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Women's Struggle for Identity A study in Marsha Norman's *night, Mother* and *Getting Out*

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Khuloud Mohammed Ameen
University of Baghdad
College of languages
Department of English

Abstract

The American play Wright, Marsha Norman gave woman in her Society much attention for they are frustrated creatures. They are considered as minor figures who are oppressed by people around them .She depicts this gloomy image successfully in her plays especially *Getting out* and *night mother* in which she present two major characters Arlene and Jessie in addition to same other minor characters .

الملخص

مارشا نورمن ، كاتبة امريكية حديثة اعطت للمرأة في مجتمعها الكثير من الاهتمام كونهم شخصيات مُحببة فهم يعتبرون شخصيات ثانوية في الحياة ويتم اضطهادهم من قبل الناس من حولهم . فهي تصور هذه الصورة الكئيبة بنجاح في مسرحياتها وخصوصاً مسرحتي **الهروب** و **عمت مساءً** ، **امي** . والتي من خلالها تقدم شخصيتين رئيسيتين هما آرلين وجيسي بالاضافة الى بعض الشخصيات الثانوية الأخرى.

Women's Struggle for Identity

A Study in Marsha Norman's *night, mother and Getting out*

Marsh Norman ,(1947) , an American playwright who was able to establish herself as a successful playwright after the success of her play, *Getting out* (1979) and later winning the Pulitzer prize for her play *night ,Mother* in 1983 . Marsh Norman has been known as an honest and intelligent writer because she carries a powerful message about ordinary people confronting extraordinary circumstances, she states, "the people I care about are those folks you wouldn't even notice in life". [Johann, 1991, Thatre, 2000: intarnet]

She adds "my work has come out of an intense moment of control with somebody, not necessarily somebody I know well but with somebody I have a sudden identification." [Ibid.]

Norman usually addresses women and issues which are potentially gender specific. Her play *night, Mother* deals with female identity and feminine autonomy focuses on the mother – daughter relationship, while *Getting Out* is about identity crisis, and its theme of split, which is represented on split stage that alternates between past and present versions of the same person. In both plays, Norman represents oppression as experienced by women and she offers options for their response.

Getting Out, deals with a young woman named Arlene who has just been released from an eight – year prison term for murder. Arlene's memory of her self, called up by her fears and needs, is represented by Arlene various visual cues call up memories which are re-enacted by Arlene as the action develops. It is a "brilliant dramatic stratagem". [Simon, 1983, 55]

With the play's progress, Arlene's character begins to unfold, showing how suspicious, tensely guarded, and withdrawn she is. Various events after her release, including

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confrontation with the prison guard who accompanies her home, her former pimp, her mother, and her upstairs neighbor, all bring about memories which are played out simultaneously by Arlene. In this manner, the audience can see beyond the violence that the young Arlie uses to mask trouble and abuse at home, and learn the sordid events leading up to her prison sentence .

We also see now Arlene has changed, striving to eke out a new existence for herself, even to the point of calling herself "Arlene" and not "Arlie" now that she has left prison. Arlene is determined to start again, hoping to regain a son who never knew her and who now lives in foster home and perhaps be happy in new, straight life. But there are so many obstacles from her past which come to haunt her and lead her a stray. It is these obstacles which create the amazing interplay of emotions between Arlie and Arlene and provide the audience with a richly detailed background of her life.

While *night, mother* takes place in a small house on an isolated country road, shared by Jessie and her mother, Thelma. Jessie suffers from epilepsy; her father is dead; her loveless marriage ended in divorce, her absent son is petty thief; her last job did not work out and, in general, her life is

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stale and unprofitable. As the play being Jessie asks for her father's gun and calmly announces that she intends to kill her self. At first her mother refuses to take her seriously, but as Jessie sets about tidying the house and making lists of things to be looked after, Thelma's sense of desperate helplessness begins to build.

In the end, with the exorability of genuine tragedy, she can only stand by, stunned and unbelieving, as Jessie quietly closes and looks her bedroom door and ends her profound unhappiness in one fatal, stunning and deeply disturbing moment.

So one can easily see that both plays represent a female community confronted with the restrictive ideals of patriarchal society. The subjects of the plays are suicide, love and meaning of life.

Both heroins, Jessie and Arlene, have many things in common. Both of them undergo oppression. Thelma is Jessie's oppression. She is a condescending and demanding mother. She wants Jessie to paint her nails, she orders "hand me that basket hon. Now my glasses, please ... measure this

for me" [NM: 11] ⁽¹⁾. Moreover Jessie struggles with Thelma for control of her life.

Thelma withholds information from Jessie about her own body and later she judges Jessie for her condition, calling her a "Freak" and comparing her to light bulb [NM: 46].

While Arlie and Arlene in *Getting out* are oppressed by the characters surrounding them. Her father (Holsclaw) repeatedly violets his daughter's body and is the first of many men to convince her of her sole worth as a sexual object. Ronnie and the guards degrade Arlie with sexual language and threats: "Go to see you get fattened up... Got us two-way mirror in the shower room" [GO: 18] (2) Carl and Bennie also treat Arlene's body and sexuality as a commodity. Even her mother is not of so much help for she is passive towards her daughter's suffering; moreover she rebukes Arlie for her father's sexual abuse defending her husband's behavior, and refuses to let Arlie come home for Sunday pot roast:

I still got two kids at home.

Don't want to bad example. [GO: 26]

Through sexual violence and position of power, each of these characters asserts control or judgment over Arlie or Arlene's body and life.

So we see that those characters are only authority and Judgment-the restrictive system of beliefs, norms, and standards of patriarchal society-that Norman presents as the source of entrapment. The patriarchal societies in the background of both plays "impose a limited way of thinking and living".

Undoubtly, this narrow ideology negatively affects both men and women in the plays, but Norman widely explore its effects on female characters.

In *Getting out*, Arlie deals with two forms of oppression; her incarnation is of two levels: literally for second-degree murder, and metaphorically for challenging the system under which her society live.

She is locked in a jail with bars and guards-but her true prison is the outside society that dose not permit deviant or subversive behavior – particularly in women. She spends her adolescent years in confinement for menial crimes and prostitution while the men around her escape punishment. Ronnie who steals and taunts Arlie, her father who never

stops his abuse and the guards' two-way mirror and secret bargaining with prisoners that is never discovered. Ruby, Arlene's neighbour and friend comment on women in their position by saying: "well, you can wash dishes to pay the rent on your 'slum', or you can spread your legs for any shit that's got the ten dollars"[GO: 53].

Arlene got out of jail to find herself in a bigger one where she can not live in respectable way because she is ex-convict; she is forced to accept a low-paying job, leave her hope in having a romantic relationship and accepts the dirty apartment from her sister to be her new home. She and all the women around her can not attain autonomy. Freedom is something illusive, a thing they can never gain.

As for Jessie and Thelma in *night, Mothers* both have been denied autonomy. Thelma had to endure a loveless marriage; Jessie's separation from her husband forced her to live with her mother. Her disease prevents her from the ability to work and form relationships:-

"You know I couldn't work, I can't do anything. I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure at anytime.

What good a job? The kind of job I could get would make me worse". [NM: 26]

They both face the judgment of family members and friends. The absence of husbands and sons suggests their male relatives' condemnation. Jessie is sensitive to her brother (Dawson) and his wife's contempt. Jessie also faces her neighbors' disapproval as well Agnes clearly expresses her aversion to Jessie:

Jessie's shook the hand of the death and I can't take the chance it's Catching, Thelma, so I ain't cumin over and you can understand or Not, but I ain't cumin. I'll come the drive way, but that's as for as I go. [NM: 30].

It is obvious that Jessie and Thelma are judged, excluded, and confined to an isolated existence in Thelma's house. Their house turned into a metaphoric jail in which both women are imprisoned.

Consequently women are denied from their identity in that patriarchal society. In both plays women must accept the identities constructed for them by patriarchy.

There is a clear divide in the plays regarding the female characters' response to oppression. The first group is represented by Thelma, Ruby, and Arlene submits to the limited existence allowed to them by their society. While Jessie and Arlene desire to regain autonomy by asserting their identities in their own ways. Lynda hart, a literary critic, describes this state saying.

One woman who has passively integrated into a delimiting and Oppressive society is pitted against another who widely rebels even at the risk of self-destruction, against the rigid system. [Hart, 1987:68]

In *Getting Out*, Ruby submits to her dead-end cooking job, she calls herself "Queen of Grease" and she boasts, saying that she can " make the finest French fries you ever did see " [GO:49]

Although Arlene is able to free herself from the restrictive and objectifying grasps of Carl and Benny, she can not escape the life destined for a lower-class ex-convict. She

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rejects her other career choice-prostitution- and finally chooses to follow Ruby's way of living.

Meanwhile, we see Thelma, in *night, Mother* follows the life determined to her. She has to eat sweets and watch television though she admits:

"Do you think I've had a good time?" "I don't know what I'm here for, but then I don't think about it".

[NM: 34]

We see these two female characters acting passively towards their role and identify in life; they have chosen the easy way to avoid struggle and disturbance. But the extreme passiveness is seen in mother Holes claw's attitude forsakes her own daughter for her assumingly contempt life:

Outside? Honey I'll either be inside this apartment or inside some kitchen sweat in over the sink. Outside's where you get to do what you want, not where "you glottal do some shit job jus' so's you can eat

worse than you did in
prison"[GO:60]

This group of women accepted willingly the identity determined to them by their society, their sole role in life is to cook, clean, play cards and watch television. Otherwise they will be condemned and abandoned by their society.

Jessie and Arlene, represent the other group of women who are fading up with their bitter life and insist on defining their identities by resisting oppression. Arlene's attempt to escape from prison and her continuous vies to authority, in addition to her control over the guards and the way she forces them to extinguish the fires she sets in sell. [GO: 8], all show that she is a self-assertive and determined character though she is destructive. She refuses to submit to society that forces its rules on her and her attempt to commit suicide is a desire to prove her identity. Through this action "she takes active control of her promised in heritance by attempting to kill the cubed-self". [Ibid: 73]

While Jessie, find in committing suicide away to have control of her life she tells her mother:-

I can't do anything either, about my life,
to change it, make it better, make me
feel better, make me feel better about it.
Like it better, make work. But I can stop
it It's all I really have that belongs to
me and I'm going to say what happens to
it. [NM: 26]

Jessie tries to reasserts autonomy through suicide and rejecting her solitary, passive existence, she finally realizes that her life is not defined on her own terms nor can she do anything in the future to make it better. There is an authority in Jessie's action as Louis Greiff sees it:

Jessie, on the last day of her life,
affects a final and creative escape
formats grasp For once an action
of Jessie's will not reflected
clumsiness and probably failure but,
instead, freedom, grace, and even a
touch of mystery. [Greiff, 1989: 226]

Norman is trying through these two plays to accuse the society that restricts identity. In *Getting Out*, though Mrs. Holsc law fails in siding Arlene, Ruby is there to help her she represents a caring female community that helps Arlene to reconstruct her broken identity. At the end of the play, Arlie and Arlene speak to each other and Arlene "fond smile" suggests the possibility of future harmony inside the character.

It is through Ruby's support that Arlene is able to recover herself and become "a self-determined woman who is capable of struggling for independence with the support of a community that begins with Ruby" [Ibid]

Meanwhile *night, Mother's* end presents a tragic violent separation when separation when Jessie fails to create a supportive community with her mother or a friend; this leads to her final act of self-destruction. She "Can not be reduced by her community, because she has none". [White, 1997: 67]. Here we have no hope for future female community surrounded by restrictive patriarchal ideals and with out the

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support of a female community, definitely Thelma will be reduced to despair.

In these two plays, Norman presents all the characters as victims of larger, more complex structure of authority and judgment the restrictive system beliefs, norms, and standards of patriarchal society which is the source of entrapment.

Women suffering and their struggle for identity in a society controlled by an oppressive system of patriarchal beliefs is the main idea for the two proceeded plays. According to Marsha Norman women have two a alternatives for life; either to submit to patriarchal system and live in a lower state than man to accept the role of the servant and entertainer like Thelma, Ruby and Arlene. Or to revolt against this unfair system attempting to prove her own identity, and to have an autonomy over her own life. It is a hard task woman should undergo, for in this case she has to challenge the world a round her and risk even her own life to win the state she desires. Arlene and Jessie represent the revolting women. Jessie defies authority and takes control over her life and kills her self, the sole thing she can do.

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Through her suicide she negates her identity and destroys the hope of female despairing future. But Arlene is more lucky than Jessie, for her friendship with Ruby enables her to reestablish herself a gain which presents a hope in future.

Notes

- (1) Marsha Norman, *night, Mother* in types of drama: Plays and Essays by Sylvan. Barnet and others, 5th edition (London: Scot, foreman& comp.1989.p.p 675) abbreviated as NM.
- (2) Marsha Norman, *Getting Out* (New York: Dps, Inc.1998).abbreviated as GO.

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