

Concept of Tragic Women in Modern American Tragedy: Perspective on Norman's Night, Mother and Fornes' Mud

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Abstract

In the contemporary society, a revolutionary transformation seems to occur in the representation of modern women. This transformation includes the change in the image of women from the traditionally submissive, passive, minor roles, and oppressed type into the new rebellions, active, self-reliant one who is represented in modern American drama. This revolutionary transformation can be noticed in the representations of Jessie in Norman's Night, Mother and Mae in Fornes' Mud. They are considered from a modern tragic woman perspective, they no more represent the traditional type of women who is submissive, passive, and oppressed. In fact, they represent a new contemporary, new rebellions, new center character, and challenging the traditional tragic women.

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1- Introduction

The concept of Tragedy has many meanings according to several European and American writer. Tragedy as a gender of drama is a term that has a variety of meanings and explanations in criticism and literary history which started with Aristotle who explains it as an attempt to recount an important and casually related series of events in the life of highly classed person. Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers of ancient Greece. He looked to the type and concept of the idea in order to find out the nature of reality in order to explore many subjects. Aristotle's tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself, in appropriate and pleasurable language, in a dramatic rather than narrative form with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions

Before the 1960s and 1970s period of the American feminist movement, women had no separated identity from that of their husbands, deprived as they were of any legal or political rights. In the American capitalist, patriarchal system of the early twentieth century, marriage was the only way for women to secure financial stability for the future. Basically, the American tragedians show imperatives that are considered with the unity of plot, nobility of character, and control of violence. Their concepts to reject the Aristotelian principles of writing tragedy reflects their attempt to create a new form which is considered true to the realities of modern life in American society (Downer, 1974: 85).

II- Women and Tragedy in Modern American Drama

In modern tragedy, the individual experiences a state of anxiety which supposes a relationship with the past that has great consequences on his future. Ultimately, this sense of anxiety in modern tragedy brings about the question of identity, the individual develops into his own negative agent, and his flaw becomes his sin (Kierkegaard, 2004: 145).

On the other hand, the modern American tragedy will attempt to transfer to dramatic art the illumination of those deep and active and eternal processes of the human soul which the psychology of Freud, Lacanian and Jung have given us through the study of the unconscious and striking the heart of emotion and linking our life today with the emergence of the primitive ethnic soul (Engle, 1953: 70).

Hence, all the psychoanalytic themes that appear in twentieth century American drama, the most prominent is the Oedipus complex. In future, there are themes of sexual, suppression, frustration, and aggressiveness. In fact, the tragic plays to difference degree, serve as capital illustrations of father and mother figure, sexual frustration, guilt feelings, death wishes and incest drives. Moreover, Psychoanalysis provides the American tragedies with illumination, suggestion, and direction (Ibid, 75).

In the twentieth century the protagonist came to be any man or women. Partly this was a position assertion of the rights of the individual, particularly for American

dramatists. As Arthur Miller (1949: 3) has mentioned:

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright Thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can Possibly lead in our time-the heart and spirit of the average man.

According to Miller, the common man can pretend to a tragic status and his story can provide materials for tragedy provided that his story engages issues of importance such as the sense of personal dignity, the survival of the race or the relationships of man to God. According to us, this variation ought to be understood against Aristotle's rise and fall pattern. For in modern societies where the political systems are democratic, kings and princes no longer raise our passion and the low man's misery and loss are as tearing as the fall of kings was for Greeks (Ibid, 6).

In the twentieth century, many aspects of classical tragedy as described by Aristotle were questioned and dramatists broke away from the Greek canons. Arthur Miller is among the fiercest modern exponents of a modern conception of tragedy. His play *Death of a Salesman* has been dismissed on the

basis that its protagonist Willy Loman lacks the stature of a tragic hero.

On the other hand, Miller's conception of tragedy retains only its disastrous ending. It contents that the last appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life, and that over and above this function of the tragic viewpoint there are and will be a great number of formal variation which no single definition will ever embrace (Ibid, 166).

Moreover, the feminist theatre was propagandist and primarily an assault on men. The traditional concepts of heroine/hero were destroyed in feminist theatre for the purpose of which history was re-examined and heroines were re-defined, not only the characters, but also traditional concepts of love, sex, marriage, family, and many issues overtly female were re-considered and re-interpreted.

The action modes of feminist theatre made unconventional use of costumes which emphasis on great freedom in body movements, thus de-glamorizing the women's body. Through feminist theatre was primarily the struggle against patriarchy, it now plays attention to

the lives of women as individuals, in relation to each other, and in relation to men (Keyssar, 1984: 3).

Additionally, tragedy in feminist theatre is not an imitation of life, but a re-thinking and re-defining of life, thereby rendering a new approach to it. As, Erick Bentley mentioned, it should be a " broad and deep account of the life of the individual " (Carlson, 1983: 400).

Therefore, the nature of the feminist tragedy and the women's tragic experience are to be analyzed, but the dramatic theories from Aristotle to Miller are found inadequate for such as analysis. For, Aristotle's contention that, a female character being manly is inappropriate, banishes the women from tragedy.

On the other hand, the tragic heroines in Ibsen and Strindberg's plays are only the extension of the man's idea of how a woman should be and not to be as a woman is. Even the modern theories of Miller and Tennessee Williams see the tragic women only through the male consciousness. The typically women's issues of Marsh Norman and Marie Irene Fornes as feminist playwrights make it indispensable to

evolve separate tools of dramaturgy for feminist theatre and feminist tragedy too (Frederic, 2005: 238).

In addition, the tragic element in the feminist theatre is the misery and hopelessness felt by the tragic female's protagonists. This misery-partly created by the society and family oppressions pressures and partly by their hesitance, dilemma, and uncertainty in overcoming them.

Miller's definition of tragedy could be applied to the women also. The failure of an individual to gain her rightful position in her society. But tragedy need not end in physical death. The death of a protagonist and female figure is not an essential element to make a play tragedy such as Linda Loman a female protagonist in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. She is not physical death, but it is the death of her husband Willy's principles and ideas (Martin, 1978: 11).

Hence, the death of one's principle and ideas could be the basis to identify one as a tragic figure. As well as, the loss and death of one's hope could be the grounds on which tragedy could be built in the modern. Thus, tragedy in feminist theatre might be the

individual's failure to rise above the hopelessness or frustration and unpredictable practice of solving her problem herself.

On the other hand, the modern tragic heroin, poverty, suicide and many symbols present the new order of humanity that stand apart from the older one. The woman's hopelessness, she does not negate herself from the world, but turns in struggles, succeeds, and fails. As O'Neill's expression in feminist tragedy that "Tragedy was the natural consequence of human condition existence is tragic anguish woman's punishment for her awareness" (Clark, 1947: 363).

In addition, Marvin Carlson illustrated that the feminist tragedy is the awareness of the women as a woman and her position in the world and her inevitability to change and improve it which is tragic. In the process, the feminist tragedy could be interpreted as demonstrating the woman's attempt to free herself from the bonds-external and internal which meant the external being stimulated by the society especially the patriarchy power, and the internal stimulated by her body and self (Carlson, 1983: 363).

Essentially, the women come to be the central character in the

most feminist drama. They are often depicted as both the protagonist and antagonist. They have been portrayed in such a way that they are not allowed to continue patriarchal system unless they are regarded as enemies to be oppressed by the new women as Parshely (1970: xviii) observes about Janet Brown's explanation:

The victim in the new feminist drama is not man but traditional womanhood or traditional woman or male-identified women

The frequent themes are women's tragedy by struggling for self-realization, self-definition, and search for identity, domestic violence, individuality, pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, and the mother-daughter relationship. Like, *Night Mother* when Jessie the tragic woman in the final chapter by killing herself in order to get rid from frustration and for searching her identity. On the other side, *Fornes' Mud* dealt with autonomy issue when Mae the tragic women decided to get education to obtain about her identity (Gussow, 1983: 40).

Marie Irene Fornes' *Mud* is the tragic story of the unsuccessful life of a center woman with two men and the failure of her dreams of a

decent or cultured life for away from the rottenness in which she lives. Mae the tragic protagonist has been brought up a long with Lloyd and they are sexual mates too. She tries to improve her thinking by going to school and be encouraging her friend Henry to live with her. Finally, When Mae found Henry no better than Lloyd; she is disillusioned with them and decides to leave them as she said:

I'm going somewhere else...
Both of you are no good...I
work too hard and the two of
you keep sucking my blood...
I'm going to find myself a job.
And a room to live in (Mud,
1983: 39).

Though, Mae dies in the struggle, her intention to break away from Lloyd and Henry established her triumph over the external and internal forces. Death of Mae only heightens the tragedy as the external forces prove to be powerful. Hence, Mud is the tragedy of a woman who has an awareness of the rottenness of her situation and yearns to break new grounds. The tragic vision of the protagonist is summarized in Mae's final words: " Like a starfish, I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I long for it. I thirst

for it. I would die for it... I am dying (Ibid, 40).

On the other hand, In Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* is considered as a terrifying drama of Jessie's enormous preparations for killing herself and of her mama's futile attempts to stop her. The tragedy of these women is sharing the house and their failure to reach out to other. Jessie, the tragic protagonist has no way out. She is tired of the uselessness in living with her problems and crisis. Her tragic situation is " I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used (*Night Mother*, 1983: 22).

Moreover, the crisis she has faced is both external and internal. Internally, the crisis in her loss of her-self who was never whom she to be, but failed. Hence, she concludes that things are " not only better out there than they are in here" (Ibid, 23).

Additionally, the collective scripting of the plays common to feminist theatre has resulted in dramas becoming choral plays where female playwright is writing from a woman's point of view, focuses on groups of women and not on one female protagonist. Hence, the heroine in the feminist tragedy is not one single individual but a single

female consciousness (Clark, 1947: 366).

On the other hand, Helene Keyssar was considered the setting of the female plays was another proof of the female consciousness and tragic situation or atmosphere of the plays. The woman playwright might have stepped out of the home physically as such as the kitchen and family room is an important recurring setting in the feminist theatre.

The setting of kitchen with a dining table and a cot in plays revealed the woman's space in order to throw light on woman's autonomy. As the setting of the kitchen in *Night Mother* becomes a kind of obsession in *Night Mother* and setting of *Mud* as a claustrophobic stage space mounted on an earth promontory with the blue sky in the black wall-symbolizes the woman's life of stagnation and her yearning for hope and sunshine (Keyssar, 1984: 11).

In fact, women are denied from their identity in the patriarchal society. Hence, women must accept the identities constructed for them by patriarchy oppression. There is clear divide in the plays regarding the female characters response to oppression. The first group is

represented by Thelma, Ruby in *Norman's Getting Out* to submit to the limited existence allowed to them by their society. While, Jessie in *Night Mother* and Mae in *Mud* desire to regain autonomy by asserting their identities in their own ways as Lynda Hart (1987: 68) described:

One woman who has passively integrated into a delimiting and Oppression society is pitted against another who widely rebels. Even at the risk of self-destruction against the rigid system.

Otherwise, several critics have compared *Norman's* plays and specific *Night Mother* to Greek tragedy because it observed the Aristotelian unities and audiences often find it cathartic. *Norman* herself says that " *Night Mother* is written in sonata form " (Betsko, 1987: 334).

Norman's traces her influence to classic music rather than classical theatre, but the end result resembles classical theatre as strongly as classical music. Just as classic realist plays move for exposition to crisis and resolution. Sonatas typically introduce a theme followed by variations, the music climaxes and moves toward a coda at the end (Ibid, 335).

According to feminist tragedy, Fornes' *Mud* is considered as a parable of gender oppression. Fornes views the trio's tragedy as product of socioeconomic circumstance and depicts the characters as essentially decent, but abandoned children. Fornes bristles at the suggestion that Mae is the men's victim or somehow more selfless than they are, and does not condemn Lloyd for shooting Mae, who has used him emotionally and sexually (Marc, 1999: 23).

Hence, *Mud* is feminist tragedy not because the men are oppressor, but because the central character is a woman, and the theme. Fornes insists that these characters are too caught up in the struggle to survive to act out conceptions of traditional sex roles. Hence, a spirited young woman is destroyed as a result of the conflict between dependence and self-realization (Ibid, 227).

On the other hand, Norman's feminist tragedy concentrates on the issue of gender definition in each play as feminist concern violence is seen as the agent for the transformation out of Mama's or woman's domesticity to freedom,

autonomy, and individualism. Freudian theories of gender in relation to the mother, Smith considered how separation from the mother for the female is psychologically more complicated than for the male. Hence, Jessie's suicide in *Night Mother* becomes a tragedy representative of women in American culture who suffer anorexia and agoraphobia as extreme means of gaining control over the self (Smith, 1991: 277-288).

However, the feminist theater was considered that women tragedy and their suffering and struggle for identity in a society controlled by an oppressive system of patriarchal oppression and beliefs are the main idea for women tragedy plays. Finally, that feminist tragedy could be a promising beginning to promote a female canon in the generic study of the feminist theatre.

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