Chapter: 6

Conclusion

Helmer: First and foremost, you are a wife and mother.

Nora: That I don’t believe any more. I believe
That first and foremost, I am an
individual, just as much as you are. (1)

- Henrik Ibsen

_A Doll’s House_

The world of woman has long remained confined to the four walls of house. Home is also a favourite topic for the dramatists like Ibsen to depict the happiness and the lack of it. It is a place where the panorama of human emotions gets displayed. The dramatists like Marsha Norman also assumes the role of a preacher here at times and presents the code of conduct which is the mixture of old and new values through her drama. Woman and her domestic world find prime space in the plays in spite of the playwright’s preoccupation with other issues.

Understanding Norman’s work in a feminist context is thus important and interesting not because she is a woman playwright, nor because she writes about women, infact like Shashi Deshpande in Indian literature, she dislikes being labeled as a feminist writer. She does not compartmentalize the feminine woes and versions into “little boxes” (2) as she terms it, but considers the feminist issues as catalyst that leads to larger world problems. Without presenting unnecessary details about her characters, she delves deep into the psyche of her characters and poetically lays bare their inner strifes and struggles with a rare profundity. She has probed into the suffering, love and passion of ordinary women and presented them with a touching sensitivity.

Today Marsha Norman is one of the powerful voices of International renown to emerge on the American Stage after the Second World War. Norman’s plays like _night, Mother_ explores the psyche of someone who plans and coolly organizes her suicide. Norman’s observation
probes into different ways in which Jessie commits suicide, while Ginger resorts to her alter ego.

A critical study of the feminist concerns in Marsha Norman’s plays also help to formulate a perspective of attitudes which determines the constitution of the female character therein. Women’s writing, as it grows, becomes a manifestation of a woman’s potential and rights and a consciousness of the essential biological and cultural collectivity which consolidate the experience of being female into an intrinsic imaginative continuum.

Marsha Norman’s approach to life is always positive, there is an affirmation of life amidst suffering. She upholds the policy of compromise between the two extremes of life - orthodoxy and modernity, materialism and idealism, spiritualism and industrialism. Her humanism is also evident from her choice of hunger and freedom as the recurring themes. The various types of hunger and her plea for different kinds of freedom are essentially an outcome of her humanistic vision. Freedom is necessary for women to realize her potential for a complete life.

Examining female-authored dramatic works like Marsha Norman’s provides crucial insights into analyzing the struggles women have experienced as they work through is thus significant. To that end, drama provides a powerful and important medium for portraying representations of women as well as the patriarchal constraints which have historically impeded their psychological development as fully functioning cohesive selves.

Although a woman’s experience occasionally has been acceptable subject matter for the American stage, the last twenty years have seen an increase in plays featuring such themes. In the past, the “Broadway Bobs,” (3) eager to please the masses and make a profit, often have chosen to ignore material deemed risky. However, women’s voices, frequently inaudible in the past, are increasing in volume in American theatre. Certainly, America’s history includes a number of female playwrights who have made important contributions to the American theatre, including playwrights such as Rachel Crowthers, Lorraine Hansberry, and Susan Glaspell. Their contributions are of great significance to the society.
However, Marsha Norman who begins assertively speaking her mind deserves special recognition for her part in placing female characters and their experiences centre stage. She plays an important part in paving the way for the proliferation of plays focusing upon women’s issues. By showcasing female characters searching for psychic cohesion, she opens, more widely, a door in American dramatic literature which had, more often than not, been locked, in so doing, she goes beyond melodrama. *Trudy Blue* and *Sarah and Abraham* are the best example which reflects women characters searching for psychic solidity.

Norman’s women move closer to a fully developed self. They “bond” (4) with their idealized other, thereby internalizing and incorporating images which, ultimately, contribute to a sense of wholeness. She focuses upon mother and daughter relationships, but all of Norman’s depictions show women with clearly established identities moving toward more integrated selves. All of her female characters exhibit evidence of fragmented selves. They remain emotional invalids, always searching for someone else to supply the “missing link.” (5) With Norman the women like Jessie and Thelma in *night, Mother*, Arlene and Arlie in *Getting Out*, Mary and Lily in *The Secret Garden*, Trudy and Ginger in *Trudy Blue*, Sarah and Kitty in *Sarah and Abraham*, Alberta and DeeDee in *Third & Oak: The Laundromat* have more firmly established identities and move towards fully integrated selves.

As contemporary women struggle to define themselves anew, they battle to break the patriarchal past which relegated them to a low status in society. However, they face a more difficult task than merely making themselves over into the fully cohesive selves they yearn to be. Psychically fragmented and often docile, they have been used to having society dictate their roles to them. Psychoanalysis, particularly object-relations theory, offers a way to study these psychic splits and possibly answers why women would want to split off an unwanted aspect of themselves. In my study I have found that, although society plays a crucial role in how women view themselves, criminal charges cannot be placed entirely at the door of cultural essentialism. Marsha Norman provides a vehicle in theater for women’s voices to be heard. By featuring female characters such as Jessie Cates, in *night, Mother* or Arlene Holaclaw, in *Getting Out* playwrights such as Marsha Norman
illuminate women’s psychic struggles in a powerful way. She is a realist who is keen on exploring the realities of life. She has a sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary society. Her plays communicate a humanistic vision of life. Norman is a conscious artist who holds definite views on the human psyche, and behaviour.

The emotional world of woman has been gracefully explored in Norman’s plays such as Trudy Blue and Sarah and Abraham. Norman’s protagonists are mostly women, although they have reached different stages in life, are all fragile introvert “trapped in their own skins.” (6) Like Jessie in night, Mother, their emotional traumas sometimes lead to violent death, in the end. Progress of society is judged by the status women have in the particular society. Presently, these plays have proved to be the best medium of presenting the society which invariably records the changes in the statusquo of woman, the proper study of womankind is woman.

Marsha Norman deals with issues of female identity and shows female characters able to assume some measure of autonomy no matter what the cost to their primary relationship with their mothers. Arlene Holtzclaw in Getting Out, DeeDee Johnson in The Third & Oak: Laundromat, and Jessie Cates in night, Mother, all, in some way, confront their relationships with their mothers and move on. In doing so, they come closer to psychic cohesion. Getting Out addresses the female protagonist’s specific hopes and the audience’s more generalized desire to escape social entrapment; and yet the play’s variety of enclosures suggests the ways in which feminine consciousness is constructed, maimed, reconstructed, and finally validated in our society.

Marsha Norman’s plays are representations of women working to fill that psychic hunger with the limited options for self-determination present in patriarchal society. Norman’s character, Jessie Cates, controls her life even though she chooses death and triumphs. She proves that she is the propagator of her life and she alone has the right to take decision for her life.

Norman, with her own unique contributions to the American theatre, reflects women’s struggles to expand the limits of their lives. By doing so, they have “mothered” (7) women through their words and provided important insights into the mother/daughter relationship.
Plays like *night, Mother* and *Getting Out*, prove to be powerful plays exploring the psyche of two women, mother and daughter, and displaying a strong bond to each other. This exploration is done with sensitivity, compassion, humour and artistic integrity.

Norman’s *night, Mother*, *Getting Out*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Trudy Blue* also examines the image of loss in modern American drama at three levels: the loss of physical space, loss of psychological space, and loss of moral space. This study analyzes how Norman, modify and transform the image of loss by focusing on the myth of the American dream, illusion versus reality, empowerment, and the complexity of human relationships. From domestic drama to the drama of social and political criticism, Norman along with a medley of American playwrights has taken the genre of American drama from backseat status into the forefront of recognized American literature.

Loneliness, isolation, and loss are transnational themes. Moreover, in *night, Mother*, Thelma’s emotional struggle to prevent her daughter from committing suicide is a plight that certainly has no national boundaries. Moreover, the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship is clearly one that transcends international boundaries.

In *Getting Out*, an oppressive system of patriarchal beliefs controls and inhibits the female characters. While Arlie asserts her identity and is punished for her strength, Arlene and Ruby submit to the identities constructed for them by society. Through the establishment of a supportive female community with Ruby, however, Arlene is able to redeem part of her former self and come away with a fuller sense of identity. Through Arlene’s union of her two selves as well as through her friendship with Ruby, Norman depicts a beginning of female autonomy and suggests the hope for a future and more successful challenge to patriarchy. In *’night, Mother*, the female characters are also controlled by a male-centered belief system, and while Thelma has contented herself with her stifled existence, Jessie chooses to defy authority, take control of her life, and kill herself. Through her suicide, however, she not only negates her identity, she also destroys the hope of female solidarity and with that, female autonomy. While a burgeoning female community enables self-assertion in *Getting Out*, a lack of female community
entails the women’s destruction by restrictive patriarchal ideals in ‘night Mother. Ultimately, Norman communicates in both ‘night Mother and Getting Out – albeit through opposing methods – the need for female solidarity to successfully confront patriarchy and preserve female autonomy.

In plays like Sarah and Abraham, Traveler in the Dark and Trudy Blue, her approach to life is positive. There is always an affirmation of life amidst suffering. She upholds the policy of compromise between the two opposite ways of life-orthodoxy and modernity, materialism and idealism, spiritualism and industrialism. Norman believes in emotional bonding in any relationship. night, Mother proves to be a powerful play exploring the psyche of two women, mother and daughter, displaying the bond between them, with to others and to existence itself. In short, with Norman the women have more firmly established identities and move toward more fully integrated selves. Whether they may be Mavis, Sarah or Lily they are now answering the unanswerable

Marsha Norman, through the female characters, voiced important truths. Other women playwrights are making their voices heard as well. If the “conversation,” (8) keeps going, the theater will have served an all important role as a catalyst for necessary changes in society. One hopes that, perhaps, one day these goals will be accomplished. The play by Marsha Norman thus concentrates on the women’s journey to autonomous selfhood, meandering through various obstacles, without limiting itself to pay particular approach.
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In his history of women's theater, set in the context of the American women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Bigsby calls attention to night, Mother, the Broadway production of which initiated a debate concerning the status of women's drama within the male theater establishment. Bigsby finds it interesting that a debate of this nature would surface in the 1980s, a debate focusing on the role of the woman dramatist, the problem of "male praise" of plays by women, and feminist suspicion of commercial success and "individual achievement." Yet he recognizes that "women have found it difficult to create sufficient space within the American theatre for their own concerns."

Browder's discussion of the mother-daughter conflict in night, Mother is informed by Nancy Chodorow's theory of "early socialization experience of females," a theory suggesting that daughters experience more difficulty than sons in separating themselves from their mothers. Jessie experiences a "tragic realization" of her failure to achieve an identity apart from the role initially provided her by her mother, and her suicide becomes an extreme measure of drawing "the boundaries between mother and daughter." This avenue of analysis excuses Thelma's role in Jessie's suicide: "If Thelma is at fault, it is only in believing she could provide everything for this daughter, that she alone could be enough."


Brown discusses Getting Out and night, Mother as feminist plays that emphasize the issues of autonomy and of connection, the ways in which each protagonist must assert her independence and define her boundaries while establishing a caring relationship with significant others. Because Arlene and Jessie "struggle within the patriarchal society to define themselves as autonomous beings," each play "can rightly be termed an example of feminist drama." More specifically, Brown examines the way Arlene learns to assert herself through speech, the relationship of each protagonist to "domestic interior settings redolent of women's material culture," and psychological concepts of self-division and separation from the mother.


Drawing upon Otto Rank's conception of doubling and Jung's and Kerenyi's interpretations of the Demeter-Kore myth, Burkman identifies "rhythms and resonance" of that myth unforeseen by Norman. Burkman views Thelma as a modern Demeter figure "trying to rescue her child from death" and Jessie as part Kore (Persephone), "who feels used or raped," and also part Demeter, who "has lost the zest for life." She demonstrates a unity between mother and daughter prefigured by the mythical oneness of Demeter and Kore in order to show that the play is not only about loss but renewal, Mama's "quickened sense of life" through Jessie's suicide.


"Is comedy sexist?" Carlson asks, and looks to W. Somerset Maugham's The Constant Wife for her answer. In traditional comedy, women characters are caught in a paradox. Although comedy promises them equality with men, comedy's happy ending returns them to their traditional roles. Carlson looks briefly at Gems' Piaf and Norman's Getting Out as examples of feminist dramas seeking replacement forms that attempt "to relegate to the past the assumptions and structures that stymie the promise of comedies like The Constant Wife." Her analysis of Getting Out is brief but suggests a method of analyzing comic structures and women characters in Norman's plays in terms of a feminist theater.

Drawing upon a number of quotations by contemporary American women playwrights, Chinoy discusses a variety of issues that women dramatists in the 1970s and early 1980s have faced; issues such as the usefulness of the label "woman playwright," the negative influence of male critics, and the difficulty of producing work in maledominated mainstream theaters. She also addresses the challenge of beginning a career as a playwright, the importance of women role models in the theater, the problem of a "female aesthetic," and the degree to which plays by women should be feminist or political. She briefly quotes Marsha Norman's view on "the importance of the female character" in women's drama.


As Norman attempts in night, Mother to give voice to the marginally voiceless, she is subject to the criticism that her play is unrealistic because she alters the speech of her protagonists to suit her artistic ends. Yet Norman employs a "modified" or "new realism" to provide access to "under-represented elements of our society." Instead of presenting a naturalistic transcription of middle-class voices, Norman conveys the "dignity" of Thelma and Jessie "by fusing the realistic ... rhythms of common speech with the heightened thought that she wishes to introduce."

Using *night, Mother* as a case study, Dolan assesses the various ways the male-dominated theater establishment, including its male reviewers and critics, shapes the audience's reception of a play by a woman. She questions whether *night Mother* mainly a "contender for membership in the canon because it so closely follows the male precedent the canon has already set."

Whereas Norman's aim was a "transcendent universality," the Broadway production of the play allowed a majority of male critics to categorize it as domestic melodrama. Dolan herself considers *night, Mother* as "typical of liberal and cultural feminist drama" and demonstrates how the liberal feminist press ironically defused Norman's imposition on the male theatrical sphere by highlighting the woman rather than the play. In essence, Dolan's discussion reveals the gender issues that surface as "women playwrights continue to assert their voices in the traditional male forum."


Erben uses the title of Norman's play *The Holdup* to designate a new genre: "The western holdup play presents the American West in dramatic tension" as "the old and the new West meet," usually in an isolated way station of the rural southwest. He argues that *The Holdup* "combines all the characteristics" of earlier plays constituting the genre, namely, Sherwood's *Petrified Forest*, Inge's *Bus Stop*, Medoff's *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?* and Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall*. With an old outlaw and a would-be gunslinger symbolizing the dying frontier, and a woman hotel owner and an educated youth representing the dynamic present of the West, Norman's play, like the others, "recalls the West's formative frontier period in a post-frontier setting," dramatizing its transformation.
Forte questions whether the dramatic form of classic realism, its narrative animated by Oedipal desire toward closure, would be "useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social structure." In comparison with more subversive or plural texts such as Carolyn Meyer's Dos Lesbos and Adrienne Kennedy's The Owl Answers, night, Mother is an example of a "realist text," whose cathartic closure caters to the demands of a patriarchal playwriting practice. Yet in terms of an incipient feminist theory of reception, 'night, Mother's impact on its audience is subversive, challenging "on some material level the reality of male power."


Jessie Cates and Laura Wingfield are viewed as "sisters in disguise." Realizing he is risking a patrocentric reading, Greiff builds his comparison on the influence of the absent father on each daughter in night, Mother and The Glass Menagerie. Each father is represented as an escapist, while both "Laura and Jessie prove to be faithful daughters who keep alive their fathers' memory." Whereas Laura's imaginative escapism, modeled on her father's, leads to a confrontation with reality, Jessie's unhappiness with reality leads to her "artful orchestration of her own death," a creative act allowing Jessie to re-unite with her father, "the informing figure of her imagination." What these parallels convey is "a creative kinship between Tennessee Williams and Marsha Norman."

Harriott cites as Norman's chief concern characters "on the verge of cutting ties" and suggests what drives Norman's characters is "their passion . . . to escape from situations in which they feel trapped," primarily situations defined by the parent-child relationship. She focuses at length on four plays, praising "the economy of language" and humor of Getting Out, the "pungent and authentic dialogue" of The Laundromat, and the "complex pattern of relationships and emotions, actions and reactions" of night, Mother. In contrast to these plays' strengths of characterization and language is the dramatic weakness of Traveler in the Dark, a play that stresses philosophy over human interaction: "The argument-faith versus reason-comes first, and the characters dramatize it. The result is less a drama than a debate."


Hart extensively analyzes the way hunger operates as a metaphor in Getting Out and night, Mother. She investigates the issue of food as a source of conflict in the mother-daughter relationship and examines how hunger plays an essential role in each protagonist's struggle for autonomy. Arlene's "figurative starvation" represents a "hunger for power, freedom and control" as she strives for "sovereignty over her body." Like Arlene, Jessie "rejects food and yearns for nurturance"; her "hunger for honest dialogue and truth about her past must be satisfied." In addition, Hart relates Arlie/Arlene's split self to the issue of women's eating disorders and connects each protagonist's quest to a feminist paradigm of growth, from "selfnegation," through spiritual "awakening," to an "affirmation through community." Arlie/Arlene moves successfully through each phase, but Jessie is unable to see beyond her "confrontation with nonbeing."

Herman briefly discusses Getting Out and night, Mother in a section devoted to "other voices" of the American theater from 1964 to 1984, including those of Jack Gelber, Amiri Baraka, Arthur Kopit, Adrienne Kennedy, and Jean-Claude Van Itallie. He suggests that night, Mother dramatizes themes "ancillary" to those of Getting Out. He also postulates an affinity of Norman's "blue-collar world" with the "fictional worlds of Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Raymond Carver."


Kachur attempts to free critical discussion of the work of commercially successful women playwrights from the double bind of male critics who tend to fault it "for a lack of universal vision" and feminist critics who find that the mainstream "forum precludes deployment of the more preferred subversive modes and themes found in contemporary experimental drama and performance art by women." By highlighting the "dramaturgical and thematic variety" within the work of four contemporary women dramatists, she also encourages a break from "the assumption that women's plays are identical thematically ... and that women playwrights are a segregated group." She focuses on Getting Out, Third and Oak: The Laundromat, night, Mother, and Traveler in the Dark, demonstrating that the first three plays deal both with women's issues and more "global verities."

Kane discusses four of Norman's plays - Getting Out, Third and Oak, The Laundromat, night, Mother, and Traveler in the Dark - in relation to the problems of autonomy, "people struggling to have a self," and of "mothering" and "Norman's continuing concern with mother-child relationships." Kane demonstrates that "mothers in Norman's early plays provide neither protection nor guidance; they do not nourish with food or love." With Traveler in the Dark, Norman breaks new ground by creating a psychologically complex male protagonist and presenting "for the first time loving and supportive wives who are warm, affectionate mothers."


Despite certain strengths of plays by the women in Keyssar's title, their main weakness is that "no matter how serious the topic, they are all comedies of manners, revelations of the surfaces of sexual identity and sexism." As mainstream plays, they take "fewer theatrical risks" than more feminist dramas. Keyssar praises Getting Out for forcing its audience to "rethink" the nature of the dramatic protagonist as double rather than "singular." On the other hand, she criticizes night, Mother for dwelling on the "sheltered space of the family room" while neglecting "the real constraints outside." In addition, the commercial success of night, Mother suggests that the "most appealing role for the audience continues to be that of the voyeur."


Claiming that Henley's plays are "theatrical" whereas Norman's are "literary," McDonnell compares the two playwrights' use of narrative, humor, and the family. She highlights Norman's "narrative gift of a very high order," illustrating how storytelling within her plays provides comic relief, creates horror, propels the plot, and reveals character. Each playwright views "stories as crucial purveyors of truth in an individual's quest for self-determination." Although each playwright relies on southern gothic humor, Henley's is "wild and outrageous" whereas Norman's is "dry and sardonic." Finally, Henley's vision of the family is more optimistic than Norman's, suggesting that self-actualization can occur within the family as a source of support. Norman expresses the opposite view, that personal identity can be obtained only outside the family circle.


In distancing herself from "the theatrics and fictionalizing" of Arlie, Arlene adheres to an ideology of "self-determination," an ideology that the play challenges. Getting Out reveals the ways Arlene is still a prisoner on the "outside," her identity as Arlene assigned to her by an Other, the prison chaplain, and her decision to go "straight" the product of "authority's desires." Ironically, as the audience approves of Arlene's rejection of Arlie, what is revealed is the audience's unconscious preference of the safety of autonomous selfhood rather than the more uncomfortable condition of multiple selves: "We find ourselves cheering for Arlene, because as she kills off Arlie, she checks our own impulses to Arlie-behavior." Thus, Getting Out
"breaks from more mainstream twentieth-century drama, which valorizes and protects tenaciously-held assumptions about the self."


Moore divides plays by women playwrights into two categories: "autonomous woman plays," which depict "one female protagonist, a fragment of whose journey toward autonomy we share"; and "choral plays," which dramatize a group of women "seeking integration by attempting community." Norman's Getting Out represents a type of autonomous woman play whose protagonist is divided, indicating a "conflict ... between a self acceptable to (male) society and a savage self who cannot conform." Moore suggests that women identify with both Arlie and Arlene, both the breaker of rules and the "other who keeps that rule breaker in line."


Morrow extensively analyzes food imagery and speech patterns as a key to understanding the respectively tragic and comic outcomes of night, Mother and Beth Henley's Crimes of the Heart, which dramatizes the opposite scenario of three daughters coping with their mother's suicide. She focuses on orality as a common denominator in Norman's and Henley's works. In Thelma's case, her fixation on sweets reveals her emotional immaturity and dependency on Jessie, whereas her "counterfeiting obtuseness" through ceaseless chatter makes her a "figure of tragic intensity" who consciously refuses to "acknowledge unpleasant truth." In contrast, Jessie uses silence to "restrict others' access to her innermost self," and her oral fixation on
cigarettes, the symbolic equivalent of suicide, provides her with a negative means of achieving control of her life.


Murray examines the ways Getting Out demonstrates a disruption between the panoptic, macho gaze of the institutional world of confinement and the creative, liberating force of Arlie's jokes. He equates the prison and its authority figures with the theater and its patrons: in each case, a voyeurism is at work in which the spectators judge Arlie's transformation into Arlene: "Does the audience experiment vicariously in a visual laboratory of power, control, and sadistic pleasure?" Murray suggests that the audience is caught in a double bind of desiring the promise of renewal affected by the system in its handling of Arlie/Arlene and realizing the need of Arlene "to be free of the macho world of control" as she indulges in mental replays of Arlie's cruel jokes.


Natalle briefly mentions Marsha Norman and other mainstream women playwrights with a "feminist vision" in contrast with feminist playwrights working within purely feminist theaters. "The drama, " she says, "written by individual playwrights who have no connections with a particular feminist group is intended as a very different kind of statement than the drama associated with a group of individuals who write, produce, and act in that drama." In this chapter, however, Natalle is chiefly concerned with the messages of feminist theater, along with its transition from radicalism toward a more inclusive humanism.

If one considers as a goal of feminist writing the abolition of the patriarchal social structure, then night, Mother may barely be considered a feminist play. Nischik conducts a thematic analysis of night Mother and Henley's Crimes of the Heart, an analysis that considers the following questions: What picture of woman is sketched in these two successful plays by American women dramatists in the 1980s? In what constellation of roles do women characters appear? To what extent are they impaired because of these roles? Which characteristics of these works are typical of contemporary feminist theater in the United States? He concludes that Crimes of the Heart may better be defended as a feminist play than night, Mother.


Patraka reviews two groups of contemporary plays by women dramatists, one group "linking women's memory to women's historybe it emotional, economic, political, or mythic," the second group focusing on "women's collective memory" or "the history of women's expectations." She considers night, Mother as a member of this second group, seeing that the play presents "in part the struggle of memories between a mother and a daughter concerning their concept of and relationship to the deceased father." She relates Norman's drama to Joanna Glass' Play Memory, which also dramatizes a daughter's memory of her deceased father.


Piazza, Roberta. "A Conversational Analysis of Theatrical Discourse: Repair

Porter focuses on Henley's Crimes of the Heart, John Pielmeier's Agnes of God, and 'night, Mother as indicators of the ways contemporary dramas depicting women reflect cultural concerns. She identifies two primary characteristics of these plays: the presentation of all-female families and the concentration on the mother-daughter relationship. These plays represent a positive change in the culture inasmuch as they dramatize women who "do not need to define themselves in terms of men" and insist upon "the importance and value of the mother-daughter nexus and its centrality in our lives."


Describing women as "the true invisible caste," Scharine draws on studies of the oppression of women in America to illuminate the political content of Getting Out. The play is an example of "political theatre," a genre that "shows public policy, laws, or unquestioned social codes impinging unfairly and destructively upon private lives," for example, the life of Arlene Holsclaw. As a political drama, Getting Out blames the "system": "The factors that mitigate against Arlene taking charge of her life must be seen as flaws in the social system and not as purely personal problems." In Arlie/Arlene's case, these factors include child abuse and "a sexually discriminating legal system." Scharine labels Getting Out "an economic primer for American women," who may see their concerns as lower-caste U.S. citizens reflected in the condition of Arlie/Arlene.
The above argument is couched in a chapter concerning issues of gender in American drama, including African-American feminism and gay civil rights.


When a feminist theater, in opposition to male-dominated theater, restricts itself to nonlinear, nontraditional forms, the result is selfdefeating: "an undeviating separatism of dramatic forms can only mean that fewer feminist concerns will be dramatised, fewer audiences will be reached, and feminist playwrights ... will be left unheard." Norman's Getting Out and Wendy Kesselman's My Sister in This House provide Schroeder with examples of "flexible realism" by women playwrights, dramas that address feminist concerns while appealing to mainstream audiences. Although Getting Out follows a "chronological plot" and contains "conventional dialogue," the play addresses the feminist problem of a woman's "imprisonment in limited and limiting social roles." The device of the split character illustrates a "fragmentation of personality that is the result of [Arlie/ Arlene's] oppression," and the play promotes women's experience as Arlene discovers "the importance of female bonding."


Simon provides a scene analysis of the initial New York production of Getting Out, which along with Kopit's Wings and Shepard's Buried Child he considers as one of "the three best plays of the season so far." He calls attention to the dramatic effectiveness of Norman's language, her use of "evasions,
understatements, and silences. Miss Norman has that essential dramatist's gift of letting the unsaid speak for itself." He also describes Norman's humor as "not a writer's wit that is superimposed on the characters; it is an earthy humor that stays very much in character." Assessing all three plays, Simon sees that "language is the least important element," that each play is meant to be performed rather than read. In addition, all three deal with "split personalities," prompting Simon to ask: "has the recession of the word caused the loss of a sense of full, unified selfhood? Or is it the other way round?"


Responding to feminist critics who see no feminism in Shepard's work and only "stereotypical feminine masochism" in Norman's, Smith concentrates on the issue of gender definition in each play as a feminist concern: "violence is seen as the agent for the transformation out of .... [Mama's or Mom's] domesticity to freedom, autonomy, and individualism." Drawing upon Freudian theories of gender in relation to the mother, Smith considers how separation from the mother for the female is psychologically "more complicated" than for the male. Jessie's suicide becomes a tragedy representative of women in American culture who suffer anorexia and agoraphobia as extreme means of gaining control over the self.


Resurrecting the eighteenth-century generic term "she-tragedy," Spencer applies it to three of Norman's plays that "focus on female characters, address a female audience, and foreground issues of female identity": Getting Out, Third and Oak: The Laundromat, and night, Mother. She considers the ways Norman develops a modern form of "she-tragedy," focusing on the importance
of conversation as action in Norman's work, the dialogue between women underscoring the "problem of female autonomy." Just as in eighteenthcentury "she-tragedies," which dramatize "the character's potentially pathetic situation," Norman's dramas indicate the extent to which women in society are still manipulated and controlled within a patriarchal system: "We are asked to consider the ways in which male misrecognition itself shapes and determines female subjectivity."


Spencer assesses audience response to night, Mother along gender lines, determining that males may view the play in a detached manner as "relatively predictable," whereas female viewers will be caught up in the "representation of repressed infantile complexes" peculiar to the mother-daughter relationship, with its issues of "feminine identity and female autonomy." Exploring the Freudian psychodynamics of Jessie's relationship to Mama, she concludes that these dynamics make the play "aesthetically over-distanced for men (producing indifference) and aesthetically under-distanced for women (producing pain)."


In The Holdup, Norman creates a feminist version of the traditional American myth of the frontier, a version that promotes maturation over adolescent violence. Her play avoids the "synthesis" of "Eastern Civilization and Western savagery" typical of late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century dramas set in the West. Instead, "Norman presents Western savage violence as a self-destructive delusion that can and must be transcended." She resolves a
tension that Shepard leaves open-ended at the end of True West, whose two brothers, one representing the civilized east and the other the primitive West, anticipate Norman's structural use of two similar brothers in The Holdup.


O'Neill's Days without End is a progenitor of contemporary American and British dramas, including Getting Out, dramatizing the "inner voice" through use of a second actor. Whereas the doubling device in Days without End was unjustly criticized in its day as "a gimmick," the same device has been praised by critics of Adrienne Kennedy's Funnyhouse of a Negro, Hugh Leonard's Da and A Life, and Peter Nichols' Forget -Me-Not-Lane. Wertheim suggests that Getting Out "marries the psychological, spiritual and philosophical divisions explored by ... O'Neill and Kennedy with the chronological divisions presented by Leonard and Nichols." Getting Out is unusual because the Arlene/Arlie split is both one of time (with a current self engaging a former self) and one of dialectic (as each self represents a conflicting impulse). Although Wertheim identifies echoes of Days without End within Getting Out, a claim for direct influence would require further evidence. Marsha Norman rightfully deserves a place at the forefront of contemporary American drama.