

Crippling Death: A Re-Action to Failed Self-Actualization in *night Mother*

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Abstract

This paper aims to bring out the diversified views of women characters who belong to the same home. Though the characters face terrible situations in their lives, they relate and respond to it in varied ways. *night Mother* by Marsha Norman is a great American play. The characters that the author chooses to portray in her plays are not mere imagined characters used only to be performed; but they are real human beings with pain and sufferings. The main reason for this hopelessness and depression could be that she never opened up to her mother, nor did she believe that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

KEYWORDS: Crippling death, isolation, depression, suicide .

Marsha Norman has written about seven full length plays and five one act plays. Her works have received a number of awards and has received the Pulitzer Prize for the play *night Mother* which has been translated into twenty three languages. Critics have lauded for the emotional density and realistic dialogues of the play. *night Mother* takes place in a rural home of Thelma Cates and her daughter Jessie Cates.

The play opens with Jessie asking her mother for a piece of plastic sheet and for her father's gun. As she searches for it, she finds it in an old shoe box and begins to clean it by casually announcing her suicide. Initially Thelma doesn't believe it. But when she understands the seriousness of the issue, she tries so many ways to dissuade like making fun of her decision, trying to make her reasonable, consoling her, sympathizing with her and also begins to morally threaten Jessie. She says,

Mama: It's a sin. You'll go to hell.

Jessie: Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me.

Mama: You'll go to hell just for saying that. Jessie!

Jessie (With genuine surprise): I didn't know I thought that (18, 19)

Jessie remains calm and continues with her preparation for death. She prepares her mother to lead her life without her presence. She instructs her about how things work; the allotted place for pantry things and the procedure to clean the garbage and the way to use a washing machine. While Jessie is keen on describing how things work in the house, Thelma notices the seriousness of the issue at hand and dissuades her daughter. But Jessie remains focused and in order to deviate from pestering her, she asks Thelma to make hot chocolate. Yet, they both don't drink it because neither of them likes milk. So it is very clear that in order to pass the time and to deviate her mother, she had asked for it. The following lines show how desperate Thelma reacts to save her daughter.

You're supposed to go around and lock up so I know we're safe for the night, and when I wake up, you're supposed to be out there making the

coffee and watching me get older every day, and you're supposed to help me die when the time comes. I can't do that by myself, Jessie. I'm not like you, Jessie. I hate the quiet and I don't want to die and I don't want you to go, Jessie. How can I ... (Has to stop a moment) How can I get up every day knowing you had to kill yourself to make it stop hurting and I was here all the time and I never even saw it. And then you gave me this chance to make it better, convince you to stay alive, and I couldn't do it. How can I live with myself after this, Jessie? (73, 74)

It isn't that Thelma doesn't have problems in her life, but she evades her problems occupying herself with eating candy, watching T.V., knitting, doing crochet and needlework. In spite of enmeshing herself in frivolous activity yet sometimes she has momentary glimpses of the purposelessness of her existence. Yet she takes life as it comes. On the other hand Jessie suffering from epilepsy and alienation sees her existence as futile and painful. She tells Mama, *I'm tired, I'm hurt. I feel sad. I feel used.* (9) When Thelma realises the hopelessness of Jessie, she questions her about the cause of her pain and anguish but Jessie casually says that she is tired of *It all*, and that she is sad about *the way things are*. When her mother questions and expresses deep concern, she says, *oh, everything from you and me to Red China.* (10) Jessie's deeply embedded anguish and the futility of life in its macrocosm outside and the microcosm within herself. Mama and Jessie exemplify, respectively, an unthinking drifting through life and a struggle to achieve autonomy, and assert identity. Mama tries to fill the emptiness of her existence with trifles. *You gotta keep your life filled up* (12) is Mama's motto of life. Whereas, Jessie decides to put an end to her life's meaninglessness through suicide.

As Jessie moves on to talk about her mother's friend and family and during this gossip; we learn the details of Jessie's life. She is in her thirty's and is divorced and unemployed and that she hates her life. She sees herself as having no future because as an epileptic, she leaves her house only to go to the hospital after a seizure. Another reason for feeling hopeless is because of her failed marriage. She is divorced from a man she still loves, because when she had to choose between continuing her smoking habit or quitting and staying with her husband, Jessie chose smoking. Moreover even her son, Ricky, is a thief and a drug addict. So she finds her life a total failure. The lack of hope is the crux of this one act play.

Jessie opens up to her mother about the realities of her life. She says that there's no point in continuing with a life as empty as hers. She visualizes her life after another fifty years and says that it will still have the same emptiness and sees no point in continuing. She uses the metaphor of a bus trip to describe the reason for killing herself. She states,

Mama, I know you used to ride the bus. Riding the bus and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you don't get off is it's still fifty blocks from where you're going? Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride fifty more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough. (33)

She thinks that, life from her perspective holds no promise or future. Their interactions make it clear that Thelma and Jessie love one another, but, to Jessie, her mother's love is not reason enough to continue living. Thelma pleads with Jessie; she cajoles her with stories, and offers to change their lives.

Mama: Try it for two more weeks. We could have more talks like tonight.

Jessie: No, Mama.

Mama: I'll pay more attention to you. Tell the truth when you ask me. Let you have your say.

Jessie: No, Mama! We wouldn't have more talks like tonight, because it's the next part that's made this last part so good, Mama. No, Mama. This is how I have my say. This is how I say what I thought about it all and I say no. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! (75)

The desperation of the mother is clear, as is her love for her daughter. But Jessie remains stubborn in her decision.

This play deals with one woman's search and struggle for identity, self-definition, and self-actualization. Jessie is extremely depressed, she says, *I am what became of your child.... It's somebody I lost, all right; it's my own self. Who I tried to be and never got there....So, see, it doesn't much matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even. I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it* (18). The pain of not being somebody or not being good enough to survive has led her to take such a decision. The purposelessness or the meaningless attitude to continue with life has taken a toll on her. In the last moments of the play, desperate Thelma clings to her impassive daughter but is pushed aside as Jessie leaves the room with the muted farewell *night, Mother*. She goes and locks herself in her room. The play ends with the sound of a gunshot followed by Thelma's grief-stricken call to her son. Though mother and daughter share the same house for a number of years, they still remain alien to each other. While Thelma tries all the means to dissuade her daughter from committing suicide, Jessie's lack of self actualization and the void in her heart has crippled her vision about life, that there is light at the end of the tunnel. This lack of need to live led to a miserable mistake.

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