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University of Babylon
College of Education for Human Sciences
Department of English



Death in Marsha Norman's 'Night Mother

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by

Rafal Ahmed Talib Abbas

Instructor: Prof. Maamun Sami Salih, PhD

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

” (قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي (25) وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي (26)

وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِنْ لِسَانِي (27) يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي (28)) “

صَدَقَ اللَّهُ الْعَظِيمُ

سورة [طه ٢٥-٢٨]

Dedication

I dedicate this research to the Almighty Allah, Who is my creator, my strong pillar, my source of inspiration, wisdom, knowledge and understanding. He has been the source of my strength throughout this research. Thank you for the guidance, strength, power of mind, protection and skills and for giving us a healthy life. All of these, we offer to you. This study is also wholeheartedly dedicated to our beloved family, who have been our source of inspiration and gave us strength when we thought of giving up, who continually provide their moral, spiritual, emotional, and financial support.

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Acknowledgment

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Abstract

This research paper deals with the following aspects in details: Introduction to Marsha Norman's life and childhood and also what motivated her to write and be one of the many people who influenced the theatre and left a long lasting impression. Also her famous and most popular literary works. The first chapter deals with a general view of the play. And also includes the introduction of the main characters of the play as well as the themes and symbols. The second chapter deals with the suffering of postmodern women in the play and how their issues effected their being and beliefs. The third and last chapter deals with the theme of death and how it's portrayed in the play. This research concludes that the theme of death presented in the play 'Night, Mother is highly important because it shows how women were treated and neglected during that period. It also shows how much relationships between the family can effect the children's lives as they grow up.

Table of Contents

Quranic Verse.....	I
Dedication.....	II
Acknowledgment.....	III
Abstract.....	IV
Table of Contents.....	V
Introduction.....	7-9
Chapter One.....	10-12
Chapter Two.....	13-14
Chapter Three.....	15-18
Conclusion.....	19-20
References.....	21-22

Introduction

Who is Marsha Norman?

Marsha Norman (born September 21, 1947) is an American playwright, screenwriter, and novelist. She received the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play 'night, Mother. She wrote the book and lyrics for such Broadway musicals as The Secret Garden, for which she won a Tony Award and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Book of a Musical, and The Red Shoes, as well as the libretto for the musical The Color Purple and the book for the musical The Bridges of Madison County. She is co-chair of the playwriting department at The Juilliard School. Marsha Norman was the eldest of the four children born to Billie and Bertha Williams in Louisville, Kentucky. When she was younger, she read and played the piano. She later began attending shows at the recently opened Actors Theatre of Louisville. She earned a bachelor's degree from Agnes Scott College and a master's degree from the University of Louisville. The Lilly Awards Foundation, a 501c3 nonprofit that promotes gender equity in theatrical productions across America and recognizes the achievements of women to the theater, was formed by her, and she currently holds the position of president of the organization. She held the position of vice president of The Dramatists Guild of America for ten years. Her most recent works include the lyrics for the musical King Kong and a UN-commissioned production concerning human trafficking and violence against women. She contributed to Kentucky Educational Television as well as The Louisville Times as a journalist. Additionally, she provided English instruction at the Prestonia Elementary School and J. Graham Brown School in Louisville.

Who inspired Marsha Norman?

She taught young children and teenagers in hospitals and mental health centers. These people may have influenced her work the most,

especially a 13-year-old girl who had an influence on her play *Getting Out*. As religious fundamentalists, her family preferred to keep Norman hidden than to confront her with thoughts that differed from their own. Jon Jory, the renowned Louisville Actors Theatre's artistic director, met with Norman. *Getting Out*, which was initially performed at the Actors Theatre and recognized by the American Theatre Critics Association as the greatest play produced in regional theater in the 1977–1978 season, was the outcome of Jory's encouragement for her to try to create a play about a difficult subject. According to Norman, "I always write about the same thing, people having the nerve to go on." Her plays focus on the lives of common people—"those folks you wouldn't even notice in life"—who find themselves in exceptional situations and must make difficult or impossible decisions. They do not focus on the brave or the heroic. She portrays individuals who, although being aware of their inability to change the larger picture, make an effort to influence a particular area of their lives. Following the performance of *Red Shoes*, Norman developed severe illness and was later given the depressing news of lung cancer. In the weeks that passed before it was discovered that the doctor had analyzed the incorrect test results, she reviewed her life. So, most of her works are taken from real life events.

Marsha Norman's Literary Works:

Norman gained a respected position in the American stage according to her efforts. The success of Norman's plays and adaptations demonstrates that she achieved one of her declared goals: "to make visible people who are rarely seen and never heard." For *Getting Out*, Norman won the American Theatre Critics Association prize for the best play staged in a regional theater in 1977–1978. In 1983, Norman won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play "night, Mother." The piece also got the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a Tony Award nomination for best

play, and the Dramatist Guild's Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award. She also won a Tony in 1991 for *The Secret Garden's* Best Book of a Musical. In addition to her work on the 'night, Mother' movie adaptation, Norman has also penned a number of unproduced screenplays. *Third and Oak* (1978), consisting of one-acts, *The Laundromat* and *The Pool Hall*, involve characters coming to terms with various types of bereavement and loss, and with their debts to the people in their past and present. Richard Wattenburg describes *The Holdup* (produced 1980, published 1987) as a "feminist perspective on the frontier experience." Women and men frequently have different expectations and understandings in Norman's plays; discussions are characterized by misinterpretation, manipulation, or anger. Sam and his wife Glory never get along in *Traveler*. The males in *Thelma and Jessie's* life are remembered and addressed with a mixture of hurt, confusion, and lack of respect—even in "Night, Mother," which has no male actors onstage. Although Norman is best known as a playwright, she has also written a novel, *The Fortune Teller* (1987), and the script and lyrics for a musical adaptation of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Mother-daughter connections and the unavoidable nature of fate are two further topics covered in *The Fortune Teller*. One of the first women to be recognized on a national level as a playwright is Marsha Norman. The Pulitzer Prize winner "made successful inroads on a still very much male-dominated reserve."

Chapter One

About 'Night, Mother:

Marsha Norman's fifth play, *Night, Mother*, was written in 1981 and performed in 1983. Following its theatrical release, it began to receive compliments and positive feedback for its realistic dialogue and emotional honesty. The drama combines classic and modern aspects. The 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Drama went to the play because of its original subject matter. To fit it into only 90 minutes is a significant emotional work. Dealing with a person's own frustration and ignored hurts is a defining characteristic of Norman's plays. *'Night, Mother* is a great illustration of her ability to capture the struggles and failings of every man and woman. This play is about how difficult it is for people to have meaningful conversations. Suicide just acts as an excuse for Jessie and Thelma to communicate with one another. Although Jessie's perspective may not always match that of the playwright, some people might think that Norman implies that suicide is an acceptable alternative to living a life if one finds it unbearable. Here, Norman merely enables the two women in her play to state their minds without adopting any sort of authorial point of view. As a result, *Night, Mother* is only tragic as far as its characters are concerned. And during Jessie's final hours, they only share a small amount of mutual understanding. The characters in this play do not fully comprehend their situation, in contrast to those in ancient tragedies.

The Characters of the Play:

Jessie Cates

Jessie is a representation of a suicidal lady who is approaching middle age. Jessie is divorced from the man she loves, but didn't love enough to stop smoking, which was the main reason he wanted her to leave, somewhere in her late 30s or early 40s. She is charged with being the only caregiver for her stubborn mother and is pale, overweight, and epileptic. She is the mother of a boy who is on the point of turning disobedient without cause, can't hold down a job, and rarely ever leaves the house. 'Night, Mother portrays in real time Jessie's last hour and a half of existence before she commits a horrific act of suicide.

Thelma Cates

Thelma, who is around 60 years old, has the type of mind that only accepts reality as she perceives it. No one has actually challenged Thelma about this aspect of her life until the final few hours of Jessie's life. Thelma is forced to reveal a number of facts during her final 90 minutes with her daughter that she never imagined Jessie would ever learn, including the fact that her daughter's epilepsy was passed on and not brought on by an accident. The admission she has to make regarding the final moments of Jessie's father's life is much worse. Her goal for the entire evening is to use her naturally talkative nature to avoid her daughter from carrying out her terrible plan to end her life.

Main Themes and Symbols:

Throughout this work, there are essentially two interrelated themes that are presented. The first theme is loneliness, and the second is how that loneliness prevents us from having meaningful conversations with the people we care about. The kitchen, where the play takes place, serves as its primary symbol. Before committing herself, Jessie makes an effort to create order in the kitchen by cleaning and organizing everything Mama will need to survive. Mama, on the other hand, turns order into chaos. She makes a mess while attempting to talk to her daughter and stop Jessie from committing herself.

Chapter Two

Suffering of Postmodern Women in 'night, Mother:

Apostasy, loneliness, separation, an unstable family structure, an emotional crisis, and the sterility of life are the issues postmodern women encounter. Thelma initially did not believe Jessie when she revealed her suicide plans to her. Thelma interpreted Jessie's choice as a joke. But as their conversation carried on seriously, Thelma was forced to conclude that Jessie Cates was actually planning to commit suicide. Jessie was on the verge of suicide, and Thelma tried everything in her power to stop her. Regardless of the reasons and defenses Thelma offers, Jessie is unmoved in her determination to improve her life by killing herself.

Due to Jessie's suicide, there may be a difficult return of deep loneliness. Thelma was as terrified of her loneliness as a young child was by the dark after witnessing Jessie's strong decision to kill herself. A source of suffering is the fear of Thelma's need to confront her loneliness. Because of their overt individuality and independence, modern women are essentially alone because their relationships are as unstable as the weather. The postmodern world is unstable in terms of human relationships. The instability of the relationship has made postmodern individuals weak, especially women who must deal with the stress of basic loneliness. The desire to be aggressive has been reduced due to confusion despair, disappointment, and

depression brought on by relationship crisis. Several emotional issues are just a result of the incorrect postmodern viewpoint. Nobody could have been blamed for not seeing Jessie's enormous potential. Even Jessie's mother Thelma was unaware of Jessie's potential for suicide. This play is feministic in that it shows just how much a woman can achieve when she is threatened with near death.

Chapter Three

Death in 'Night, Mother:

The central **theme** of "night, Mother" is death, which by definition is the complete absence of life. The motivation underlying Jessie's acts and the goal of the discussion that drives the play's action is preparation for her death. Jessie's desire to offer finality is what drives her to inform her mother of her planned suicide. The play lasts for an hour and a half and is about getting ready to die. The sorrow, the sadness, the fear, the anger, and the slow acceptance are other feelings that the audience witnesses and hears, which are typically saved for after the loss of a loved one.

What is theme in literature?

Theme: a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. While the subject of a work is described concretely in terms of its action (e.g.'the adventures of a newcomer in the big city'), its theme or themes will be described in more abstract terms (e.g. love, war, revenge, betrayal, fate, death, etc.). The theme of a work may be announced explicitly, but more often it emerges indirectly through the recurrence of *MOTIFS. Adjective: thematic. **(Baldick, 1996: p. 258).**

Night Mother takes place in Thelma Cates' and Jessie's rural home's living room and kitchen. The clock on stage keeps

track of actual time throughout the play. The play's hour and a half running time matches perfectly to the time that passes between Thelma's introduction and her final call to Jessie's brother telling him of his sister's death.

“JESSIE. I'm going to kill myself, Mama.

MAMA. (Returning to the sofa.) Very funny. Very funny.

JESSIE. I am.” She avoids going outside since she is an overweight, unattractive woman, among many other factors. She spends the majority of her time indoors, taking care of her costly, useless mother, chatting with neighbors, and eating junk food. Because she wouldn't stop smoking, her husband left her, and her son is a small-time thief. She recently lost her job as a hospital gift store employee. She wants to end her life because she neither enjoys nor is in control of it. **(Norman, 1982: p. 13-14).**

"I'm just not having a very good time, Mama," Jessie explains to Thelma. The lack of opportunities in Jessie's life had a direct impact on her decision to die. She can't imagine a future or a change, and thus she cannot understand why she should live on. Her illness and life decisions have led to a limited and aimless existence. Jessie's only responsibility is to take care of her mother, who is incapable of realizing that Jessie also wants to be happy. **(Norman, 1982: p. 22).**

Jessie thinks that no one cares about her and that her family members have been ignoring her since she was a young

child. "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 she slept whenever she wanted, just by closing her eyes," she says (50). All of her loved ones, including her mother, have betrayed and abandoned her, she feels. Jessie doesn't like her family since she thinks they get involved in her private life. Jessie is trapped within the house with her mother and goes through feelings of isolation, identity loss, depression, and frustration. **(Norman, 1982: p. 50).**

In one of Marsha Norman's interviews she said, "All through my writing death has served as the place where no one can get you, nobody can call. It's also a fantasy about not having to finish everything. Death allows you to make a lateral move you just get out of the game. Escaping that final judgment that we make as we get older if you're lucky enough to get old whether you lived your life well. Somehow an early death is appealing in a silly, fantasy life."

"Jessie! (Pounding again.) Jessie! Stop this! I didn't know! I was here with you all the time. How could I know you were so alone?" This shows that even when her mother lived with her for a long time, she didn't even notice what her daughter was going through and she never bothered to ask! **(Norman, 1982: p. 57).**

“And Mama stops for a moment, breathless and frantic, putting her ear to the door and when she doesn't hear anything, she stands back up straight again and screams once more.) Jessie! Please! (And we hear the shot, and it sounds like an answer, it sounds like No. And Mama collapses against the door, tears streaming down her face, but not screaming any more. In shock now.) Jessie, Jessie, child . . .Forgive me.”

Jessie's final night reveals the type of life she has lived. It's amazing how carelessly she is getting ready to commit suicide. The final scene is so intensely dramatic that it brings the experiences of the entire life back to life in a second. The mother's threat to end Jessie's life by doing as she pleases is extremely insightful and truthful. As soon as we hear a shot, we realize Jessie has shot herself. **Norman, 1982: p. 56-57).**

Conclusion

To sum it up, Marsha Norman is familiar with such issues because they stem from her own youth. They are the subjects of her play 'Night, Mother. She is similar to Jessie in the sense that when she was younger, she was neglected and left behind because of her strict parents. This play introduced the suffering of women and how they are treated. Jessie was lonely and was left to her thoughts on killing herself because her mother was not paying attention to her needs. She thought that killing herself would make her feel better and gain her identity back since all she does is staying home and taking care of her mother who doesn't even bother to check on her daughter. The disease she had and all the gossip about it was one of the main reasons to her death. Jessie didn't find a meaning in her life since her disease is keeping her away from having the life that she deserves and wanted and from getting a job to fill her lonely time. As she stays home, all she thinks about is ending her life which for her meant ending her suffering.

Her mother makes an effort to persuade her. They cry. They laugh. They scream. They think about it. And it becomes clear through their arguments how miserable Jessie was when she made her choice. Marsha Norman tried to portray the suffering of most women in an open and honest way. The setting of the play and the speech of characters are all relatable and relevant to most of the audience. Jessie symbolizes the idea of a

woman struggling to take back control. Jessie decides to end her life because she has the freedom to do so, not because she is ill or mentally ill in some way. Norman makes it clear in her piece of writing that Jessie's decision wasn't influenced by any particular reason. There is no cause for Jessie to die other than the fact that she chooses to do so; however, that is what she does offer: a woman who chooses to act instead of waiting to be acted upon.

In my opinion, women has been always defined by their father and when they get married they are defined by their husband. After her father's death and when her husband divorced her, all she wanted is to gain her control of life back and to be independent. That's why she didn't want anyone to see her when she suicide. A lot of women till this day suffers like Jessie! When they are young, they rely on their parents and if they get married they rely on their spouses. But if they get divorced, everyone starts blaming them for not doing their best to keep their marriage. They enter a spiral of sadness and tension as a result of psychological pressure. Also, the child's relationship with his parents and their lack of attention to him may be the biggest factor that leads them to commit suicide and kill themselves! Physical health was and still much more important than mental health. The psychological factors were not important and were ignored. This what led Jessie and most women nowadays to end their lives!

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