

# Woman's tragedy for quest identity in Maria Irene Fornes' Mud

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## Abstract

*Mud depicts the image of woman as a victim of the socio-political system. Woman has been oppressed throughout the ages by various institutions including; religious, moral, educational institutions. This study aims at shedding light on the fact that women's' rights are violated and women are victimized in the patriarchal societies. Many individuals in the society are trying to make use of women as they are one of the vulnerable and fragile categories in the society. The play shows that Mae has been the victim of her family first and then of the society. She is raped by her own relationships with men who represent the patriarchal society. Even during the quest for Knowledge in order to get her identity she has been represented as the victim of the formal governmental institute. The protagonist of this tragedy, accept death in a spirit of acquiescent submission that is foreign to great tragedy.*

**Keywords:- Identity, Tragedy, Mud Images, Feminism,**

## 1- Introduction

Maria Irene Fornes interested to women in their society much attention for they are frustrated and

oppression. Fornes gave the women pure picture and considered them as a center figure who are oppressed by the society and people around them. Fornes' Mud is the best example for oppression, frustration, and the concept of woman's tragedy in which she presented major female character Mae and another two male characters.

Modern American playwrights try to highlight and comment on the conditions of American society through individual characters and their situations. As the social interactions complicated during the 20th century, many playwrights of the age focused on the issues, such as feminism, civil rights, chronicle diseases, color conflicts, political crisis and the individual's position in relation to those issues (Benjamin, 1998: 2). Women playwrights mainly focus on the theme of feminism. They depict the image of female characters' entrapment in materialistic world.

Additionally, Fomes retraced her woman's tragedy by some issues of women. Fomes' deals with the concept of identity and deals with the feminine autonomy in general focus on searching identity which considered as one of the most element tragedy for women in modern American society. Hence, Fomes' *Mud*, depicts oppression as experienced by women and she offers option for their response.

## II- Mae's tragedy for quest identity in Fomes' *Mud*

The images of loss in autonomy, death, poverty, dirtiness, oppression, Violence, lack of education and freedom pervade Maria Irene Fomes's *Mud* during the beginning of the play as we knew that Mae is planning on getting knowledge. However, although Jessie's suffering like that other modern American plays focal point in this play is Mae empowerment to control her destiny.

Mae, the heroine of *Mud* wants to learn to read and write, though she lives in a hopeless environment: poverty, dirtiness, endless labor, and, what is most painful, namelessness. The fact that she lives and exists is an undeniable concrete reality, but there are no words to give meaning to her being and relation to the world.

Education, and its acquisition, takes a more prominent role in *Mud* than in other Fomes works. She uses the quest for knowledge and pushes it against class dynamics, male dominance, and sexuality. The play opens with the establishment of the impoverished economic class distinction of Mae and Lloyd.

The searching for identity is an importance theme of modern American playwright's plays which are considered built the changing of women roles to get herself-actualization without depending on others to discover her identity in the society. Hence, this interpretation considers one of the main issues in the feminism to give women opportunities to become self-determining, in depending on something in the society. Therefore, the play examines more closely in terms of the search for identity which considered as the best clarity the struggle of woman to rise above her condition of class and gender.

In Fomes' *Mud*, Mae the female tragic hero in the beginning of the play is searching for herself and for her subjectivity by searching by her efforts and body to use language in order to express her sense of identity. Mae and two male characters live in

one place in poverty. Hence, Mae wants to live outward the world by getting knowledge and self-actualization, but she fault because the oppression of the patriarchal controlling by the two men surrounding her.

Mae lives with Lloyd whom her father brought home as an abandoned child and raised with Mae. Mae and Lloyd live in considerable rural poverty but Mae attends literacy classes and is committed to learning to read, and to becoming educated. The play is a character study of Mae as she demonstrates one woman's efforts to free herself from the poverty she was born into. Her character journey is reflected in the disillusionment of both Lloyd and Henry to their plight as they slowly bring her down to their level of desperation. She works every waking moment, she tries to educate herself although she is barely literate, and brings home an older suitor in the hopes he can elevate her. But the things she thinks will free her only drag her further down. All of Mae's hopes and dreams are lost when she realizes that she is condemned to a life not her own. This is when she makes the radical decision to face the unknown and leave.

In addition, Mae's ambition to learn knowledge and language in order to improve herself outside the society Mae has tried many attempts to get language and she uses her body with Henry and Lloyd in order to get knowledge and live outside to find out her identity, as she seduced Henry in the beginning of the play. Within this play, violence is the inevitable outcome of Mae's quest for autonomy because Mae continues to support the two men in their limited world and for that matter continuous to ask them to fulfill her needs. When Henry arrives in a particular scene Mae is the aggressor and seducing him in order to teach her to read as states:

MAE: why is that you can talk, Henry, Lloyd cannot talk? Why is that? What I'm saying Henry, is that I want you. That I want you here with me. That I love you.

HENRY: Mae, this is unexpected.

MAE: It is unexpected, Henry.

HENRY: I have nothing to offer you.

MAE: Yes, you do. I want you.  
(Fornes, 1983, Scene 3: 24).

On the other hand, Henry does not understand about these words, So Mae misunderstanding Henry's ability to read for nobility. Henry does not possess, but her oppression for knowledge is so great and her

loneliness so deep that Mae cannot control her desires. Mae wasn't care about Henry's refusing her offers, as she expresses:

MAE: I want you mind.

HENRY: My mind?

MAE: I want it (She seduces Henry by kissing him).

HENRY: Did you feel my mind?

MAE: Yes, I did. I want you here (She kisses him again).

HENRY: To live here?

MAE: If you will (Ibid, 25).

Hence, the desire for loving one's mind is considered more comfortable than the pleasures of the body. Additionally, Mae tells Lloyd that Henry is coming to live with them, hence we can notice that Mae is controlling about everything because she does not give Lloyd any decision to object. Mae's control by her body to find out and achieve her identity, as she explains to Lloyd that " You can learn from Henry. If you want to, he can teach you how to read " (Ibid).

As a matter of fact, Mae's thinking about learn language and knowledge rather than Lloyd's pain and jealous from Henry, she is considered Lloyd's suffering as just a moment feelings. After Henry feels ill and suffering, Mae tells Lloyd that

they will look after him. Hence, Lloyd has frustrated from Henry's disability to each and clean himself, he informs Mae to get rid him by killing him as Mae assesses that " kill him if you want. He cannot talk straight any more " (Ibid, 34). However, Mae has prepared to move on without Henry because she feels that Henry is usefulness for here. As Fornes explains about the play as she reveals:

" If you revered the sexes in Mud, you would see that Mae's nature is more males than females in terms of dominance, and that men's natures are more female in terms of tenderness and acceptance " (Stuart, 1985: 14).

Additionally, Fornes extends the issues of using emotional abandonment which explained that each woman attempts to shoot a man who had used her emotionally and sexually. Hence, the outside world should be more sympathetic in justice toward the women. Women are often more severely punished for stepping outside their perceived societal roles. So, some critics use more sympathize about Fornes' interest to select like this issues or themes other than the gender (Cope, 2005: 146).

In fact, Mae's tragedy is considered as the victim by the hands of the two male characters. So, we can notice that the male dominates over the woman in everything, hence the study explains the women's victim which caused by the patriarchal oppression over the women in the society. On the other hand, in the end of Mud's play, Mae seems to be taking responsibility for her own tragedy. Hence, she adopts for her own symbol of death as she observes, " Like the starfish, I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me" (Fornes, 1983: 40).

Moreover, the desire of self-determination and education has forced Lloyd to keep her with him. Mae's tragically explains that the only response remaining to the clinging, helpless men is to shoot her. Hence, Mae's death is regarded as a tragic quest for freedom, identity, and self-actualization as Mae's words " I long for (the night). I thirst for it. I would die for it " (Ibid).

Essentially, Mae is a center tragic hero. She has controlled about her action, movement, and freedom. The play is presented the most segment of women's controlling. As Fornes illustrates that:

" The woman's place in the world, not because she is good or a heroin, not because she is oppressed by men, but simply because she is the center of that play... It is her mind that matters throughout the play...It is because of that mind, Mae's mind. A woman's mind that the play exists " (Betsko, 1987:166).

Additionally, Mae's tragedy for her quest of knowledge and identity by learning language when she analyzed that death will become life for her get knowledge. Hence, Mae describes herself by starfish through the play as she said " If a starfish loses an arm he can grow a new one. This takes about a year. A starfish can live five or ten years or perhaps more, no one really knows " (Fornes, 1983, Scene 6, 27). During the play, this scene has multi-concepts to interpret from some critics and theories from perspectives view. As Deborah Geis adds that:

" Mae acquires an identity and even corporeality as she reifies herself through a text... The act of reading from her textbook... This linguistic recourse allows Mae the power of self-demonstration, the ability to articulate her bodied subjectivity " (Geis, 1990: 300).



On the other hand, Jill Dolan has illustrated that Mae's action is clear successful into discourse during the scene as she writes " Unable to learn to read, and now completely objectified by the man who was to grant her entry into discourse, Mae remains outside the register of language " (Dolan, 1988: 109).

In fact, Mae's tragedy is caused by Mae's struggle to emphasize herself through processing language which effects of invisible violence, this violence occurs to the human soul when it is ignored of the light and justice. In addition, Fornes' *Mud* allows the audience to find out the character's thought. Hence, the characters discover themselves through a specific sign or symbol and conversation, but now, we can now these characters through their struggle and conflict to search themselves and their identity.

Therefore, Fornes' *Mud* illustrates to readers to identify with the characters as others, and give this work as outsiders. As Fornes explains that " It means to learn not how other people live, but how we are able to imagine ourselves as others, which is what drama is meant " (Betsko, 1987: 139).

Finally, Mae's search for identity considers the main reason for her tragedy through the play and also it's considered as a metaphor for all who search for self-direction and autonomy. So, Mae's movement in her search for herself has been inward, hence, she has killed when she attempted to change her movement to move outward and brought back by one of the two male characters who loves her. Additionally, Fornes is not content with providing a psychological analysis of her female character circumstances. So, Mae explains the social, economic, and political realities that maintain those circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

Women suffering and their struggle for identity in a society controlled by an oppressive system of patriarchal beliefs is the main idea for the proceeded play. In *Mud*, Fornes shows that woman's behaviors are shaped by the social forces. The protagonist is searching to define her role and she wants to start a new life, but her cruel self and the people around her hinder her attempts. Fornes depicts an oppressive system in which men have entirely controlled the female characters. Mae is committed to the system established

for them by the society. Thus, Norman shows a beginning of female independence and depicts the image of women in such a way that they will enjoy more liberty in the future. Fornes' play reflects encircling compassion and an imperishable will to freedom. Her play is based on the quintessential American values of self reliance, freedom and hope.

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