

“I’m Cold All the Time Anyway”: A Psycho-Feminist Study of Marsha Norman’s ‘Night, Mother

Snoor Ismael Mahmood¹, Shokhan Mohammed Fatah²

¹English Department, College of Education, University of Garmian, Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq.

²English Department, College of Education and Language, Charmo University, Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq.

Abstract— This article is an inter-disciplinary study of Marsh Norman’s ‘Night, Mother. Marsha Norman is an American playwright who is famous for addressing the dilemmas of women in her writings. Female characters in her plays are generally depicted as victims of their societies. They are situated in a place in which they are powerless and helpless about improving their own conditions. This study aims at exposing the psychological suffering of the main character in relation to the socially imposed standards of living. According to different theories of feminist critics such as Kate Millet, Luce Irigaray, Jane Stoppard, and psycho feminist theories of Nancy Chodorow, in addition to going back to the science of psychology, it shows that the life of women is predetermined by social values and norms. It also shows that the kind of life assigned to women based on their gender roles and feminine duty is the factor behind women’s psychological anguish and self-destructive decisions, such as committing suicide.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Marsha Norman, Nancy Chodorow, ‘Night, Mother, Pscho-femnist.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the passage of time, certain shifts are noticed in the representation of women in certain socio-cultural contexts. Different issues from different social environments have been tackled and addressed by feminist writers. As an American dramatist, Marsha Norman is one of the feminist writers who could discern in details new issues of woman inflicted on her due to the standard gender roles of the society. She writes about matters which are overlooked as she states, “the people I care about are those folks you wouldn’t even notice in life” (qtd in Trudeau, 2010, p. 360). She writes about painful experiences of ordinary people who are trapped in a harsh condition that is almost impossible to change. The characters of her plays are mostly feeble and caught between their difficult situations and making hard decisions such as committing suicide. They cannot do anything to change the forces that subjugate them, but still, they attempt to find a way to escape from their surroundings.

Her play, ‘Night, Mother, is about an ordinary woman who suffers greatly and cannot do anything about her situation. Eventually, she decides to commit suicide. The play was published in 1982 and won Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1983 (Brennan & Clarage, 1999). It was a huge success for Marsha Norman and received great critical acclaim. Critics have praised the play for its accurate depiction of emotions, the reality of a woman’s life, and the family relationship crisis, especially between the mother and the daughter. Being a multi-dimensional play, it has been studied by various critics and researchers from different perspectives. For example, Yasemin Guniz Sertel in her article “‘Night, Mother: Women as a Victims of Culture” has analyzed ‘Night, Mother as a play about a woman who is obsessed with physical beauty. To have a desired body, she suffers from eating disorders. She mentions two types of eating disorders, obesity or compulsive eating and anorexia. She holds society responsible for obliging women to be concerned with beauty (2018). Focusing on the psychological aspect of the play, Jafari and Kiaei have analyzed the play in the light of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. They claim that the characters of this play are Lacanian subjects (2015). Their lives are described as a typical example of Lacan’s Psychoanalytic theories (2015, p.138). While Khloud Mohammed Amin and other researchers have focused on issues of gender using the feminist approach. She studies woman’s struggle for identity in Marsha Norman’s ‘Night, Mother and Getting Out. She asserts that the anguish of the women and their quest for having their own identity are the main concepts in those two plays (2011). Most of the feminist studies of this play highlight oppression and disability of women and the search for independence. Moreover, Karen Foster in a Ph.D. dissertation examines the mother-daughter relationship in the plays of Lillian Hellman, Marsha Norman, and Tina Howe. He uses the psychoanalytical theories of Lacan, Freud, Chodorow Kristeva, and Irigaray to show the role of “language and behavior in the construction of the mother/daughter subjective positions, their relationship, and the concept of the maternal as it is found in these plays” (1994, p.1). However, this study is tackling Marsha Norman’s ‘Night, Mother from various theories of feminist writers to delineate that gender role intensifies the psychological pain of Jessie, the main character of the play. The study shows that Jessie is a depressed character. It also blames the society responsible for assigning a miserable condition or confining her life. Moreover, based on feminist psychoanalysis,

the study relates the depression of the main character and her decision to commit suicide to the impact of the environment and social values.

In this study, two different approaches have been used to analyze the life of a woman in a patriarchal society. The study explores the position of the female characters employing feminist literary criticism. It highlights their position and plight in relation to feminist theories. It also investigates the reasons behind her psychological pain based on the psycho-feminist theories of Nancy Chodorow. In addition to that, the study tries to expose the mental and psychological state of the character by going back to the science of psychology. Furthermore, depression and the reasons behind it are clarified from psychological perspectives.

II. 'NIGHT, MOTHER

In 'Night, Mother Jessie who is the main character is unhappy, frustrated, and alienated, consequently, she suffers deep pain psychologically and decides to put an end to her life. Finding no solution to her problem, being disappointed and hopeless, she shoots herself and dies. The story of the play is quite modest, and it is not eventful. Not many characters are involved. However, its simple story conveys a deep message.

The gender roles stand as a powerful factor behind her psychological suffering and decision to commit suicide. Depression is a psychological disease. Patricia Ainsworth in her book *Understanding Depression* describes depression as the outcome of emptiness and meaninglessness of one's life (2000). In a situation when one feels that he or she is living in a vacuum, when he/she wakes up, the smell of the coffee reminds him or her of another awful day, when there is no change, no progress, no joy, no love, but mere emptiness, the person gradually becomes disappointed, and thinks of death (Ainsworth, 2000, p. ix). There are several factors that cause depression and psychological suffering. One of the reasons is the effect of social environment (Brown, 1998) the situation that one lives in affects him/her. Other social reasons such as the feeling of inferiority, marginalization, being relegated to a lower state of the society, lack of power and the feeling of helplessness are among the causes that lead to depression and hopelessness (Broverman et al, 1970).

Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* explains the position of women in society as the reason behind her psychological suffering. Accordingly, Australian Feminist Jane Stoppard relates the psychological pain and torment of the woman to depressive experiences that are shaped by social and cultural assumptions which define woman's life. It is commonly known that social values form individual behavior, pattern of beliefs, and determine ways of life. Customs and traditions of society assign several spaces for men and women. Cultural and social traditions and conventions contribute to the construction of human personality since culture with its institutions such as family, religion, education inflict certain norms and standards of living on the mind of individuals. Thus, it is possible to say a woman's role, life,

personality, position is determined by social culture. Perhaps, it is the social conditioning that imposes certain psychological torments on woman and leaves her without choice and solution. Suicide will be the only avenue for her to subdue her status and put an end to her torture.

In a patriarchal society, women are relegated to a specific and limited space because of their genders. Their gender determines their duty, job, and position in the society. Being a female, her life is mostly confined to giving birth to a child, child-rearing, housework, being a wife, and the subsidiary person that is living in relation to man. Similarly, in this play, the two female characters live inside a house detached from the country. Throughout the entire play, the only main place is the house, more specifically the kitchen. As the author states: "The play takes place in a relatively new house built way out a country road, with a living room and connecting kitchen and a center hall that leads off to the bedrooms" (Norman, 1983, p. 6). This setting suggests the space that is allotted for them to dwell in a "living room" which can mean life and "connected to the kitchen" means that their life is bound to the kitchen doing cooking, eating, and then sleeping as denoted by the bedroom. Moreover, what is there in the living room is a "magazine, candy dishes and needlework catalogue" (Norman, 1983, p.6). The description of these feminine objects alludes to the confinement of their lives by patriarchal values that assign certain types of works for her. Before committing suicide, Jessi tries to do all her jobs which are: thinking about the amount of food for cooking, ordering food, stocking them, cooking the meal, washing the dishes, ironing her mother's clothes, packaging items, and keeping the house clean.

The gender role that defines a woman is a societal construction, as it is argued by Kate Millet, one's sex as male or female is specified at birth, but gender is created by social culture that is masculine in essence. The roles of girls and boys are prescribed for them, boys are conditioned to be aggressive, strong, domineering, self-assertive while girls are conditioned to be weak, submissive, emotional, passive, meek, and humble.

Based on those assumptions and beliefs that "women are irrational, emotional, weak" men are strong, rational, and strong (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). Besides, women are supposed to be protected and owned by men. Those sets of principles are programmed in the minds of both men and women. Hence, the man is superior, the woman is inferior, the man is independent, woman depends on the man. So, the woman is situated at a position in which she is an object, marginalized, relies on man as her master outside that position there is no other role to perform. In this way, she is vulnerable to manipulations, emotional breakdown, and victimization.

'Night, Mother is the embodiment of those gender roles. It is a story of two women. A mother named Thelma and her daughter Jessie. They are living in the same house. Their life is confined to house chores. They lead a joyless and conventional life. They are completely dissatisfied with their lives and disillusioned. From the early beginning of the play, Jessie starts to prepare herself for committing suicide. The whole play happens within eighty minutes' duration in which the mother

tries in vain to prevent her daughter from killing herself. Throughout their conversations, the reader can find out the reasons behind her decision to commit suicide.

Norman introduces Jessi as a weak character who has psychological conflicts, “Jessie Cates, in her late thirties or early forties, is a pale and vaguely unsteady physically” (1983, p.2). This physical appearance and paleness allude to the existence of anxiety, depression, or being tired psychologically. She has lost interest in eating, losing appetite also is another symptom of psychological problems, agony, anguish, and distress.

She is powerless and helpless. She reaches the point that she is forced into a cramped condition. She is crippled by social forces that shrink her space to move forward and to change her life as she states: “and I can’t do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better. But I can stop it, shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there is nothing on I want to listen to” (Norman, 1983, p. 36). There are factors that control her, and she cannot change them. It is an overwhelming power which ruins her life, and she cannot change it. She does not want to listen to anything because she thinks all they say is meaningless. It makes no difference for her. Nothing is like the way she wants to be as she affirms “nothing on I want to listen.” Her desire is suppressed, and her wishes are all shattered as nothing goes on as she wants. Therefore, her life has turned into a purposeless life which she cannot endure anymore.

She describes her life through the image of a bus that is out of her control, “Ridding the bus and it is too hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you do not get off is it is still fifty blocks from where you are going?” (Norman, 1983, p.33). She expresses her feeling that there are noises and crowds that disturb her, hot weather that stand as a factor which tortures her. There are several reasons that push her to get off but still, she cannot because what is waiting for her is the worst. It means that she has no choice. She is obliged to stay. There is no room for her to escape, to establish her autonomous being, the bus can symbolize that she is not in a position of power. She is conditioned in a place that is not her own place. It is not shaped by her wishes and needs. It is mastered and controlled by a driver which in turn suggests that her life is mastered and controlled by the culture of the male dominant society. As it is observed by Luce Irigaray, the description of a woman as an object has imprisoned her in the margin of society. It has confined her ability and limited her scope of role within a society since her role is defined by man. Her life is encircled by masculine rules, norms, conventions of the patriarchal society that strip her of her own ability to define herself. It has also positioned her in a subordinate marginal place in which she is voiceless and silent because she is not a subject of discourse (1985).

Whenever she takes a step to make a change, she is contradicted. She tries several times to shift her lifestyle, but she fails. As she exposes the reason behind her disappointment and disillusionment saying, “I took that telephone sales job and I didn’t even make enough money to pay the phone bill, and I

tried to work at the gift shop at the hospital and they said I made people real uncomfortable smiling at them the way I did” (Norman, 1983, p.35).

When things do not go as one wishes, the suppression of her desire leads to a kind of psychological disease which is called depression. The signs of depression include loss of appetite, loss of interest in different social activities, isolation as her mother describes her “you are acting like some brat, Jessie. You’re mad and everybody is boring and you don’t have anything to do and you don’t like me you don’t like going out... and you never talk on the phone” (Norman, 1983, p.34).

Being depressed, she neglects herself. She is immersed in her pain in a way she has lost interest in doing makeup, and changes in her style and clothes. As her mother tells her: “if you did not wear that yellow all the time” (Norman, 1983, p.22), “why don’t you wear that sweater I made for you?” (Norman, 1983, p.56), “ your hand[’s] are not washed. Do you want a manicure or not” (Norman, 1983, p.11). The mother also tells her about tidying and changing her hairstyle and doing makeup for her eyes. She is also not willing to talk. She is not eager to communicate and to be involved in enjoyable chats.

The primary discourse of patriarchal society trains women to be beautiful, married, a mother and bring up children. In other words, the patriarchal society expects them to be obedient to rules that govern their life. It also imprints the idea that success is measured by accomplishing what is designed for her. The failure to perform those roles encourages emotional pain and different psychological problems. For Jessie, life is empty as she has failed in her feminine duty of being a mother and wife. She married, but her marriage turned to emotional suffering as her husband left her. Then she tried to be a good mother and have a child. She had a son, Ricky, but he became a drug addict and a thief. She was not able to have a harmonious and friendly relationship with both her husband and her son, therefore, she is alone now. She is disillusioned and dissatisfied with her life because things are not the way they are supposed to be. The feeling of inferiority, being a failure, not having the position that is recognized by society, and being powerless to change her position, makes her disappointed, hence, she suffers emotionally. The lack of any other roles outside those feminine responsibilities makes her life completely empty, meaningless, and boring. This stands as a reason behind the suicidal thoughts. Accordingly, Jenni Spencer argues that in addition to her sickness, epilepsy, “Jessie’s suicidal depression follows a series of losses, from her dog King to her husband” (1989, p.152).

Nancy Chodorow believes that the inner psyche of women and their feeling about being a mother is socially and culturally constructed. She clarifies that the relationship between the mother and her daughter is different from the relationship between the mother and her son. She argues that the daughter realizes that she is female like her mother. Thus, she can become a mother like her. She says the girl is more attached to her mother because they are like each other biologically not because the mother prefers her daughter to his son. So, unconsciously the connection becomes a part of her ego, it will be incorporated into her mind. Because of being brought up with close ties to mothers, daughters are constructed with a

sense of self in relation, feeling connected to others, being able to understand others and have empathy, and willing to be in a relationship. Thus, they like to relate to a man and become a mother and have a child.

Such feelings are shaped by internalizing her relationship with her own mother. By contrast, boys, as they are brought up by their mothers as different from her, tend to be independent and they will feel anxious to depend on others as they are not brought up in relation to anyone. Additionally, within the patriarchal framework of the society that encourages the boy to depend on himself and live freely outside the family, men grow up with internalizing masculine traits of being powerful, independent, self-assertive, authoritative, and active. While women being confined to live inside a house and attached to the mother tend to develop feminine qualities as established by society to be emotional, kind, obedient, passive, and dependent (Chodorow, 1999).

From early childhood, girls are trained to be dependent. Based on the social values, parents encourage the boys to be involved in physical activities but try to protect their girls from the same physical tasks as boys. For example, if a boy plays with a doll, fathers show disgust at the feminine behavior of the boy. When a girl asks for help, parents soon respond to help her while they do not similarly respond to the boy's demand because they think that boys should depend on themselves. The quick response to girls shows the inability of girls to depend on themselves, while not responding to the boys show that they believe in the capacity of the boy to manage himself (Nelton-Hoeksema, 1990, p.125).

In this way, girls internalize "their sense of self" mainly based on their relationship with others. That is, they do not develop an image of themselves as an independent person, "but instead develop images of themselves only in terms of their relationship with others". Their concern with relationships makes them more inclined to others' opinions about them and affections for them (Chodorow qtd in Nelton- Hoeksem, 1990, p.123). Not being self-reliant and lack of autonomy makes a woman more vulnerable to helplessness, self-derision, and depression. The feeling of being dependent and lack of freedom, as argued by Jacobson, are factors that make the human being vulnerable to depression (qtd in Nelton- Hoeksem, 1990, p.121). Similarly, Jessie is depressed because of a lack of relationship because she does not have a husband, and she is away from her son. The lack of love and relationship makes her suffer emotionally. Her psychological suffering intensifies as she loses hope of changing her life. Women are programmed to be emotional by imprisoning them in a position in which they cannot attain the power to live without being an object of relationship. If they are equal to boys and receive the same type of child-rearing, they would grow up more to be self-reliant and live independently.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, one can conclude that the plight of the woman is socially constructed. The social values of patriarchal society encircle the life of the woman in a space that makes her vulnerable to different kinds of abuse, oppression, even to psychological disease and self- destruction. Women are victims of cultural standards of the feminine role. Failing to fulfil her role as a wife and mother embedded her in an empty life that she was powerless to get out of it. Beyond that feminine role, there is nothing else for her to do. Suicide is the only option to get rid of that miserable empty and boring life that lacks enjoyment. The gender role makes her dependent, passive, and subsidiary in need of support and affection to enjoy her life. Women are emotional and psychologically weak because from early childhood based on male dominant ideology, she is nurtured to be emotional and dependent. Jessie commits suicide because of the influence of society on her life. She commits suicide because society obliges her. A deep analysis of the inner psyche of the character has shown that she is obliged to kill herself. The forces that push her to take that decision are the tradition, norms, and conventions of society.

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