A Woman's Two Choices in Pursuit of Female Subjectivity: The Case of Marsha Norman

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中文摘要：女性在追求性别平等、建立独立女性主体的过程中面临的悖论之一就是：是追随父亲的主体身份还是恢复同母亲的文化纽带。美国剧作家玛莎·诺曼的剧作《出狱》和《晚安，妈妈》分别展现了建立女性主体的两种模式，以表现女主人公在追求独立生活过程中的双重选择。文章运用精神分析和女性主义的相关理论，着眼于两部剧作表现的母女关系模式，审视女主人公的生存困境，讨论她们为建立独立女性身份所做的努力以及母亲身份与女性主体的关系。

Such labels as “feminist playwright” may not carry much weight in describing Marsha Norman and her effort in presenting women's struggles against patriarchal values since many of her plays address more universal subject matters than feminist issues. Even for those few plays that obviously deal with women's problems, Norman's multi-dimensional portrayal of the heroines' inner struggles goes far beyond any label can possibly define. Two of her plays, Getting Out (1978) and 'night, Mother (1983), outstandingly represent Norman's observation of a woman's dilemma in finding her female self in society.

This essay, by analyzing the effort made by the heroines in these two plays to find their female self, intends to discuss further Norman's observation of women's problems in modern society and the possible options that she offers to solve these problems. Feminist theories as well as theories of psychoanalysis will be employed in the interpretation of the heroines' struggles to exert autonomy.
I. Denial of a Woman's Traditional Social Roles

*Getting Out* is a two-act play about a newly released prisoner Arlene who tries to settle herself down in society to start a new life. In this process, we see her struggle against her former female identity shaped and constructed by men: raped by her father, emotionally manipulated by the chaplain, both sexually and economically exploited by her boyfriend and pimp Carl, and sexually harassed by the prison guard Bennie. The whole play, although with some of these men absent from sight, is about Arlene's struggle against their control. This is a struggle toward autonomy and self identity. Arlene believes that she went into prison as Arlie and she has come out a different person. That is why she insists that she is addressed by the new name. A new name is a symbol of a new identity. By saying good-bye to her old self, she can start a new life. Bennie drives her all the way from the prison to her home in Kentucky not for nothing, as Arlene's mother correctly assumes. However, when he is ready to force Arlene to grant sexual favor to him, which may be regarded as a usual practice for other women, Arlene refuses and calls him a "rapist." Carl spends a lot of time trying to talk Arlene into going back to prostitution since that is an easier way of earning money. However, Arlene refuses him in the same decisive way. Arlene's attitude shows her defiance against men's attempt at commercialising and marginalizing woman. The rejection to serve men as a sexual object is a sign of her refusal to take the traditional roles with which patriarchy endows a woman. According to Luce Irigaray, a woman is expected to perform three social roles: virgin, mother, prostitute. In all these roles, a woman's value lies in her body because only in exchange among men can a woman take on value: "the properties of a woman's body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men." Simone de Beauvoir has made a similar observation by saying that a woman is only meaningful to a man for her body because she is required by society "to make herself an erotic object." Arlene's cry, "I'm gonna work" (I, 33), clearly shows her determination to earn a living by working with her own hands instead of by serving men as their sexual object. Arlene's autonomy is gradually established, and there is reason enough to assume that she will find a true identity of her own, independent of male interests and male desires.

Different from her predecessors in dramatic history who refuse or abhor the maternal role, Arlene decides to bring back her son Joey from the foster family.
and to raise him by herself. The absence of the child on stage weakens Arlene’s role as a mother, another woman’s social role expected by patriarchy, but reinforces the determination of Arlene to find her value first and foremost as an independent woman. Irigaray points out that motherhood is believed to be “the only worthwhile destiny for women” under patriarchy and it “most often means perpetuating a patriarchal line of descent by bearing children for one’s husband, the state, male cultural powers”[7]. However, if a woman is satisfied with being a mother only, she will lose herself in satisfying male expectations and finally lose her female self. A woman should find values in simply “being women”, which means that women should not take advantage of their privilege of becoming mothers and raising children. If women can find values in simply being women, they can finally establish their female subjectivity and thus achieve equality with men.

Unfortunately Arlene cannot obtain understanding from her mother who still judges her from the traditional point of view. However, she is able to obtain such an understanding from her upstairs neighbor Ruby who used to be a prisoner herself but who is now able to make a living on her own. It is with the help of Ruby that Arlene decides to face the new life outside the prison, keeping in mind that outside is different: “Outside’s where you get to do what you want.” (II, 60) The female companionship is thus established to help Arlene in finding a true female identity. Ruby, thus, stands as a source of spiritual support and psychological comfort for the troubled Arlene. She functions as a surrogate mother to restore “the missing pillar”[8] that Irigaray has imagined of the relationship between a mother and a daughter. With this filial bond Arlene can easily gain what she expects and will very likely turn into another Ruby later on.

II. Construction of a New Mother-Daughter Relationship

The Pulitzer Prize winner 'night, Mother invites controversial responses from male as well as female reader/audience. While most female reader/audience seem to identify with the characters on stage and are able to achieve catharsis when the curtain falls, many male reader/audience are unable to sit through the whole play, believing that the play is “too limited in focus, too predictable in effect to capture their interest completely”[9].

The play takes place in an ordinary house, not particularly marked as different from any other houses. “The room may, in fact, be marked by its blandness, and, because the bland and the banal are such negatively coded words, they are most
likely also gendered and show up as adjectives to describe activities engaged in by women.”[10] The story happens between two generations of mothers, neither of whom carry heavy accents that mark their geological belonging and that “distance the audience”[11] from them, as the playwright makes it clear in her note. Jessie, while arranging the family chores, tells her mother Thelma that she is going to kill herself with her father’s gun this evening. Thelma makes every effort to prevent her daughter from doing so, either by trying to call her son Dawson or by distracting Jessie from the idea, either by taking the blame for Jessie’s unsuccessful life onto herself or by helping Jessie to look at the bright side of life, and finally even by personally standing in the doorway to stop Jessie from entering the room. However, Jessie is determined to carry out her plan. And the play ends with the expected shot from the other room invisible from the stage.

Thelma is a mother in the traditional sense. Her marriage is not a happy one because her husband “wanted a plain country woman” (31) but she “didn’t have a thing he wanted” (32). The husband did not even speak to her on his deathbed, which shows that Thelma has been treated as an inferior person in the family. Contrarily, Jessie is a mother of a different kind. She is a person of independent will and an independent identity. At least she consciously pursues such an identity. Her marriage breaks up because her husband Cecil asks her to “choose between him and smoking” (38). Smoking, an action that is considered masculine and often barred from a woman[12], is now taken up by Jessie who sees it as an indication of pursuing equality with men. If smoking is a sign of Jessie’s rebellion against the established male values, her later insistence on smoking is a sign of her challenge against the male authority. Equally important in this respect is Jessie’s dress made clear in the playwright’s character description at the beginning of the play: “She wears pants and a long black sweater with deep pockets, one of which contains a notepad and there may be a pencil behind her ear or a pen clipped to one of the pockets of the sweater” (4). The fact that she wears pants instead of a dress or a skirt shows Jessie’s tendency to resemble a man in appearance. The details about the pen/pencil and the notepad is an indication that Jessie has gained access to Word which has always been denied to a woman. She feels absurd that Dawson thinks that all women share his wife’s foot size, a symbol of the male view to judge women by the same standard and see them carrying the same way, with no distinct individual identity. She feels disgusted at Dawson’s care for her: “He’s always wondering what I do all day. I mean, I wonder that myself, but it’s my day, so it’s mine to wonder
about, not his." (19) In saying this, Jessie expresses her wish to get rid of male influence and to control her own life. Jessie's autonomy is revealed again when she uses the frequently used metaphor of life as a journey. "Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop." (24) Jessie has a clear purpose in life and a strong will to gain dominance over her own life. Her effort to assert autonomy is clearly exemplified in the above gestures.

An intriguing thing about the play is that Jessie is both a daughter and a mother. She is a mother in her own home, but her maternal role does not seem to be fulfilled well because her son Ricky is a thief and a drug addict. However, Jessie does not link the son's (mis)behavior closely to her own life. The traditional women as mothers usually exist partly for their children. It is their children who give meaning to the women's lives. However, Jessie lives for herself. She does not place her hope in life only on her son. After she breaks up with her husband, which she believes is "a relief", Jessie returns to her mother and becomes the mother of her mother by giving her mother the kind of care she needs. Although Thelma is the biological mother of Jessie, Jessie functions as the spiritual mother for her mother in the play. Therefore, what we see on stage is a reversed mother-daughter relationship.

In this play, the mother-daughter relationship is carefully presented and fully developed. According to Irigaray, patriarchy destroys "the most precious site of love and its fertility: the relationship between mother and daughter"[13]. However, Norman seems to present a vivid illustration of this lovable and filial relationship. Here, we see the mother and the daughter communicating with each other. They are trying to establish a line of descent between them. In order to constitute a positive mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray believes it necessary "to invent another style of collective relations", and "to constitute a new subjective and socio-cultural order"[14]. To do this, "we need to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence (the last refuge) and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers"[15]. In this play, Thelma does not take control over the stage with her maternal power; instead, we see Jessie talking with her mother in an equal but more assertive manner. Linda Kintz has observed the feature and function of the conversations between the mother and the daughter: "Their conversation, paradoxically, articulates what women have long used with one another to deal with a language and a coded world that is not theirs, a language of the glance, the touch, quick flashes of comprehension that may escape men but
are sighs of an underground, oblique language among women as a dominated group." Jessie insists that her action of suicide is a private thing that does not and should not include any other people: "It’s private. Tonight is private, yours and mine." (54) By bringing her mother into the action as a witness, Jessie sets an example of a true mother for her mother. Jessie’s suicide must be understood positively because it is her suicide that gives meaning to the play. Killing herself is an extreme expression of her determination to control her life and to assert her autonomy. Finally, from the talk with her daughter, Thelma gradually understands her and finally accepts her action. Jessie’s behavior certainly offers her mother "a new sense of life and strength to live it." It gives her mother "the gift of knowledge, of connection".

III. A Woman’s Two Choices

Feminist philosophers have frequently discussed the dilemma that a woman faces in establishing her female subjectivity. As a daughter, a woman is emotionally and psychologically attached to both parents. However, when she sees the inferior position that the mother is placed in, she may choose to follow the father. Julia Kristeva asks: "Daughter of the father? Or daughter of the mother?" This seems to be the paradoxical situation that the daughter is trapped in. Irigaray clarifies a daughter’s decision by assuming the role of a daughter herself who speaks to her mother with complicated feelings: "I’ll turn to my father. I’ll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you. . . . I’ll follow him with my eyes, I’ll listen to what he says, I’ll try to walk behind him."

In Getting Out, Arlene lacks a paternal figure to offer guidance in her life. Those men that she has met in her lifetime have all been treating her as if she were a piece of property ready to be disposed at men’s wishes. She is very easily reduced to a sexual object of man’s desires. Her father’s sexual abuse and the chaplain’s emotional manipulation have twice shattered Arlene’s dream of seeking for any model in her search for an independent identity since in front of these men, the only female identity she is able to possess is a sexual object. In Arlene’s case, the dilemma of a daughter that Kristeva and Irigaray have been concerned with does not trouble her at all. Instead, she intends to follow the example of the neighbor Ruby, a maternal figure that can function as a role model for her.

In comparison, however, the daughter’s dilemma troubles Jessie in 'night, Mother, who frequently talks of the happy memories her father has given her. In seeking an
individual identity, Jessie knows clearly that she should follow her father’s steps. As Jessie’s mother does not possess such an identity, how can she set an example for Jessie to follow? The choice of the father’s gun with which Jessie kills herself is an obvious manifestation of the daughter’s effort to look for strength from the father. The daughter’s final decision to rely on her father for a spiritual model and the power of speech means her abandonment of the mother. Thelma finally realizes: “I thought you were mine.” (58) Jessie is certainly not hers; nor is she the father’s. Jessie exists only for herself. Only when a woman finds meaning in her own existence can she construct an individual self.

As is seen from the above two examples, a woman, in trying to establish her female self, appeals to two possible role models: the mother or the father. In the mother, she intends to find a filial relationship that has been missing in history. This is the origin of life for her and will serve a second time as a source of female identity. According to Nancy Chodorow, it is comparatively easier for a woman to establish a female identity than a man to form a male identity because girls “grow up with a sense of continuity and similarity to their mother, a relational connection to the world[21], whereas boys have to “deny the feminine identification within themselves and those feelings they experience as feminine”[22]. However, a girl is brought up with the ideology that the female is devalued in patriarchal society. Chodorow warns us that if women continue to confine themselves within the maternal role with which patriarchy endows her, they will “continue to bring up sons whose sexual identity depends on devaluing femininity inside and outside themselves, and daughters who must accept this devalued position and resign themselves to producing more men who will perpetuate the system that devalues them”[23]. To go a step further, the reader is not presented with enough information concerning how Ruby manages to survive after release from the prison. The financial crisis, the educational disadvantage and many other inferior situations that Ruby is thrown into may have become tremendous hindrance on her way to earn a living all by herself. Therefore, Arlene’s prospect of becoming another Ruby remains a Utopian myth in much the same way as Ruby gains her luck. In the father, the daughter aspires to find a model for an independent human being. She will follow this model in order to form a female self in a similar way. However, the construction of the female self in this way will require a social and cultural context that respects sexual differences. Therefore, Jessie’s prospect of finally gaining an independent identity only results in her successful attempt in suicide. If any attempt
in asserting female autonomy leads to such a disastrous ending, it is hard to say that the purpose is properly achieved.

Once again, we should keep in mind that both Arlene and Jessie are mothers. Both have male children to support, and both are daughters of elderly women. If we say that their maternal role is weakened by the deliberate absence of the sons on stage, their relationship with their mothers, however, is presented with extra color. Both the absence of the sons and the mother-daughter relationship are intended to emphasize a filial link between two generations of women. This link is especially important for a woman to establish her female self since to establish a female genealogy. It is necessary to abandon the pride that a woman usually takes in performing the role of the mother. An equal and reciprocal relationship should be set up between the mother and the daughter in which they treat each other with a womanly love. Irigaray argues that a new relationship between the daughter and the mother should be established: “Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love.”[24] She even puts forward a few concrete suggestions concerning the setting up of a good relationship between them[25]. In Arlene’s relationship with Ruby and in Jessie’s relationship with her mother Thelma, we see a woman’s attempt in actively communicating with her mother. This is an important step toward the construction of an independent female self.

Notes:

[1] Jenny S. Spencer, “Marsha Norman’s She-tragedies”, Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1989) 154.

[2] Marsha Norman, Getting Out (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1978) Act I, 38. All quotations in this essay from Getting Out are taken from this source. Hereafter only act numbers and page numbers are provided in the text.

[3] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985) 186.

[4] Ibid., 187.

[5] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1972) 543.

[6] For the many mothers who refuse and abhor the maternal role, see Yan Liu, “Many Mothers Banished to Alaska”, China Comparative Literature 4 (2007): 134-143.

[7] Luce Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press,
[8] Ibid., 112.

[9] Jenny S. Spencer, "Norman's 'night, Mother: Psycho-drama of Female Identity", Modern Drama 30 (Sept. 1987): 364. For other negative criticisms made by male critics, see Linda Kintz, The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1992) 197.

[10] Linda Kintz, The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama. 209.

[11] Marsha Norman, 'night, Mother (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1983) 4. All quotations in this essay from 'night, Mother are taken from this source. Hereafter only page numbers are provided in the text.

[12] For the forbidden of women from smoking in Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party and The Homecoming, for example, see Yan Liu, "Manipulation or Marginalization? An Analysis of the Identity of Pinter's Ruth", Interactions: Literature and Culture 14.1 (Spring 2005): 289-297.

[13] Luce Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press, 1994) 112.

[14] Luce Irigaray, "Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality", trans. David Macey, The Irigaray Reader, ed. Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) 192-193.

[15] Luce Irigaray, "Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order", trans. David Macey, The Irigaray Reader, ed. Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) 50.

[16] Linda Kintz, The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama. 218.

[17] Katherine H. Burkman, "The Demeter Myth and Doubling in Marsha Norman's 'night, Mother", Modern American Drama: The Female Canon, ed. June Schlueter (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 1990) 259.

[18] Janet, Brown, and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "Fearlessly 'Looking Under the Bed': Marsha Norman's Feminist Aesthetic in Getting Out and 'night, Mother', Theatre and Feminist Aesthetic, eds. Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 1995) 196.

[19] Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women", trans. Sean Hand, The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 151.

[20] Luce Irigaray, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other", trans. Helene Vivienne Wenzel, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981): 62.

[21] Nancy Chodorow, Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) 110.

[22] Ibid., 109.

[23] Ibid., 44.

[24] Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993) 105.

[25] Luce Irigaray, Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1993) 47-50.
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