). Bored, Mama embarks on giving detailed, tedious instructions to her daughter on how to do the laundry, "You put the clothes in. You put the soap in. You turn it on. You wait" (21).

Thelma's craving for food uncovers a genuine yearning for a missing companionship. She will stop getting any good food if Jessie does not give up the idea of suicide. She does not like to live with her son, Dawson, and his wife, Loretta, because they do not have good food, "all what they have is Sanka" (83). Mama's strongest argument against her daughter's self-destruction is that they both can make hot chocolate the traditional way. Additionally, Mama's genuine hatred of the patriarchal power is also expressed through her hatred of specific food items. She shares with Jessie a strong dislike of milk, "I hate milk. . . Something downright disgusting about it" (42). Mama brings up her hatred of

milk when she recalls her husband's disregard of her feminine needs, "It was a big fat lie, the whole thing. He just thought it was funnier that way. God, this milk in here" (71). Milk invokes patriarchy; thus Mama despises both. She even ascribes her daughter's epilepsy to the unsatisfying relationship Mama had with the late father:

Because of how I felt about your father. Because I didn't want any more children. Because I smoked too much or didn't eat right when I was carrying you. It has to be something I did (71).

Centering on food is Mama's defense mechanism against serious considerations of her own life. When her daughter questions the meaning of life, Mama finds it in one's preoccupation with food, "Rice pudding is good"(77). She believes in her friend's, Agnes', method of survival, "You gotta keep your life filled up" (40). She advises her daughter, "You could work some puzzles or put in a garden or go to the store. Let's call a taxi and go to the A&P!" (34). Brown and Stevenson point out that to Mama "gardening, shopping for food, and eating represent reasons to live. But although Jessie understands her mother's pleasure, it is not a pleasure she can share" (190). Brown and Stevenson, however, miss the point that as a participant in and a product of the patriarchal culture which places most women in a no-win situation, Mama does not have much to offer. She has been deprived of all her daughter aspires for; she has been given only food, the most basic human need, and this is the only thing she can really offer. Mama has been controlled and manipulated by all the men in her life; in retaliation, she practices this control over her daughter whom she regards as an extension of herself; she asserts to her daughter, "Everything you do has to do with me" (72).

Throughout the play, Mama's personality does not undergo a significant transformation; she remains passive to her arid existence, yet more responsive to her daughter's suicide as this, in its turn, threatens her only meaningful identity

as a mother. Like the characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Mama prefers a life of waiting for the unidentified. It is expected that she will spend the rest of her life doing crochet work, eating her sugary food, watching television and filling the emptiness of her life with trivial talks. Insightfully, her daughter instructs her that after she hears the gunshot, she should keep herself busy with cleaning the hot chocolate pan till the police comes. Norman's stage directions tell us that she grips the pan tightly "like her life depended on it"(89). Hart comments, "Jessie's last request from her mother is for food. . ." and "this last bit of sustenance that mother and daughter share is highly charged with symbolic meaning as the pan Thelma uses to warm the milk becomes the object that will occupy her after Jessie's death" (76).

The only insight Mama gets is her final anguished confession that Jessie is not her property and that she should have been regarded as a separate consciousness, "Jessie, Jessie, child. . . Forgive me. (*Pause*) I thought you were mine" (89). Mama faces the fact that she must relinquish control.

Unlike Mama, Jessie lost appetite for food as she lost appetite for life. Mama observes, "You never liked eating at all, did you"(53). Fragmented and confused, unable to be part of any nourishing relationship, failing to be acknowledged as an autonomous individual, and burdened with a life-long illness, Jessie internalizes a very poor image of herself, "a garbage" no more (61). She informs her mother:

Mama. . . I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I feel used." (28)

Looking around in a futile search for some meaning of her existence or something that "might keep me here. . . something I really liked, like. . . rice pudding or cornflakes" (77), Jessie encounters only emptiness. Her sense of uselessness is reinforced by the mother who informs her, "You don't have to take care of me" (32), by the husband who abandoned her for another woman

and by her criminal son who steals and does drugs. Jessie's privacy is always invaded by her brother Dawson who, with his wife Loretta, opens the package containing Jessie's mail-order bra, that with the "little rosebuds on it" (24). Jessie resents this kind of "casual familiarity with the most intimate details of her life" (Morrow 28). Epilepsy adds fuel to fire as it robs her of any remaining control over her body or her destiny. Bigsby summarizes Jessie's malaise: "She is a woman who has woken up to the fact that she is living a life without true meaning or purpose and has the power to end such a pointless existence, thereby paying herself the respect of believing that she is at least the author of her own fate" (232).

Contrary to the mother who represses what she is unwilling to face through "eating or chattering" (Morrow 26), Jessie faces her life by negating it and by saying very authoritative *no* to all the oppressive participants, including food: "This is how I say what I thought about it *all* and I say no. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no" (75). Hart points out that Jessie is "a woman in whom all desire is spent, not through satiation but through the clear understanding of her world's false nourishment" (75). Having exhausted all the possibilities of constituting a constructive image of herself, she stubbornly insists, "I'm going to kill myself" (13). She explains to her mother:

I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt any body, and slept whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes....That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost, all right, It's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will (76).

Jessie's philosophical observation that 'she never got there' suggests that 'there' is "a unified, fixated, autonomous self safe from seizures or shifts and centered

through familial bonding" (Haedicke 214). Her dilemma is that she cannot find the requisite food for that type of life.

Jessie's distaste for food uncovers the causes of her self negation. Mama's violation of her daughter's individuality is revealed, as Hart details, during the preparation of the hot chocolate which Jessie asks for. Initially, Mama denies her daughter's request because the latter "didn't eat a bit of supper." Likewise, when Jessie requests "no marshmallows", Mama insists, "You have to have marshmallows. That's the old way, Jess. Two or three. Three is better" (39). The scene betrays Mama's dominating personality as well as Jessie's forced submission. Hart comments:

In this most basic of ways, Mama is asserting her power and denying her daughter's initiative. The child's efforts to impose her own will upon the world and to manipulate her environment are directed towards food very early in the development of a separate self. What will be eaten and how it will be prepared are questions that often form the basis for mother/daughter struggles. The mother in Norman's play appears to win this quit battle. (76)

It is worth noting that neither Jessie nor her mother drinks that hot chocolate. Mama does not even prepare the caramel apple which Jessie strangely expresses an appetite for. The suggestion is that Jessie is making use of these food items to make a point against her mother.

"A replacement for love" and a betrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, food procurement becomes Jessie's obsession before her intended suicide (Kaplon 1). Jessie spends the last two hours in her life stocking the kitchen with the mother's 'treats'; she orders a whole case of snowballs (7), arranges the grocery delivery and stuffs the kitchen drawers with packages of toffee and licorice (29). She also instructs her mother not to forget to drink her milk and to have her okra-eating friend, Agnes, to cook for her. Morrow finds that this special care for the mother's eating habit "testifies to Jessie's concern for and forgiveness of her mother" (30). Yet, one is inclined to see it as a sign of Jessie's newly-acquired liberation. Jessie assumes the mother's role; she no

longer receives instructions but is able to give some; she is no longer controlled but is able to control others. Developing this argument further, Jessie's sense of control is apparent in her orchestration of the details of her death and her funeral. She collects the old disposable articles appropriate for the task of cleaning up her suicide mess. She warns her mother against Dawson's intrusion into her decision. She insists on using her father's gun which she carefully cleans, loads and finally fires. She instructs her mother to let the police be the first to enter her room to get the corpse. She advises her mother to tell people that she killed herself due to a personal matter.

In line with the same argument is Jessie's strong attachment to smoking, an undeniably destructive food. Jessie sacrifices her husband for smoking; she affirms, "Smoking is the only thing I know that's always just what you think it's going to be. Just like it was the last time, right there when you want it and real quiet" (56). Morrow finds that smoking for Jessie suggests "an association with power and self determination" (29); it provides Jessie with a sense of choice and control over her body, albeit a negative one. Digging deeper, smoking for Jessie is a subversion of the dominant male power. Jessie's father chews tobacco (49) and her husband "made me choose between him and smoking" (56). Thus in smoking, Jessie identifies with that male power she has been denied.

Food rejection and smoking attachment – voluntary acts – can be regarded as Jessie's way of becoming the central character in her life. This is further developed into a final gun-shot of her body which she conveniently interprets as a personal choice. Drawing on the image of traveling on a crowded and uncomfortable bus, Jessie remarks, "Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride fifty more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough"(33). To choose to commit suicide, Jessie implies, is to triumph over the absurdities of one's existence. The rhetorical question which Jessie poses is not why suicide but why not suicide (Biggsby 234). Her decision is thus "an acceleration of inevitable decay" (Morrow 39).

Like other women protagonists in English literature, namely Ibsen's Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* or Hellman's Martha in *The Children's Hour*, Norman's Jessie Cates finds survival and a sense of accomplishment in suicide; it satisfies her hunger for power over her life and over others. If she could not be in charge of her life, "she will be in charge of her death. She controls the time, the place, and the method; and, now that she has told her mother of her plan, she controls her mother, too" (Harriot 139).

The point which should not be overlooked, however, is that Jessie's suicide is also a rejection of the ugliness of her life, and a loud feminist cry against a non-nourishing existence. The eternal silence of death offers Jessie "a desirable insulation from others because of its utter and permanent absence of speech" (Morrow 28); she romanticizes that death is "so quiet I don't know it's quiet. So no body can get me" (18). Gerald Weales concludes that with suicide "Jessie elects to act rather than be acted upon" (371). Jessie's decision is therefore an existential one; she cannot accept existence with no meaning, but can embrace non-existence with meaning. Norman agrees on the statement of her interviewer that Jessie's choice is "better death with honor than a life of humiliation" (Betsko and Koenig 339).

Thus, In Norman's *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*, food assumes a dramatic symbolic function. Throughout their relationship to food, Norman's female protagonists project gnawing emotional hunger. The food which they long for is apparently not that kind which appeases a physiological demand but that which gives meaning to their meager existence. In *Getting Out*, the protagonist Arlene finds the requisite food represented in the supportive female community around her. In *'night, Mother*, Mama understands the false nourishment of her sugary food, but she also understands that one's passive acceptance of his/her marginality can be a good food for survival. Jessie does not find her nourishing food; she finally kills herself as this very act provides her with the sense of autonomy, the gratifying food she has always craved for.

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