

Marginalization and the Struggle for Survival in Marsha Norman's “ ‘Night Mother’”

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Born in 1947, Marsha Norman grew up in Louisville, Kentucky in a fundamentalist Christian family. She worked as a journalist writing articles and reviews on books, plays and films for the Louisville Times. She is much appreciated for dramatizing everyday life in her writings, later as a playwright Norman is known for the treatment of human relationships, which primarily concerned with the psychological and emotional difficulties faced by women; her focus is on the ordinary characters enduring in spite of personal misfortune and futile familial relationships. Her most widely read play, “ ‘night, Mother” which premiered in December 1982, has been translated into twenty-three languages and was produced as a film; it won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play. The drama critic Janet Brown identifies Norman as, “perhaps the most successful author of serious feminist drama working in the U.S. today.” (Brown 60) Her work naturally lends itself to feminist criticism and feminist praise. One of the major focal points of feminist psychology has been the relationship between mother and daughter and its ramifications in the life of an adult woman. One may find thousands upon thousands of novels and works of non-fiction exploring the mother-daughter bond but in dramatic works is extremely rare. Norman explores the damages and inadequacies that arise in this relationship. “ ‘night, Mother”, follows the emotions and reactions of a mother and daughter from the time the daughter announces her imminent suicide until she commits the act ninety minutes later. It may rouse debates about the extreme choice in committing suicide, but it has resonance about contemporary life and what gives it, or fails to give it substance.

Emphasis on interiority of the human temperament is evident in her plays; her success as a playwright stems from her ability to do just that. She creates characters that are at once inimitable, and her plays explore the convolution of social and familial relationships. Marginalization, is an essential and significant issue which is reflected by the position and condition of the oppressed and deprived and, Marsha Norman makes use of this concept to highlight the plight of the economically disadvantaged sections of society. In other words, marginalized people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are hence vulnerable to livelihood change.

Her plays also focuses on complex issues of gender and female subjectivity, but does without sacrificing the traditional and conventional sources of pleasure through narrative and emotional catharsis. Thomas Riggs an eminent critic considers that Marsha Norman is, “a playwright grasping at various fragments of social significance and dissecting them within a broad spectrum of dramaturgic experimentation.” (Riggs 525)

Norman shows a keen interest in imperative human relationships that is forged in the crucible of both familial and generational conflict. All the characters, struggle to survive, find some inner strength to cope with the disabling emotions that their situation inevitably aggravates. In presenting psychologically complicated women, she conveys the trepidation of a community too long unnoticed by the theatre.

Norman's characters endeavor to find their voices, to tell their stories to whoever will listen to. They yearn for someone to acknowledge their existence. They become survivors. In the process, they become visible, struggle to have meaning; in essence she writes plays that give a picture of characters, usually women, trying to find a more cohesive self despite terrible consequences. Jean Stine, a critic argues that,

While universal themes of death and desire, of human dignity and human pain, of hope and existential despair are accessible to all; these seem but secondary elaborations of the primary drama that women may cathartically experience in Norman's play. (Stine 372)

Her plays focus on some complexity that relates to the inner life of the protagonist. In essence, her dramas depend greatly on dialogue rather than stage action, physical movement or change of scene. The protagonists are normally inarticulate often nondescript, but find concealed strength and depth of feeling they had never before recognized in themselves, and thus face their problems with determination. The solution is often a radical one, though the outcome may be tragic, the central character is personally triumphant.

The subjects she delves deep into are suicide, love, and the meaning of life as huge as they appear. Norman depicts upon a closer reading about the characters and the oppressive environment they live in. All these characters are victims of a larger, more complex structure of authority and judgment. She faults the source of entrapment, the restrictive system of beliefs, norms, and standards of patriarchal society. This entrapment can be described as the barbed network of unspoken and unexamined beliefs, which confine characters to a single way of being free, of identifying themselves and their desires. She grabs upon the single greatest crisis that engulfs the characters.

In, " 'night, Mother", Norman depicts the originality in the portrayal of lies in the detailed examination of Jessie's particular kind of psychological complexity and the conception of tragedy in " 'night, Mother" rests on the assumption of inevitability. Commenting on Jessie's suicide, Norman in an interview remarks that:

Well, Jessie certainly doesn't want to have anything more to do with her life, but she does want Mama to be able to go on, and that's a very strong desire on Jessie's part (Betsko 328)

The play is about a widowed mother and her divorced daughter in the hour or so before the daughter's suicide. The play has only two characters – Jessie and Thelma Cates. The troubled daughter, Jessie asserts her choice to end her life, so that she can take control of it. Their conversation takes place in the small living room in their house that is filled with Thelma's possessions like candy dishes, quilts and other material for the needlework. The things in the cluttered house belong to Thelma, and Jessie does not own anything, not even the gun with which she shoots herself. Jessie in her thirties has no pleasure and she decides

to make a quick exit with one bullet. After Jessie's calm announcement of her intention, Thelma goes through recurring stages of skepticism, anxiety and depression. Jessie runs through the last ninety minutes of her life, occasionally pierced by stabs of feeling, but carefully informing Thelma of the preparations she has made, including deliveries of groceries, milk and candy. Her husband, whom she still loves, has divorced Jessie; her teenage son is a thief and drug addict living aimlessly. Her epileptic attack adds to her woes. She has a feeling of emptiness and assessing her thirty years she concludes, "I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it." Waiting for her marriage and parenthood has created depressing results and discontentment.

The conversation between Thelma and Jessie Cates is a dispute about life and death. Although, one may obviously choose life; but sadly we realize, Thelma losing the argument with her daughter. Norman's skill is that she allows the audience to make their own judgment about Jessie and Thelma. For the first time Thelma has turned off her television set that fateful night, no doubt for the first time, even as she changed her routine, she had the most candid conversation with her daughter ever. What happens after Jessie's announcement is that, the first cynical and then the shaken mother tries to cajole and talk her child out of suicide. Jessie is not deranged, she has never improved in her life since her childhood and the play seems more complex than it looks more tormenting than even its plot might suggest. Thelma argues with Jessie:

JESSIE: I think I can kill myself, mama.

Mama: You're not going to kill yourself, Jessie. You're not even upset! ...
People don't
really kill themselves, Jessie ... unless you're retarded or deranged, and
you're as
normal as they come, Jessie for the most part. We're all afraid to die. (17-
18)

Norman's play is simple, as she perfectly captures the intimate details, void that fills many ordinary homes on many faceless streets in the vast country people live. "Although it is likely to kindle many debates about the choice to commit suicide, it is about contemporary life." (Stine 319)

By dramatizing an hour and a half of intense crisis and argument, leavened by bursts of wry humor, Norman plunges inside the inner life of both Jessie and Thelma. Ending her life will please Jessie most and eventually it may be considered her position as not perverse. Thelma experiences the great torment since nothing has prepared her for this, for the struggle to prevent her daughter's death and for its aftermath. The conversation between the mother and daughter in the dying moments is quite significant:

Mama (Quickly): Jessie, I can't just sit here and say O.K., Kill
Yourself if you want to.

Jessie : Sure you can. You just did. Say it again.

However, “ ‘night, Mother” dramatizes not only Jessie’s motivation to die but also the effort she makes to instruct her mother in survival. She is not depressed, or anxious, or troubled in any noticeable manner. Jessie’s tragedy is not that she sees an existence behind the disguise of everyday activity. The message that it leaves is that, this play presents a reflection to reality in which women struggle for identity. The explanation for Jessie’s suicide is perceived not within family but in individual disappointment, courageously ending a life that was undeniably insignificant. She views her suicide as something that will work, irrevocably testify to her ability to choose. Jessie explains clearly to Thelma,

No mama. This is how I have my say. This is how I say what I thought about it all and I say no. Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no!” (75)

Jessie brings the fortitude of the quiet character to life. So that she finally convinces Thelma, that her decision is in fact her own, and the right one at that. Herein, Norman initiates an alarming message by presenting an extremely integral vision of domination experienced by overpowered women. She is able to convey the displeasure present in the everyday domestic world. Harriet the critic opines that,

Norman’s characters are at a critical point, when events of the past intersect with events of the present to bring about the need for a change in direction for the future. In that change lies the possibility of their redemption. (Harriet 147)

Jessie’s task in the play is to confer her mother the truth about her, regarding her motive for suicide. By doing so, she frees her from guilt and responsibility. She implements her own freedom of choice, but in a context of receptive concern for the mother. In “ ‘night, Mother” both the mother and daughter are controlled by some people, and while Thelma has satisfied herself with her passive existence, Jessie prefers to defy authority, take control of her life and kill herself.

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