The Concept of Gender Inequity in Marsha Norman’s Celebrated Plays Getting Out and ‘night, Mother

Gender Inequity refers to the devaluation of women and the social domination of men. The aim of this paper is to explore the features of gender inequity in Marsha Norman’s plays Getting Out and ‘night, Mother and the outcomes of this inequality in female characters’ lives. This paper will discuss Judith Lorber’s definition of gender inequality regarding feminism, Judith Kegan Gardiner’s idea of female identity and Becker’s and Lemert’s the labeling theory. Later on the notions such as patriarchal ideology, the labeling theory, aimlessness, dual fragmentation and female identity are considered in both plays.

Keywords: gender inequity, gender inequality, patriarchal oppression, an assertion of identity, labeling theory, aimlessness, dual fragmentation.

Introduction

‘night Mother is one of Marsha Norman’s most unsettling and compelling works. Through the complex mother-daughter relationship of Thelma and Jessie, ‘night Mother depicts a female community’s reaction to patriarchal oppression. The most controversial aspect of the play lies in Norman’s resolution for Jessie’s feelings of entrapment – suicide. Feminist critics debate whether to praise the play’s representation of female entrapment in a male-centered ideology or denounce the defeatist solution it offers. (Demastes 109)

In ‘night Mother, Jessie and Thelma as well are denied autonomy. While Thelma has meekly endured a loveless marriage, Jessie’s separation with her husband has forced her to live with her mother, and her disease has inhibited her ability to work and form relationships. (Demastes 111)

Getting out is a drama about a woman released from prison after an eight-year sentence and a lifetime of trouble. It concentrates on the psychological changes she undergoes as she is transformed from a hate-filled child named Arlie into the rehabilitated woman Arlene. To contrast the two sides of her protagonist’s personality Norman uses two actresses on the stage simultaneously. In the course of the work Arlene must make the hard choice between returning to her former trade, prostitution, by which she could earn a comfortable living, or to continue her job washing dishes, which barely provides subsistence wages. (Murray 380)

In Getting Out we can see an exploration of the title in the most immediate and obvious expression of being freed as Arlene is freed from her latest jail sentence. However, it would be impossible to ignore the ways in which virtually every other character arriving in this play, either on the stage or simply via the dialogue, is either escaping, being freed from, or attempting to escape some situation of either their own making or another’s. Arlene is physically “getting out” of prison, yet we find her followed by the prison
guard, her criminal past that will keep her from getting a decent paying job, a
family past that will continue to hurt her self-esteem and crush hope for a new
life, and the injuries of early childhood trauma, that while never plainly
spoken, add enormously to the vast amounts of emotional baggage. (Miner
124)

This paper suggests a feminist reading of Marsha Norman’s celebrated
plays *Getting Out* and *night, Mother* which is done through a close reading of
the works. Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary sociological
theories which analyzes the status of women and men in society with the
purpose of using that knowledge to develop women’s lives. In this research the
researcher traces the outcomes of gender inequity in American society of plays
illustrated in these works. The task is done through developing arguments,
evaluating ideas, and assessing a series of evidence that pictures the effects of
gender inequity in these plays such as patriarchal ideology, female identity,
female community and female autonomy. Furthermore, the hardships and
disasters that these two repercussions bring for the heroines of the plays will be
discussed. The researcher aims to highlight the chains of events based on
which the destinies of the characters are shaped.

Additionally, in this paper the researcher tries to clarify the concept of
gender inequity tracking down the instances of those concepts pointed out in
the plays; the task is done via extracting the examples, found in the play of
immoral actions against women rooted in patriarchal society; besides, the
pieces of evidence that usher the reader into gain an understanding of the
situation in which the characters have to adapt themselves to the situation are
handpicked.

The concept of Gender Inequality

In her book *Gender inequality* Lorber uses the concept of gender
inequality. She states that one goal of feminism as a political movement is to
make women and men more equal legally, socially, and culturally. Gender
inequality takes many different forms, depending on the economic structure
and social organization of a particular society and on the culture of any
particular group within that society. Although we speak of gender inequality, it
is usually women who are disadvantaged relative to similarly situated men.
Women often receive lower pay for the same or comparable work, and they are
frequently blocked in their chances for advancement, especially to higher
positions. There is usually an imbalance in the amount of housework and child
care a wife does compare to her husband, even when both spend the same
amount of time in paid work outside the home. When women professionals are
matched with men of comparable productiveness, men still get greater
recognition for their work and move up career ladders faster. On an overall
basis, gender inequality means that work most often done by women, such as
teaching small children and nursing, is paid less than work most been done by
men, such as construction and mining. Gender inequality can also take the form
of girls getting less education than boys of the same social class. Nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women, but in Western societies, the gender gap in education is closing at all levels of schooling, and among some groups, women surpass men in higher education degrees. In many countries, men get priority over women in the distribution of health care services. Contraceptive use has risen in industrial countries, but in developing countries, complications in childbirth are still a leading cause of death for young women (4-6).

Gender inequality is the devaluation of "women", the social domination of "men" and it has social functions and a social history. It is not the result of sex, procreation, physiology, anatomy, hormones, or genetic predispositions. It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structure and individual identities deliberately and purposefully. The social order as we know it in Western societies is organized around racial ethnic, class, and gender inequality. Lorber contends, therefore, that the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group. The life of everyone placed in the status "woman" is "night to his day-that has forever been the fantasy. Black to his white. Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning" (Cixous and Clement [1975] 1986: 67)

There is no core or bedrock for human nature below these endlessly looping processes of the social production of sex and gender, self and other identity and psyche, each of which is a "complex cultural construction" (Butler 1990, 36). For humans, the social is the natural. Therefore, in its feminist senses, gender cannot mean simply the cultural appropriation of biological and sexual difference. Sexual difference is itself a fundamental – a scientifically contested construction. Both 'sex' and 'gender' are woven of multiple, asymmetrical strands of difference, charged with multifaceted dramatic narratives of domination and struggle (Haraway 1990: 140).

Lorber believes what she is looking at first are feminist theories about why women and men are unequal and second, feminist gender politics, the activities and strategies for remedying gender inequality. She also states that the reason for much of the change in feminist theories is that with deeper probing into the pervasiveness of gender inequality, feminists have developed more complex views about gender, sex and sexuality. Gender is now understood to be a social status, a personal identity and a set of relationships between women and men, and among women and men. Sex is no longer seen as a one-way input or basic material for social arrangement, but a complex interplay of genes, hormones, physiology, environment and behavior with loop-back effects. Sexuality is understood to be socially constructed as well as physiologically based and emotionally expressed. The main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and individual solutions.
Patriarchal Oppression

This notion is one of the most significant reasons of gender inequity during the course of the play "Night, Mother." Norman succeeds in indicting the sex/gender system of society and in assigning the patriarchal family much of the blame for Jessie’s state of mind. But Jessie also struggles against a society which oppresses her not only for her gender but also for her disability. The researcher discovers a great number of examples regarding social oppression. When Thelma (Jessie’s mother) seizes on the idea that Jessie gets a job, she responds:

JESSIE. I took that telephone sales job and I didn’t even make enough money to pay the phone bill, and I tried to work at the gift shop at the hospital and they said I made people real uncomfortable smiling at them the way I did.

THELMA. You could keep books. You kept your Dad’s books.

JESSIE. But nobody ever checked them.

THELMA. When he died, they checked them.

JESSIE. And that’s exactly when they took the books away from me!

THELMA. That’s because without him there wasn’t any business, Jessie! (26)

Jessie’s epilepsy limits her to dead-end jobs and her solitary personality – frequently compared to her father’s -- places her outside the social mainstream with its gender expectations and social skills required for women. Norman highlights the limitations that social regulations have imposed on Jessie; she is unable to communicate with customers in the acceptable social manner for a sales job nor is she able to handle a solitary bookkeeping position without the male family figure present. The audience see that Jessie’s suicide is not the act of a crazy woman, but a deliberate effect of several causes that oppress women and people with disabilities daily.

Both Thelma and Jessie face the judgment of family members and friends. The absence of husbands and sons causes their male relatives’ condemnation. Jessie is sensitive to her brother Dawson and his wife’s contempt. He interferes in everything she does, even the most private matters of her life:

THELMA. What does Dawson do that bothers you?

JESSIE. He just calls me Jess like he knows who he’s talking to.

He’s always wondering what I do all day. I mean, I wonder that myself, but it’s my day so it’s mine to wonder about, not his”.

(11)

An Assertion of Identity

Patriarchal ideology in Getting Out inhibits female autonomy and denies female characters of a self-determined identity. Norman tries to accuse the society for restricting identity through the play. In Getting Out Arlie undergoes
rehabilitation. This process requires that the inconsistent character leave her
multiplicity and assume a single, consistent subject position.

This individual must attempt to meet the desires of another who represents
the interests of the existing social formation. (Miner, 1985: 130)

The women of this play must accept the identities constructed for them by
patriarchy. Those who do not follow the rules of social order are punished with
isolation. There is an obvious divide in the play regarding the female characters
to this oppression. One woman who has passively combined into a delimiting
and oppressive society is fought against another who rebels, even at the risk of
self-destruction, against the rigid system (Hart, 68). While Ruby and Arlene
learn to accept the limited existence they are permitted, Arlie attempts to regain
her autonomy by asserting her identity in her own terms. In Getting Out, Ruby
submits to her dead-end cooking job. She calls herself Queen of Grease and she
boasts: “Make the finest French fries you ever did see” (43).

Although Arlene is able to free herself from the restrictive grasp of Carl
and Bennie, she cannot escape from the life of a lower class ex-convict. She
rejects the other career choice -- Prostitution -- and finally chooses to follow
Ruby’s path. The researcher discovers that the female characters’ act passively
toward their role and identity in life. Arlie actively resists oppression and
insists on defining her own identity. She attempts to escape from prison and
continually searches for authority. She controls the guards by forcing them to
clean up her meals and extinguishing the fire she sets in her cell (8). Although
Arlie is destructive, she is self-assertive and determined; she refuses the
subservient identity society compels her to assume. Her suicide attempt is seen
as an effort to seize her identity. “She takes active control of her promised
inheritance by attempting to kill the bad self” (Hart 73).

The danger of female character’s defeat is that the play presents a mirror to
reality in which women misrecognize themselves in quite traditionally negative
ways by reintegrating the spectator into her place within the dominant order,
without challenging in any fundamental way the prevalent image of women in
society – as those who reproduce, consume, and are consumed, who are
powerless, inadequate, unworthy and mutually destructive. (Spencer 374)

**Dual fragmentation: Arlie/Arlene**

One of the results of gender inequity is the dual fragmentation in Arlene
who is the main character of the play Getting Out. Arlie is Arlene’s memory of
herself, called up by fears, needs and even simple word cues. The memory
haunts, attacks and warns but mainly the memory will not go away. Arlene is
suspicious and guarded, withdrawal is always a possibility. Arlie is
unpredictable and incorrigible. The change seen in Arlie in the second act
represents a movement
toward the adult Arlene, but the transition should never be complete. Only
in the final scene are
they enjoyably aware of each other (Norman 4). Both Arlie and Arlene evolve throughout the play, both seeking integration within the female protagonist’s mind. The fragment in Arlene’s identity was accentuated by male characters’ attitude. She wanted to change her past identity, but she still has been seen as a prostitute. In the Preface to Getting Out, Marsha Norman explains: “Arlie is the violent kid Arlene was until her last stretch in prison. In a sense, she is Arlene’s memory of herself, called up by her fears, needs and even simple word cues. Arlie’s life should be as vivid as Arlene’s if not as continuous…” (29).

Throughout the play, Norman focuses upon the sufferings and the confusions that Arlene experiences between her inner and outer selves and how both these controversial selves Arlie and Arlene try to overpower each other. Arlie appears with a funny, slightly ghoulish story about throwing a neighbor boy’s frogs into the street to be run over by cars. Arlene constantly aware of Arlie, her negative self, tries her best to destroy it. In the process she is grossly misunderstood by people around her.

The play provokes the researcher to think about the existing social systems, influences and realistic consequences. Arlene’s reality is that she has few choices and most of them are unattractive. She has very few skills, so she has to choose between low-paying jobs that will preserve her freedom, although, financially difficult for her to survive on, while the other option for her is to return to her old ways of crime and prostitution, providing larger income, but stripping her freedom.

The play is a transition of dignity from abuse to respect. Arlene faces tremendous conflict in being aware of and accepting her positive self and denouncing her other negative self Arlie.

The Labeling Theory

According to Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert’s labeling theory, when a negative label gets applied so publicly and so powerfully that it becomes part of that individual’s identity that is called secondary deviance. Lori Guimond remarks: “The play illustrates the infinite complications that affect an individual’s struggle to reform. Although numerous sociological theories apply to Arlene’s struggle, the labeling theory best explains the difficulties associated with her reformation” (1998-99: 30).

The ex-convict label influences Arlene’s family life. Arlene tries to make amends with her family by asking her mother whether she can join them for Saturday lunch. Arlene’s mother immediately rejects the request, providing an excuse that “Sunday is my day to clean house now” (32). However, in reality she does not want Arlene to visit them, as Arlene is no longer welcomed at home. Arlene’s mother states: “Don’t want nobody like that in my house. I still got kids at home. Don’t want no bad example” (33). Arlene’s mother clearly
feels that Arlene does not have a positive influence on the family; thereby, reinforcing the ex-convict label stuck upon her.

In addition to the ex-convict label, Arlene also receives the label of whore from her mother. When Arlene’s mother discovers Bennie’s hat in Arlene’s house, she automatically assumes that Arlene has returned to her old life style of prostitution. Arlene explains that Bennie is a prison guard and he had volunteered to drive her to Kentucky, but her mother does not believe that any man would “drive a girl 500 miles for nuthin” (34). Arlene’s plea that she “ain’t like prostitution no more” (35) fails to convince her mother. Her mother says, “Oh you aint. I’m your mother. I know what you’ll do” (36). These harsh words arouse feelings of hostility and hurt in Arlene. She also threatens Arlene and states: “I knew it. Well, when you got another bastard in you, don’t come cryin to me, cause I done told you” (29). The fact that her own mother has no faith in her contributes greatly to the difficulty in progress of Arlene’s reform.

Carl is the father of Arlene’s baby Joey who was born in the prison. He hopes to persuade her to return to prostitution. While Carl describes the easy life on the street to Arlene, her attention is constantly interrupted by memories enacted by Arlie and a series of guards, teachers, and peers from her childhood and adolescence in schools, reformatories and prisons. Arlie recalls and tells Carl “You always sendin me to ol’ droolers …They slobberin all over me….They tyin me to the bed!...I could git killed workin for you” (37), but he argues on economic grounds saying, “You can do cookin and cleanin or you can do something that pays good. You ain’t gonna git rich working on your knees. You come with me an you’ll have money. You stay here, you won’t have shit” (38). Arlene rejects Carl’s offer, she is determined to win Joey’s custody. Despite her rejection Carl leaves his contact number, in case Arlene changes her decision.

Another character who doubts Arlene’s reformation is Bennie. In the beginning, Norman portrays Bennie as a caring, considerate man who truly wants to help Arlene. However, in her flashbacks, Arlene recalls the negative labels that Bennie uses to describe her. When Arlene is in prison, Bennie says that she is a screechin wildcat (39). Bennie’s wildcat label arouses Arlie residing in Arlene’s subconscious mind, resulting in increased animal-like behavior. The fact that Bennie dwells on Arlene’s past “there ain’t nobody can beat you for throwing plates” (40) is an additional factor that hinders her reform. The prison guard Bennie takes advantage of her, he derives sexual thrill from the wild cat attitude of Arlene when Arlie is predominating her. Arlie’s violent, vibrant and vicious sexual responses ignite his baser animal instincts; hence he searches for Arlie in Arlene’s cold and insecure self. Like Arlene’s mother, Bennie continuously focuses on the person Arlene used to be rather than the person she is striving to become. He reminds her of her violent behavior in the prison, where Arlene’s rehabilitation cannot take place.

Bennie appears to love Arlene’s violent behavior and he finds it necessary to frequently remind her of these accomplishments. Perhaps Bennie refuses to accept Arlene’s change, because he feels more in control with Arlie’s wild actions than Arlene’s cool, sensible self.
Bennie’s attempt to rape Arlene is a prime example of his need to overpower her. The attempt also shows that Bennie does not think Arlene is on the same level as other women. He sees her as wild cat that can only be subdued by force. Bennie’s behavior also suggests that he applies the whore label to Arlene. Although Arlene does not act like Arlie, Bennie feels that she is sexually available to him because she has been a prostitute in the past. Ironically, only when Arlene calls Bennie a rapist does he stop his attempts at forcing himself on her. The rapist label forces Bennie to realize that she is not Arlie anymore, so he responds: “No, I guess you ain’t Arlie” (41). Bennie’s acknowledgement of Arlene’s change is a crucial turning point because it results in the elimination of the whore label.

Aimlessness

Passiveness caused by gender inequity in society had undeniable role in female characters’ aimlessness especially Jessie Cates. *Night, Mother* illustrates the modern man’s dilemma of aimlessness, futility and hopelessness in life. Norman presents Thelma and Jessie both living in a void, both approach life differently. Thelma evades her problems occupying herself in frivolous activity; sometimes she has momentary glimpses of the purposelessness of her existence. On the other hand, Jessie Cates suffering from epilepsy and alienation sees her existence as futile and painful. She tells her mother: “I’m tired, I’m hurt. I feel sad. I feel used” (9). She is tired of everything and the way things are. Thelma asks Jessie if she is driven to suicide because of her dislike or disappointment with her son Ricky who has turned out to be a petty thief and a drug addict or because of Jessie’s frustration with her husband Cecil’s desertion of her or because of epilepsy and ill health. Thelma mentions Jessie’s father as one of the possible reasons: “He died and left you stuck with me and you’re mad about it” (17).

Thelma and Jessie exemplify an unthinking drifting through life and struggle to achieve autonomy and assert identity. Thelma tries to fill the emptiness of her existence with trifles. She says: “You gotta keep your life filled up” (12). This sentence is Thelma’s motto of life. Unlike Thelma, Jessie decides to put an end to life’s meaninglessness through suicide.

The researcher claims that the above mentioned extracts are the result of gender inequality existed in the society which has a great effect on female characters’ aimlessness. Jessie and Thelma are victimized by the male characters’ superiority in their lives.

Biology as Ideology

In Judith Lorber’s article, Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology, she discusses the differences in men and women biologically. She then takes this information and compares it to society’s standards that men and women are
unequal. Lorber believes that neither sex nor gender is disparate. She states there are different hormones, genes, and genitalia that are ignored when categorizing sex. The same applies to identifying gender, ignoring sexuality and appearance, etc. Lorber argues that although men and women are different biologically, it is not that simple to label people as one or the other. She also adds there are in-betweens, and not all people are completely men or completely women. Instead, it is social institutions, such as sports, that justify the boundaries between men and women. It is society’s thinking that labels women and men as different. Western ideology takes biology as the cause, and behavior and social statuses as the effects, and then proceeds to construct biological dichotomies to justify the "naturalness" of gendered behavior and gendered social statuses. What we believe is what we see--two sexes producing two genders. The process, however, goes the other way: gender constructs social bodies to be different and unequal. The content of the two sets of constructed social categories, "females and males" and "women and men," is so varied that their use in research without further specification renders the results spurious (1).

Catharine MacKinnon contends that in Western society, universal "humaness" is male because virtually every quality that distinguishes men from women is already affirmatively compensated in this society. Men's physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health insurance coverage, their socially defined biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life defines art, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other defines wars and rulerships define history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex. (1987: 36)

The oppression of Patriarchal Ideology

In Getting Out, the researcher explores Marsha Norman’s attention to female characters, for they are frustrated creatures. She depicts this gloomy image successfully in her plays especially Getting out, in which she presents a major character Arlene in addition to some other minor characters. Also, the researcher identifies the characters surrounding Arlie/Arlene as her real oppressors. Her father repeatedly violates his daughter’s body and is the first man to convince her of her sole worth as a sexual object. Ronnie and the guards degrade Arlie with sexual language:

“GUARD-CALDWELL. You gotta eat, Arlie.
ARLIE. Says who?
GUARD-CALDWELL. Says me. Says the Warden. Says the Department of Corrections. Brung you two rolls.
ARLIE. And you know what you can do with your...
GUARD-CALDWELL. Stuff em in your bra, why don’t you?
ARLIE. Ain't you got somebody to go beat up somewhere?

GUARD-CALDWELL. Gotta see you get fattened up.” (17-18)

Similarly, Carl and Bennie treat Arlene’s body and sexuality as a commodity. Even her mother offers little support and affection for her daughter; she berates Arlie for her father’s sexual abuse, defends her husband’s behavior, and refuses to let Arlie come home for Sunday pot roast: “I still got two kids at home. Don't want no bad example” (26).

Through sexual violence and position of power, each of these characters’ asserts control or judgment over Arlie or Arlene's body and life. Also, the researcher explores that these characters are not the primary sources of oppression? They are victims of a larger, more complex structure of authority and judgment – the restrictive system of beliefs, norms, and standards of patriarchal society – that Norman presents as the source of entrapment. Undoubtedly, this narrow ideology negatively affects both men and women in the plays, but Norman widely explores its effects on female characters.

In Getting Out, Arlie deals with immediate and explicit forms of oppression that manifest restrictive societal ideologies. It discusses Arlie’s incarceration on two levels: literally for second degree murder and metaphorically for challenging the system under which people live. She is locked in a jail with bars and guards but her true prison is a society that does not permit deviant or subversive behavior – particularly in women. She spends her adolescent years in confinement for menial crimes and prostitution while the men around her escape punishment. Ronnie who steals and taunts Arlie, her father who never stops his abuse and the guards' two way mirror and secret bargaining with prisoners that is never discovered. (26)

Societal standards and capitalist economics inhibit Arlene, a lower-class woman with a criminal background and little education. Ruby, Arlene’s neighbor and friend comments on women in their position by saying: “Well, you can wash dishes to pay the rent on your ‘slum,’ or you can spread your legs for any shit that’s got the ten dollars” (53).

Although Arlene gets out of jail, she finds herself in a bigger one where she cannot live in respectable way. Because she is ex-convict; she is forced to accept a low-paying job, give up her hope in having a romantic relationship and accept the dirty apartment from her sister to be her new home. Like Arlene, all the women around her are victimized by patriarchal ideology about women. They cannot attain autonomy, something illusive which can never be gained. Arlene responds to ruby when she talks about working outside: “Outside? Honey I’ll either be inside this apartment or inside some kitchen sweatin’ over the sink. Outside’s where you get to do what you want, not where you gotta do some shit job jus’ so’s you can eat worse than you did in prison” (53). This group of women accepted willingly the identity determined by their society. Their sole role is to cook, clean, play cards and watch television. Otherwise they will be condemned and abandoned by their society. Arlene represents the woman who is fed up with her life and insists on defining her identity by
resisting oppression. Her control over the guards and the way she forces them to extinguish the fires she sets in sell show that Arlene is a self-assertive character though she is destructive.

Conclusion

The researcher has tried to investigate the outcomes of gender inequity and its effects on lives of the female characters involved in the two stories in particular and the women in general. Having done this, the researcher has carried out close reading of the two plays paying much attention to the themes of women’s struggle for identity and gender inequality in patriarchal ideology. The task has been done through developing arguments, evaluating ideas and assessing a series of evidence that picture the repercussions of gender inequity in society such as oppression of patriarchal ideology.

In this regard the researcher has found that Marsha Norman employed fact-based cultural and societal events to show the injustice about women. Both themes, oppression of patriarchal ideology and women’s struggle for identity are portrayed in a tangible way. Through Getting Out Norman provides the reader with a vivid picture of women’s situation in society, thereby enables him/her to interact with the societal affairs of the country. She utilizes specific mechanism in her writing to demonstrate the cultural perspective of her characters. In his plays, the writing mixes the inner and outer self of characters and past circumstances.

References


