

## Parental Crisis in Marsha Norman's '*night, Mother*: a Lacanian-Feministic Reading

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### Abstract

Reading Marsha Norman's '*night, Mother* in the light of Lacan's imaginary and symbolic orders, as well as Adrienne Rich's notions presented in *Of Women Born*, one can detect that Jessie's suicide has roots in the complicated bond she shares with her mother, her struggle for separation from her while unconsciously yearning the imaginary fusion with her, as well as failure in understanding the true nature of her relationship with her father and following in his footsteps. This paper will take a close look at the ways patriarchy has invaded the mother-daughter relationship that Jessie and Thelma share, and their struggles for achieving self-autonomy, as well as the role Jessie's father plays in the finality of her decision. Terms such as matrophobia, death drive, abjection, imaginary father, and symbolic father will be used in this paper in order to clarify the ways in which Jessie's parental ties are destructive.

**Key words:** Marsha Norman; '*night, Mother*'; Lacan; Imaginary order; Symbolic order; Patriarchy; Feminism; Suicide

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### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history family has mostly been depicted as a safe haven, sheltering its members from the harsh atmosphere of society; however, with the advent of psychoanalysis and different theories regarding the relationship between parents and children, familial ties start to appear complex and sometimes destructive. In '*night, Mother* (1982) Marsha Norman depicts a girl named Jessie who is driven to suicide because of an intricate web of parental as well as societal predicaments. Critics have shown interest in '*night, Mother* both as a feminist and psychoanalytic play; nevertheless, the complexity of Norman's characters as well as the applicability of certain theories to her plays leave much to be looked into. So, for the sake of our argument here, the focus would be on studies done with regards to lacanian-feministic approach on the play. Among the works written on the relationship between Jessie and Thelma in the light of lacanian orders and his notion of language as power is Karen K. Foster's dissertation, "De-tangling the web: Mother-daughter relationships in the plays of Marsha Norm, Lillian Hellman, Tina Howe, and Natorake Shange". Concluding that Jessie's suicide is a form of inclining to patriarchy, Foster looks neither into Lacan's symbolic order, nor the role patriarchy plays in scathing the relationship between Jessie and Thelma. Approaching the play from a different perspective, Khadijeh Taherifard (2017) believes that there is a reversal of gender roles in '*night, Mother*. In her article "Lacanian Reading of Marsha Norman's '*night, Mother*", she dissects Lacan's imaginary and symbolic orders stressing the notion of "the other" and "desire" clinching that "Thelma functions as the other for Jessie, while her father functions as the mother" (2017, p.72). Sharing Taherifard's argument regarding the cause of Jessie's suffering, Alieyh A Jafari (2015) in her article "Lacanian Psychoanalytical Theories in '*night, Mother*'" uses Hegel's dialectic of Mater-slave adopted by Lacan to prove that Jessie has turned into a

slave among "others" who are "patriarchal forces", the worst of whom is her mother who is "the big other" (2015, p.143). She goes on to contend that Jessie's suicide is a way for her to have her say and achieve self-rule (p.143). Regarding mother-daughter relationship in the play it is John Kundert-Gibbs's paper that clarifies how Marsha Norman shatters the image of home and family with the familial setting she creates for the harsh reality of her play. In "Revolving It All: Mother-Daughter Pairs in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* and Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls*", he argues that a reversal of roles has happened in the play; therefore, Jessie has become mother to her mother and that explains the reversal of the cycle of power in *'night, Mother*. As valuable as his notions are, it seems that he has ignored the role that Jessie's father plays in her committing suicide. In this paper by analyzing *'night, Mother* in the light of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and Rich's feministic ideas, it would be argued that Jessie's suicide has its roots in the complicated bonds she has with both her mother and father. It is hoped that the results of this research would shed more light on the application of Rich's feministic ideas and Lacan's symbolic and imaginary orders on the play.

<sup>1</sup>Lacan's imaginary and symbolic orders are among the functions of psyche, and are respectively concerned with the formation of child's identity with regards to her mother and father. Imaginary order starts from birth for six months "when we are joyfully united with our mother, receiving food, care, and all our comfort from her" (Bressler, 2012). It is between the age of six and eighteen months that we enter mirror stage. In the mirror stage the baby who has not yet learned to stand by himself sees its image in the mirror, assuming it has the qualities it is yet to master. It appears "already to be" what it will "only later become" (Gallop, 1985). During the mirror stage the wholeness of image in the mirror contrasts with the reality of fragmented body parts. This contrast is experienced as "an aggressive tension" between the real body and the image in the mirror (Evans, 2006). This aggression is an essential feature of Narcissism. Hence, Narcissism can range from "extreme self-love" to "extreme suicidal aggression" (p.6). The next lacanian order, symbolic order, is the phase of father's domination in which he presents cultural norms and laws, and castrates his children in order to follow him to be socially acceptable (Bressler, 2012). From early on Lacan put great emphasis on the role of father in the formation of psychic health; thus, his absence can cause many problems for a child.

In the play, Jessie and Thelma are entrapped in a metaphorical imaginary order devoid of seeing themselves as separate entities. They are trapped in a suburban house without any visitors, which make them excluded from the outside world and patriarchal society. They

are in constant struggle to be separated from each other and from the engulfment that the masculine society has associated with the female sex. Passing the metaphorical imaginary order and entering symbolic order, Jessie turns away from her mother to her father in the hope of finding a way to get out of her plight of womanhood; however, failing to see the oppressive nature of her father leads her to self-destruction. The fact that Jessie shoots herself with his father's gun, which was found with the help of her mother with the bullets bought by her brother while she was wearing her son's trousers shed light on the destructive nature of familial ties in a patriarchal society such as pictured in the play. When Jessie says "see? Everybody's doing what they can" (p.14), she admits the role of all her family members in her decision. In order to elaborate more on the subject, in the rest of this paper, the discussion of imaginary order and formation of mother-daughter bond will be followed by explaining the application of the symbolic order, and the realm of the patriarch.

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## 1. THE IMAGINARY ORDER AND FORMATION OF MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

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One function through which women have partly succeeded to exhort their power in patriarchal societies is motherhood. In spite of being manipulated by patriarchs, motherhood still provides tiny claims of power for women through the baby's dependence on them. This power, which might be a compensation for women's total "powerlessness" in other arenas of society lies in their ability to grant, spare food, care, and retain a baby's health and well-being (Rich, 1986). This ability gives a woman powers that threaten her counterpart and that might be the reason why the image of women's womb, "the ultimate source of her power" has been manipulated throughout history to be considered "a source of powerlessness" (p.68).

Being afraid of the power women could have, patriarchal societies feel the need to marginalize them in one way or another. As an example in *'night, Mother*, Thelma never got divorced in spite of being in a loveless marriage. She preferred to forget about her happiness and stayed to take care of her baby because that gave her a sort of power. Her husband married her because she was a simple country girl and then he expected to see in her much more than a country girl. She explains how her husband treated her as "he felt sorry for me. He wanted a plain countrywoman and that's what he married and then he held it against me for the rest of my life like I was supposed to change and surprise him somehow" (p.47). Having the privilege of being a male or the leader of the pack, he gave himself the right to ignore her because of her not meeting his expectations.

Throughout the play Thelma's submissive outlook is

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<sup>1</sup> I have used Gallop's, Evan's, and Bressler's readings of Lacan to cut short my theory section because of the space limit of this paper.

strongly highlighted. She never fights for anything and believes “Things happen .You do what you can about them and you see what happens next” (p.58). When Jessie tries to explain the reasons for her suicide she cannot understand since she has never expected more than she already had as a woman. She says: “You make me feel like a fool for being alive, child, and you are so wrong! I like it here, and I will stay here until they make me go, until they drag me screaming and I mean screeching into my grave” (p.78). Bearing in mind that she is a product of patriarchal society, Thelma clings to the only place she feels safe in, that is, her house, and makes herself busy with what she is supposed to do, which is housework. When she advises Jessie she says “There’s nothing really sad going on right now. If it was after your divorce or something that would make sense” (p.29). Her ignorance about the rights she could have enjoyed in life makes her think that only if Jessie’s sadness was about her husband leaving her it could have made sense. The reason might be that she is used to living in a male-dominated society. That is the only world she belongs to, a world ruled by masculine presence.

As a result of leading her life under suppression, Thelma’s conformity has turned her into a woman bowing to patriarchal rules. When she says “I don’t know what I’m here for, but then I don’t think about it” (p.34), she is, in fact, escaping from facing the truth, and expects Jessie to do the same, because that is the only path she could take. The way her husband has undermined her role as an entity whose existence in his life was merely bound to housework manifests the ugly truth of the repression she endured all her life. Thelma recounts the story of their courtship as her husband used to say, “I’m sitting in the mud, he comes along, drags me in the kitchen, ‘she’s been there ever since’” (p.45). Jessie’s father believed that he was the savior of his wife since he pulled her out of mud and brought her into his kitchen and she has been living in there ever since. The way he recounts this story hurts Thelma since she believes it is not the truth, and tells Jessie that it is “a big fat lie” (p.46). He has not been Thelma’s savior, although in his narcissistic way of thinking considered himself to be so.

Nevertheless, despite all her conformity there is still some unconscious feeling of entrapment in the role her husband has ascribed to her. She has been a mother to her daughter and a kitchen servant to her husband and that is all she has experienced as a woman. Deep down in her unconscious mind Thelma hopes to get rid of all these restraints and act independently. This can be seen in her bragging about her wish to sell the milk can. In an act of doing business she utters “I shoulda got you to bring down the milk can. Agnes Fletcher sold hers to somebody with a flea market for forty dollars apiece” (p.10), and Jessie says she will. Assuming the act as the role that the head of the family would function to support his family, Thelma’s wish to sell the milk can is the beginning of a stage in her

life to play the role of her husband, and get away from the restraints which have been imposed on her.

Besides, considering the milk as a symbol of motherhood, the fact that it has been engulfed in the can suggests Thelma’s motherhood being entrapped in life. In a scene that Jessie talks about the way Dawson has bought her new bullets, Thelma becomes frustrated for not knowing what was coming up because she was talking on the phone with Agnes about the milk can (p.14). This suggests that her obsession with the milk can, in spite of wishing to get rid of it, has cast away her attention from her daughter and what was going on in her life. It is as if the suffocation inside the milk can has deprived both mother and daughter of any relationship, to the point that selling it or getting rid of it can be lucrative for both of them.

Any image linked with milk is reminiscent of imaginary order and *‘night, Mother* is rich in using these images. As Foster (1994) also contends the wealth of imagery associated with milk constructs the imaginary order in the play (p.2). Foster believes finding bullets in a milk can represents Jessie’s conflict “between the good breast/bad breast metaphor” (p.19). Nevertheless, it seems plausible to think that finding bullets in the milk can could also associate the maternal nourishing quality of milk with brutal destructivity of bullets. Later on Thelma directly says that she hates milk, “I hate milk. Coats your throat as bad as okra. Something just downright disgusting about it” (p.42). Jessie also has the same opinion “I thought it was my memory that was bad but it’s not. It’s the milk” (p.46). It is as if both women find codependence of their relationship in this metaphorical imaginary order suppressing. In their last conversation Jessie tells her mother that she should drink milk and she answers “not anymore. That hot chocolate was the last. Hooray” (p.54). Hooray is an exclamation of joy, and shows that Thelma is finally done with milk; therefore, she can sell the profitable milk can and get rid of the milk that has coated her throat and deprived her of any voice. This leads to a new stage in her life which makes her more a woman rather than a housewife and mother.

As it appears, in an act of enabling two females, Norman presents the genuine conversation between the mother and daughter and the very suicide of Jessie in a way that as Burkman describes “Mother and daughter merge as they separate, the death of one giving life to the other” (see also Gibbs,1996). As a matter of fact Gibbs (1996) finds Thelma’s dependence on her daughter so severe that he considers Jessie’s death as “an actual rebirth” for Thelma (p.60). Retrospectively, Jessie is also able to finally break the chains between her and her mother. This is the final triumph of them both when she acts independently against the norms of patriarchal society.

Since patriarchy has invaded mother-daughter relationship by repressing mothers and luring them into underestimating their power, they have turned into

agents through whom womanhood is taught. Although their conformity reassures them that their daughters can survive in the masculine world “the anxious pressure of one female to another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role” deprives daughters of being thoroughly and properly mothered (Rich, 1986). In *'night, Mother* when Jessie complains about her brother's lack of respect for her privacy by saying “it's mine [my life] to worry about not his” (p.22), conformity and passivity play a role here not to let Thelma teach Jessie stand for her right. She suggests to Jessie that they can avoid seeing Dawson so that Jessie would be comfortable. When Jessie says “I read the paper. I don't like how things are, they are not any better out there than they are here” (p.31) her mother suggests her not to read newspapers and take the TV out. She wants to teach her the strategy of survival that she has performed all her life to make sure she would survive as well. This lies on the fact that generally mothers feel that their daughters are extensions of them.

This is supported in the play when Thelma says, “Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie. You can't do anything, wash your face or cut your finger, without doing it to me. That's right! You might as well kill me as you, Jessie, it's the same thing. This has to do with me, Jessie” (p.72). Thelma's claims show her inability to see her daughter as an independent being separate from her. In other words, in Thelma's eyes Jessie is an extension of her. Nevertheless, Jessie's answer is shocking to her when she says, “then what if it does! ... What if I could take all the rest of it if only I didn't have you here? As if the only way I can get away from you for good is to kill myself (p.72).

Here it seems that Jessie is making an effort to separate herself from her mother by trying not to live a life of subservience like hers even if the cost is her life. For years she was practicing abjection to separate her identity from her mother's by, for instance, showing no interest in food as it is evident in recurrent exclams of her mother “you didn't eat a bite of supper” (p.36). “You never liked eating at all did you? Any of it? What have you been living on all these years? Toothpaste” (p.53)? in her book, *An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva argues that food loathing is “the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection”(para.4). She goes on to explain that the feeling of nausea and lack of interest to receive food separates one from the maternal figure who presents it. It is a claim of “establishing” one's self. It is like saying “I am in the process of becoming the other at the expense of my own death”; therefore, abjection could be counted as a kind of “narcissistic crisis” (para.4). Jessie's lack of interest in food signifies her effort to escape away from the dependence on her mother. She tries to resist everything associated with her mother concerning that in case she might become just like her. In other words, she has “matrophobia” which is referred to by Adrienne Rich

(1986) as “the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother” (p.134).

Since mothers are associated with the restraints that rest upon the female sex, they stand for “the martyr”, and “the victim” in us, giving us a sense of entrapment (Rich, 1986). That is why daughters attempt to separate themselves completely from their mothers avoiding to become just like them. She believes that the passivity and “victimization” of mothers when they accept “whatever comes” set fire of rage in their daughter who is supposed to look up to her mother to understand what means to be a woman (1986). Rich argues that when a girl begins to hate her mother for representing the restraints of womanhood this “matrophobia” pulls her unconsciously towards her mother (p.236). To that end, no matter how hard Jessie tries to escape from her mother, unconsciously she longs for that safe feeling of fusion with her in the imaginary order because of her “death drive”. As Evans (2006) describes, Lacan's notion of “death drive” is “a nostalgia for lost harmony”, “a desire to return to the pre- oedipal fusion with the mother's breast” (p.33).

Jessie's last request from her mother is for food, hot chocolate and caramel apple, containing milk which she has been avoiding before. Now at the crucial moment that she is trying to be totally split from her mother, her longing for food is associated with imaginary order. Moreover, as Jessie admits one of the reasons why she lost her husband was that he made her choose between cigarettes and him, and she chose cigarettes. As Jessie claims, “I never understood why he hated it so much when it's so good. Smoking is the only thing I know that's always just what you think it's going to be” (p.56). According to Freud's pre-oedipal developmental phases, in oral phase when we take pleasure in sucking our mother's breast, we would later enjoy kissing and sucking our thumbs (Bressler, 2012). Smoking is also an oral activity which involves sucking and could be compared to taking pleasure of receiving care from a maternal figure in disguise. This can be traced back to this stage of life, reminding us that we can never go back to that safe stage of union with our mother. As stated by Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*(1979) when the child starts to feel her mother as a separate entity “orality and the oral attitude of incorporation (the fantasy of taking in the mother or her breasts)” appears as a “defensive technique” (P.59), and smoking can also be considered as such.

After all the struggles she went through for achieving autonomy in a society that has deprived her and women before her of any power, and has penetrated into the most private bond between mothers and daughters, Jessie commits suicide as a protestation to the patriarchal society and to the conventional mother conforming to this society. She claims “This is how I have my say. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky

and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! Just let me go easy, Mama” (p.75). Understanding the depth of her daughter’s despair and the part she played in it unconsciously, Thelma finally confesses, “Forgive me. I thought you were mine” (p.89).

## 2. SYMBOLIC ORDER: THE REALM OF THE PATRIARCH

When it comes to symbolic order and the recognition of father as the great patriarch, Lacan focuses on distinguishing between imaginary, symbolic, and real father. According to Evans (2006), the “symbolic father” is not a real being, but the “paternal function”, “the fundamental element in the structure of symbolic order”, or “the name of the father” (p.62). The “imaginary father” can fluctuate between two extremes “the ideal father” who resembles god-like figures, or a father “who has fucked the kid up” by “imposing incest taboos on his son”, and depriving his girl of having phallus. He is “the agent of privation”. In both cases he is “an omnipotent figure”, and the real father is the biological father (p.63). In Evans’ reading of Lacan’s doctoral dissertation in finding the cause for psychosis, “the exclusion of the father” from the family structure is recognized as a major reason. He concludes by putting paramount importance on the fact that by father Lacan means the symbolic father (2006). Since “Psychosis can lead to substituting symbolic father with imaginary father, Evans believes that Lacan turned the notion of “delusion” which was recognized as an illness on its head, claiming it is not only an “illness”, but also a “cure” by the psychotic person who lacks the name of the father or the symbolic father and fills his/her need by finding a substitute (p.63).

In the play, although Jessie believes that she shared a strong bond with her father, there is still a clue of his father’s dominance. As Thelma quotes “He felt sorry for you too Jessie, don’t kid yourself about that. He said you were a runt, and he said it from the day you were born and he said you didn’t have a chance” (p.49). Looking at the way Jessie’s father talks about her daughter shows not only his underestimation of his baby girl, but also his dominance over her. Reading the play, it can be understood that Jessie was attached to her father and eager to follow in his footsteps, but the father she loves is not the symbolic or the real father; rather the substitute of the symbolic father as she has imagined in her mind, that is, the ideal father that she loves. As a result, the absence of the symbolic father has driven her to delusion, and as a cure she has substituted the symbolic with an imaginary father whom she immensely cherishes. As Thelma tells her “you loved him enough for both of us. You followed him around like some...” (p.7). Thelma believes that Jessie loved her father so much that his death has set fire of rage inside her. She says: “He died, and left you stuck

with me and you are mad about it” (p.49).

Thelma believes that Jessie’s disease was inherited by her father just like her green eyes and straight hair (p.69). Not only does she look like her father, Jessie also acts like him since she recognizes him as the role model she must follow. During the course of the play, it is shown in the conversation between Thelma and Jessie that Jessie’s silence and awkwardness is also a trait which was visible in her father. As Thelma says: “Agnes gets more talk out of birds than I get from the two of you.” (p.48). Even after her father’s death Jessie is still living with his shadow. She used to keep his books, and searches for his gun to kill herself though she had Cecil’s gun. She says “I want to hang a big sign around my neck, like Daddy’s on the barn. Gone fishing” (p.27). Jessie’s decision to kill herself could be somehow an empowered version of his father’s refusal to take an active role in the life he didn’t like, and use of fishing as an excuse to get away from it.

According to Thelma Jessie’s dad never went fishing. She just parked his car near the lake, chewing tobaccos, and looking at the lake (p.49). A group of men along with Dawson has also approved of this fact. We know that he was in a loveless marriage with Thelma, a marriage in which his expectations never came true. He was so reluctant towards his wife that even in his deathbed he refused to talk to her; yet, he never ended the marriage or had the courage to change the course of his life. He just endured his situation by underestimating his wife and refusing to talk to her. It is as if by exerting his power over his wife, he is maintaining his power in society. Compared to her father, Jessie doesn’t like her life either. She is a woman in a male dominated society who has watched her beloved father dying. Her husband has walked away from her and her only son has gone awry. She has had epilepsy her whole life, and is an awkward antisocial person who barely leaves the house. Thus, she has never played an active role in her life; however, she has autonomy over one thing, and that is how, when, and where she ends her life. Her suicide can serve as an empowered substitute for her father’s passivity in a stronger and more autonomous fashion. This could also point to the way in which Norman characterizes her female characters, who in spite of harsh realities of their existence, act in a more powerful way than men do.

All in all, Jessie’s reluctance to distinguish the oppressive nature of her father’s power over her and substituting the reality with an imaginary loving father as a cure for her psychosis make her follow in his footsteps which lead her to self-destruction. The other important part he played in Jessie’s suicide was his marginalization of Thelma by devaluing her and making her see her womanhood as inferior to exert his domination. Thelma unconsciously transfers this version of womanhood to her daughter which she finds inadequate to carry on with her life.

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## CONCLUSION

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Jessie has always been hunted by the condition imposed on her family as a result of living in a patriarchal society, the male members of which exhort their power on women stopping them from claiming power and equality. Her father never approached her mother as a loving wife because she was just a simple country girl. Her mother never felt loved and cherished as a woman, and performed her responsibilities according to the dictates of patriarchal society. In this way she acted as an agent of patriarchy and evoked "matrophobia" in Jessie, who struggled to break up the mother-daughter bond. Nonetheless, at the end of the play both of them managed to define the boundaries of their selves and enter a new stage of their existence. Moreover, Jessie's illusion of good and loving father and following in his footsteps led her to both self-annihilation and empowerment. The fact that in spite of her father's passivity Jessie could find a way to end her misery shows that women can act even more powerfully than men once they become agents of their own lives. Jessie's death can be defined as her unconscious desire to go back to the unification with her mother as well as her protestation to gain self-autonomy and identity by affirming herself as the author of her own fate.

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