

# MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN MARSHA NORMAN'S PLAY '*NIGHT, MOTHER*

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**ABSTRACT:** Nancy Chodorow averred in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) that owing to their differing experiences in childhood, girls and boys experience dissimilar developmental journeys. While boys move away from their mothers and identify naturally with the father's social power, girls find it difficult to break away from the overpowering influence of the mother. This, sometimes, hinders the girls from developing a normal sense of self, which affects their entire life. '*night, Mother* (1983), a play by Marsha Norman, a Pulitzer Prize winning American playwright, revolves around the struggle of a mother Thelma to deter her daughter Jessie from committing suicide. Jessie finds no reason to live further since her life carries no meaning except to continue to be a caregiver for her middle-aged and widowed ailing mother. The play presents the conflict between the mother and the daughter where Jessie's bond with her mother does not allow her the freedom to live her life according to her own terms. The mother-daughter relationship and their conflict will be analyzed in this paper in the light of Chodorow's theory.

**KEYWORDS:** Childhood, self, conflict, suicide, mother-daughter relationship

## I. COMPLETE PAPER:

The play '*night, Mother* written by Marsha Norman in 1981, depicts the crisis in the lives of two women – a mother and a daughter, and the contrasting ways in which they deal with it. The play received critical acclaim when it was first produced on stage. In 1982, it was enacted in Massachusetts with its production by the American Repertory Theatre and later it moved to New York City in 1983. Marsha Norman had gained popularity in the American theatre with her first play, *Getting Out* (1977), and won the Pulitzer Prize only six years later in 1983 with '*night, Mother*, her fifth play. The play was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play and went on to win the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award from the Dramatist Guild, and Drama Desk Awards.

*'night, Mother* is a two-character play in one act. The protagonists of the play are two American women – Thelma and her daughter Jessie and the setting of the play is the kitchen and living room in their rural home. Jessie is a pale, overweight, divorced, unemployed, and epileptic middle-aged woman, whereas Thelma is in her late fifties or early sixties. Dawson, Thelma's son and Jessie's brother is a miscreant and an offender, and is known to be a thief and a drug addict. Jessie does not want to live with her mother as a substitute anymore and intends to commit suicide. With the same intention, Jessie starts making lists of household chores and explains Thelma her responsibilities. Jessie states to her mother, "I am worried about you, but I'm going to do what I can before I go. We're not going to sit around tonight. I made a list of things" (18). Thelma realizes that Jessie is determined to end her life and tries to discourage Jessie. During the discussion, Jessie attempts to look for her father's gun. Thelma has no idea of Jessie's intention and she tells Jessie the location of the gun. Jessie asks her mother to take care of the house chores in her absence. Jessie states, "The grocery won't deliver on Saturday anymore" (20). Jessie keeps her mother busy in preparing chocolate although nobody likes chocolate in the house.

To dissuade Jessie from planning to commit suicide, Thelma starts sharing the memories of her past and tells Jessie that she had never been happy as a married woman. She did not have a caring family or a loving husband. Later, all her hopes turned to ashes with the death of her husband, Jessie's father. Thelma then hoped that her son, Dawson, would be with her and would take care of her, but he got married and started living with his wife, away from his mother. Her daughter Jessie lives with her, yet Thelma feels lonely and unhappy. But Thelma assures Jessie that she loves her and it would not be right for Jessie to commit suicide. She tells Jessie, "We've got a good life here!" (23). Claire Detels states, "Watching the women of '*night, Mother* cook, clean, and organize clothes as the main substance of their lives can have a surprisingly powerful emotional effect in the theatre, causing us to notice and re-evaluate what we consider work and life to be" (235). Jessie asserts that even if she lives for more fifty years, her life will not change. She feels that it will not make any difference if she stops living then or after fifty years. Therefore, Jessie is determined to commit suicide. At the end of the play she goes and locks herself in her room, ignoring Thelma's pleas to stop. After a few seconds, there is the sound of a gunshot inside the room and Thelma frantically calls her son.

Nancy Chodorow states in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) that girls and boys experience disparate developmental journeys due to their different experiences in childhood. Boys can identify naturally with the social power of the father, and therefore find it easy to move away from their mothers. Girls, on the other hand, find it hard to escape from the overwhelming influence of the mother, since they recognise their similarity and oneness with their mother. Chodorow states, "Girls' identification processes, then, are more continuously embedded in and mediated by their ongoing relationship with their mother....A boy's identification processes are not likely to be so embedded in or mediated by a real affective relation to his father" (176). Being emotionally dependent on their mothers, girls, at times, are unable to develop a normal sense of self, which affects their personality and their entire life.

The play focuses on the identity crisis of Jessie who is at a turning point in her life. Jessie lives with Thelma in their home and takes care of her mother and attends to all her needs. Jessie's role as her mother's caretaker threatens her self-identity which she tries to resist. Suffering from an illness that does not allow her to move out independently, Jessie has nothing to do except supporting her mother who never understands that Jessie also desires personal happiness. Jessie believes that nobody pays attention to her and her family members have been neglecting her since her childhood. She states, "It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody, and slept whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes" (50). She feels abandoned and deceived by all her close ones including her mother. Jessie dislikes her family members and feels that they interfere in her private life. Trapped with her mother in the house, Jessie experiences alienation, loss of identity, hopelessness, and desperation. Lisa Tyler states for Norman, "She often felt trapped in a hostile environment and later recalled longing to be kidnapped so that she could escape her family" (1). Jessie's identity crisis reveals the situation of the contemporary American society wherein individuals suffer from loneliness and depression due to their inability to connect with others.

Jessie's conversation with her mother reveals Jessie's desire to establish her identity and authority which she has been deprived of since she has been living with her mother. Jessie states, "And I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it" (26). She finds suicide as the only way to acquire control over her life. Jessie does not want her mother to feel guilty but, on the other hand, expects her understand her decision of committing suicide. Jessie states, "Now, somebody's bound to ask you why I did it and you just say you don't know" (53). She wants to connect with her mother in the last few moments of her life. Jessie tells her, "I don't want anybody else over here. Just you and me" (16). It indicates that Jessie is going to be parted from her mother but she wants to spend the final moments of her life with her mother.

The identity of Thelma is linked to Jessie's survival. Thelma has a premonition of Jessie's death and struggles to save Jessie. Thelma realises that she has been dependent on Jessie since her husband's death. But Jessie understands her role in Thelma's life and states, "I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you company, and that's . . . not reason enough because I'm not . . . very good company" (50). Thelma, being Jessie's mother, understands the mental state of her daughter who has lost all hope to live further and feels lonely. Leslie Kane states, "Uncompromisingly, relentlessly and painfully, it dramatizes Jessie Cates's attempt to rationalize her suicide and her mother Thelma's attempt to forestall it" (268). Thelma not only listens to her but tries to give her alternatives also so that she may reject the intention of suicide. Thelma tells her daughter, "I'll teach you to crochet" (25). She further tries to tempt her with mundane things so that Jessie may stop thinking of suicide. She states to Jessie, "And you don't get cocoa like mine anywhere anymore" (27). She persuades her to get involved in other things but is unable to stop Jessie. It is a clear sign of helplessness of a mother before the daughter. Although she understands Jessie's feelings of rejection and failure in her life, Thelma cannot control Jessie as the latter remains unmoved in spite of Thelma's persuasion.

Both Thelma and Jessie have been a wife and a mother, though those relationships are seen to be failing for both of them. Jessie lives with her mother after her divorce and considers Thelma to be responsible for the loss of the former's identity. Jessie does not desire to lead a life where she has no autonomy. If the childhood of Jessie is minutely observed, it will be quite clear that loss of her self-identity starts in her childhood. Both the mother and daughter identify themselves with each other. According to Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, boys succeed in creating their own world of dominance away from the mother. She states, "Boys are more likely to have been pushed out of the preoedipal relationship, and to have had to curtail their primary love and sense of emphatic tie with their mother" (166). Jessie realises that as she cannot have an identity independent from her mother in her life, it is through her death that she will acquire one. It is Thelma who finds no solution of her problem as Jessie commits suicide at the end in spite of all her efforts.

The trouble between both Thelma and Jessie occurs due to the expectations which both the mother and the daughter have for each other. Chodorow states, "In the case of a mother-child relationship, there is an interactive

base of expectations of continuity of relationship. This interactive base develops once a woman begins to care for a particular child, and usually includes gratification and as well as frustration for both the child and the mother” (34). Thelma as a mother expects Jessie to be with her and help her out with the household chores all her life. Jessie, on the other hand, wanted love and attention from her mother but Thelma failed to express her love for her daughter. Christopher Bigsby states, “Until this moment she has been the victim of her own physiology, of her medication, of her husband’s needs and desires, of her mother’s misguided and unfocused love, of her son’s wayward behaviour” (230). Bigsby refers to Jessie’s close relationship with her father when he was alive: “Once she had felt someone’s love, a grace offered without demands, as her father gave her tokens of his affection. But he had died” (230). While performing her own responsibilities in the family, Thelma does not receive love or attention from her husband, her own son and his wife and even from Jessie. Similarly, Jessie suffers due to a failed marriage and due to her son’s lack of concern for her. The failure of Thelma and Jessie’s expectations from each other and from their family leads to the conflict between them and causes Jessie to lose all hope and the will to live.

Chodorow avers that in situations where the parenting is done almost exclusively by the mother, the girl child identifies completely with her mother and finds it difficult to break away from that strong influence and develop an independent identity. She states, “Hetherington, in one of the few studies of the effects of father-absence on girls, found that adolescent girls from father-absent homes were uncomfortable and insecure with men and boys” (Chodorow 138). The child realises that her existence solely depends on her mother, and becomes deeply attached to her. In the absence of the father, the girl child has no male role model to look up to, and defines herself only in relation to her mother which affects her sense of identity as an individual.

In *'night, Mother*, similarly, the absence of Jessie’s father in her life creates a sense of vacuum which her mother can hardly fill. Jessie’s emotional dependence on Thelma does not allow the former to assert her independence or to pursue her own goals in life. Jessie loved her father as she states, “I don’t know. I liked him better than you did, but I didn’t know him any better” (32). Thelma’s love for her becomes a delimiting force which Jessie cannot escape except through death. Jessie’s psychological turmoil regarding the value or worth of her life is intricately connected to the fact that she has been deprived of the love and care of her father, a bond that may have provided her the strength to carry on despite the challenges she experienced due to her epilepsy and her broken marriage.

## II. CONCLUSION:

Marsha Norman’s play *'night, Mother* poignantly portrays the close relationship between a mother and a daughter, Thelma and Jessie, a relationship that becomes the cause of trauma and despair for the daughter leading her to the extreme step of planning to end her life. Through recurring motifs and realistic dialogues in the play, Norman highlights the sense of futility and hopelessness experienced by Jessie, and her mother’s increasing anxiety due to Jessie’s open avowal of her intention to commit suicide. According to Nancy Chodorow’s theory as propounded by her in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, the intricate emotional bond between a mother and a daughter cannot be easily shaken off by the daughter especially in the case where the mother is a single parent and the father is absent. Jessie’s dejection stems from her realization that her life has no meaning except to assist her mother with her routine requirements, and that her life will not change, howsoever much she desires. The play captures the last few moments in Jessie’s life while she is in the close proximity of her mother to suggest that filial relationships can also be delimiting and constrictive, and that women need to be conscious of their own innate strength and freedom to choose in order to lead a happy and fulfilling life.

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