

**IDENTITIES AT STAKE: UNINTELLIGIBILITY OF THE ‘PHALLIC’ FEMALE IN ANN  
JELLCOE’S *THE SPORT OF MY MAD MOTHER***

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**ABSTRACT**

Although the notion of identity is assumed to be stable and unchanging in order to reinforce the binary opposition of the center/self and the ‘other,’ identities are fluid, and hence they are always at stake, which brings about the recognition that identities are attached to the subjects through a flimsy thread with a potential to break loose from them. The anxiety of facing the challenge to their identities and what they hold so dear to themselves is, this paper argues, the driving force behind the actions of the most of the characters in Ann Jellicoe’s 1962 revision of *The Sport of My Mad Mother*. Furthermore, elaborating on our insistence on tangible meanings that are accessible to us, Jellicoe asserts that we desire to attain the singular meaning of everything, be it a play or a natural phenomenon. Hence, this paper contends that in an attempt to make us confront this fact and realise the futility of our pursuit of exactitude and meaningful order, Jellicoe does not take us gently, but urges and even forces us to take part in the provisional meaning-making process and come up with our own interpretations. As the author of this paper, my interpretation will focus on identity politics with its feminist implications along with a patriarchal discourse of ethics and responsibility.

**Key Words:** Ann Jellicoe, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, identity and gender politics, feminism.

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[I]dentities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term — and thus its ‘identity’ — can be constructed.

— Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity?’” (1996, p. 4)

DEAN. You obscenity! You gross thing! Man/woman, cruel! Unstable! Frigid!

— Ann Jellicoe, *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (1964, p. 83)

The anxiety of facing the challenge to their identities and what they hold so dear to themselves is, this paper argues, the driving force behind the actions of the most of the characters in Ann Jellicoe's 1962 revision of *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (hereafter *Sport*), the original version of which was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958. The revised version has an unyielding feminist agenda to underscore the artificiality of the gendered identities that do not hold anymore and all that is expected from them so as to be intelligible in a hegemonic matrix contingent upon the binary oppositions. The revised version of *Sport*, which shall be analysed in this paper, is extensively informed about the patriarchal hegemony, which, by defining the parameters of 'normality,' imposes on women the assumedly universal and unchanging feminine attributes that are forged by the very patriarchal agents claiming their primordality. In this regard, patriarchy aims at lecturing women on how to 'be' women, which lends itself to the idea that "to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman'" (Butler, 1988, p. 522; emphasis in the original). Continuously doing myth-mongering about female body, female sexuality, and the essence of femininity, patriarchy attempts to harden its sweeping generalisations into reality that seem to have been extant all along, and coerce women into conforming to them.

As Ann Jellicoe explains in the 1964 preface to the play, it is "an anti-intellect play not only because it is about irrational forces and urges but because one hope it will reach the audience directly through rhythm, noise and music and their reaction to basic stimuli" (p. 5). This 'anti-intellect' play relates the ups and downs of a gang of Teddy boys, who were considered as "dangerous social deviants, prone to gang violence and wanton cruelty" (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 74). The behaviour of these Teddy boys throughout the play is "instinct with a purely arbitrary spirit of violence" caused by or directed towards two outsiders — Dean, an American and Dodo, "maybe a girl about 13 years old, maybe an old woman" (Jellicoe, 1964, p. 9), which underlines her situation as illustrative of women of different ages. She represents the idea of womanhood as constructed by patriarchy with her inarticulacy throughout the play and passive submission to the male bullies. Whereas the rest of the characters voice their opinions, articulately or not, Dodo remains silent, and nothing further than a few monosyllables could be got from her. The leader of the group, Greta, is the eponymous 'mad mother,' who is "a legendary figure of destruction and in the end, when she gives birth to a child, of creation too, who corresponds presumably to Kali" (Taylor, 1963, p. 75).

The play is quite dense in meanings. However, this created an adverse effect for audiences. As Janice Oliver explains, everyone including the critics were shocked by "the plotless, nonverbal nature of the piece, as well as by its overpowering rhythms and images that seem to represent the ascendance of violence in contemporary British society" (1996, p. 220). This idea is taken to a further point in John Russel Taylor's observation, which explains the reason why an impending sense of menace is experienced both by the characters and the reader/audience alike. According to him, an "*instinctive* way of life emerges" (1963, p. 75; emphasis added) in the play. This instinctive side of the play

triggers the anxiety of the characters with a probability, if not threat, to change and subvert the order and certainty that they crave for zealously, which may strip them off their identity and its concomitant attributes.

Moreover, *Sport* somewhat teasingly plays with our desire for reason and order to take the upper hand in the face of our instinctual and natural characteristics. The title *per se* can be read as a hint for our quest of rationality and order with the aim of finding solace and securing our present condition. It deploys the notion of myth, which is "the bodying forth in images and stories of our deepest fears and conflicts" (Jellicoe, 1964, p. 5), and it "gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe" regardless of its being "only an illusion" (Lévi-Strauss, 1978, p. 6). In this sense, it can be put forward that through the use of myths and rituals Jellicoe challenges our ancient yearning to give meaning to our world lest we get lost and be unable to maintain our integrity. Thus, she explains:

I think the word 'meaning' shows exactly what is wrong with people's attitudes. [...] If you sit watching and say "What does this mean? What does this mean?", you are not going to get anywhere, but if you allow yourself to be excited by the visual action and gradual crescendo of noise underlining this, you may begin to appreciate what it's about. (qtd. in Taylor, 1963, p. 76)

Elaborating on our insistence on tangible meanings that are accessible to us, Jellicoe asserts that we attempt to attain the meaning, the singular form is used advisedly, of everything, be it a play or a natural phenomenon. Hence, this paper contends that in attempt to make us confront this fact and realise the fallacy of our pursuit of exactitude and meaningful order, Jellicoe does not take us gently, but urges and even forces us to take part in the provisional meaning-making process and come up with our own interpretations. As the author of this paper, my interpretation is focused on the identity conflicts with its feminist implications along with a patriarchal discourse of ethics and responsibility.

*Sport* employs "a very old myth in which a man, rejected by his mother, castrates himself with a stone knife," and thus explores the theme of "fear and rage at being rejected from the womb or tribe" (Jellicoe, 1964, p. 5). This myth delineates the rather bizarre mother and son relationship between Greta and Cone. Cone seems overwhelmed by Greta and the looming sense of peril emitting from her very existence. His dependence on Greta is so pathetic that Patty ridicules him for this:

PATTY. Listening for Greta! Looking for Greta, eh? Why's she not here, eh? Changed! She's different! And it's going to get worse. Worse. Bah! Mummy's boy Master Coney! Doesn't love him any more! She! She! She's losing interest and especially in Master Coney! (p. 24)

Hence, even in the absence of Greta, Cone is most desperate about the slightest possibilities of losing the affections of Greta, which may never have existed in the first place. However, his reaction upon the belief that Greta has deserted him functions as a precursor to his ultimate downfall at the end of the play: “Where are you, Mamma? Why you left me?” (p. 38). The complexity of their relationship and Cone’s unhealthy reliance on Greta for his identity and existence are underpinned with sexual innuendos, which all the more mount on the complicated nature of their relationship. A sense of “latent sexuality” (Wyllie, 2009, p. 27) peeps in Act II where “*CONE goes to GRETA and plays [...] touching her hair, her hand, her arm*” (p. 57) only to attain some not-so-innocent solace from Greta: “*GRETA beats CONE up in an easy, lazy, rather splendid manner. He gives himself up in a sort of ecstasy. When she has done he lies relaxed and peaceful*” (p. 59). He is observed to lose himself in the process and enjoy the moments of relaxation or even ejaculation. The sexual tension is heightened through Greta’s indifferent conversation with Dean, which drives Cone into utter madness and jealousy. Thus, expanding on Cone’s sickly dependence on Greta, if nothing else, Laura Snyder observes that “Cone’s attempts to gain Greta’s attention are increasingly pathetic, as is his sexual jealousy” (2000, p. 99).

Cone’s fixation with Greta devours him upon learning that she is pregnant. Stricken with grief over the news, he exclaims: “You won’t want me any more” (p. 80). As in the myth, he feels rejected from the womb and kills himself by ‘castrating’ the life within himself. As Simone de Beauvoir maintains, “the child gains her first sense of her own existence from the mother’s responsive gestures and expressions” (p. 36). In this respect, Cone still seems to be trapped in the first stages of his psychosexual development and insistently needs Greta to affirm his existence. He weaves his life with threads of Greta’s affection and responses to himself, and when the threads are no longer extant, he throws himself into the abyss. In the light of this, it can be asserted that Cone’s craving for affection and his lovelorn emotions for Greta reduces him to the position of a selfless character, whose identity is predicated on his relationship with Greta. His anxiety is fuelled by insecurities. I would like to argue that these insecurities are identity-related insecurities. As Cone defines his identity as contingent upon his relationship with Greta, he feels threatened by any doubt that will shatter that relationship. He thinks that any sort of change in the feelings and responses of Greta will attack his very self.

In another reading, Cone’s sorrow can also be explained by his Oedipal complex, a desire to replace his father as the sexual partner of his mother. According to Sigmund Freud’s postulation of phallic stage in psychosexual development, the child desires to have sexual gratification with the parent of the opposite sex, which results in a conflict to be complicated more by the child’s identification with the parent of the same sex and later targeting him/her as the rival since s/he “takes the parental figures as both love-objects and objects of rivalry” (Hall, 1996, p. 3). Additionally, Freud argues that this unsatisfied yearning for sexual gratification due to the taboo against incest gives rise to a state of melancholia that “is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (1917, p. 244). However, he maintains that “it is difficult to see what has been lost, so we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost,” and adds “indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost” (1917, p. 244; emphasis

in the original). Hence, it can be claimed that after missing any chance of acquiring the sexual or any other form of affection from Greta, Cone sinks into melancholia and believes that he has lost Greta and all that is associated with her.

As a consequence, he ends his life not as a result of his willing choice, but due to the lack of choices. This argument empowers Greta and underlines her capacity to create and destroy alike. In this sense, Michel Foucault's argument about the authority of the powerful sovereign may prove helpful so as to add to the credibility of this point:

For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death. In a formal sense, it derived no doubt from the ancient *patria potestas* that granted the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away. (1988, p. 135)

'The father of the family,' in Greta's case, becomes a mother, and a very potent one, indeed with her "both violent and nurturing qualities," which brings her "in line with the 'phallic' mother" (Gale, 1996, p. 136). Hence, her power that is traditionally associated with patriarchal hegemony renders her identity an ambiguous and unstable one. Evinced powerful qualities of both sexes, that is, the authoritarian figure of the male and the creative and proliferating capacity of the female, she melts the masculine and feminine qualities in one pot — in one body.

Furthermore, should one employ Bhabha's postulation of the 'Third Space' with its implications of the idea of identity as unstable and open to change, it can be claimed that Greta hovers over the borders of the 'Third Space' by not completely 'being' one thing or another. This lays bare the constructedness of gendered identities and gender-based expectations. She starts out as a woman, but could she 'remain' a woman? With all the qualities of masculine potency and female productivity, she becomes the embodiment of 'contradictions' according to the patriarchal ideology, thereby subverting the allegedly feminine qualities imposed on women and divorcing the discussions of identity from blindly following the teachings of patriarchy. Besides, the notion of identity is always in process and open to change because "identities are never singular," and they "are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). This argument unveils the reasons of the anxiety experienced by Dean, who is presumably the representative of patriarchal ideology and civilisation. Through "a fearful look at [his] threatened masculinity" (Wandor, 1986, p. 146), he feels that his patriarchal authority is menaced by Greta — a "Man/woman" (Jellicoe, 1964, p. 83), whose identity is not stable and threatens to render his identity unstable, as well, which would strip him off his central position and privileges granted by patriarchy.

Thus, Greta turns the tables on him and claims the central power. Her authoritarian claims are so internalised by the other characters that her absence entails a kind of presence for them because Greta has turned them into 'docile' bodies that are easy to control and subdue. By reducing them the

point of docility, Greta produces “subjected and practised bodies” (Foucault, 1995, p. 138), through which, as Foucault argues “one may hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes” (p. 138). Thus, she epitomises the ultimate authority that is conventionally perceived as a patriarchal right and challenges patriarchal grand narratives about the superiority of the male over the female. Her authority is so much taken for granted that she does not have to do anything to position herself as the powerful one. The audience becomes acquainted with her ‘legend’ through the characters’ fear and respect even before she first appears on stage. When she joins the other characters, she literally takes centre stage. Stage directions also point to her central power because wherever she goes on the stage, “*the focus of attention seems to go with her*” (p. 55). At some point, she assumes the role of a schoolmaster with a cane in her hand, and threatens to ‘punish’ everyone including the audience. She becomes a figure of utmost authority, and “[a]n atmosphere of threat emanates from [her]” (p.58). To see Dean humbled, she adopts the patriarchal discourse about the weak and the strong. However, who is weak now is not a female in contradistinction to patriarchal narrative, but a male, one who has been holding sway over other characters. Thus, Greta puts Dean back in her place: “Try and beat me! Try and eat me! Hah! Look at you! You’re so weak you can’t stand, you’ll fall, you’re falling. [...] What are you? A whisp of will, a thread of pride, a sigh of thought” (p.85).

Her superiority is underscored with a power to create and produce life as she is equally able to take it away. This point is underpinned by Patty who is the representative of a conventional female figure:

PATTY. I wish I was—I wish I was Greta. Greta! [...] Anyone’ll do anything for her. She’ll have Solly caper down Blackpool pier with no clothes on and bash a copper with a Pepsi-Cola bottle. It’s like she makes something come busting out. Everyone’s got something inside and she makes it grow and grow and come busting out. (p. 21-2)

In this sense, she both literally gives birth to a baby at the end of the play and metaphorically lets people give birth to their inner and truer selves, which all the more emphasises the productiveness of Greta. This explains why all these characters have been waiting for Greta to come because she will let them loose in the process of ‘becoming’ what they really are, however painful it may be. This idea of becoming what you are not at the moment and what you hide from the others triggers Dean’s downfall from being a man of power with civilised virtues to a man totally afraid of the threat to his masculinity by a pregnant and “[f]rigid” (p. 83) woman, at the expense of an oxymoron.

Dean practises his authority and power on Dodo, who is the embodiment of the passive and subdued female, by preaching her about the atrocities of living in a world ruled by patriarchal hegemony even though he is one of those creating that hegemony in the first place:

DEAN. I’m strong and I understand . . . it’s terrible, terrible to be weak to try and bear the terror pressing in your imagination . . . each moment as it passes is a moment won

from being hurt . . . but what if they should come tonight? What if they should get you tonight? [...] Oh Dodo! I understand, I understand your fear. There's no loving trust that I withhold from you. Every privilege of my strength I share with you. There, there. (p. 65-6)

It would be too naïve not to see the kind of sadistic joy he gets for making sure that she is weak and he is strong. He uses the cold-war scenarios of looming dangers that will get them around the corner. As part of the cold war youth, they are seized by a sense of paranoia and an impending fear that may show itself any time. The 'they' that Dean makes frequent reference to both implies the rival gang members and all the other threats facing the youth in the post-war era.

Dean's desperate cries in the face of Greta and her ambivalent situation are understandable after dealing with Dodo in such an easy and smooth manner. His first attempt to overcome the obvious threats to his masculine identity is to understand her in clear-cut terms:

DEAN. I'm wondering whether your hair natural—Limey.

CONE. Greta!

GRETA. And what conclusion have you reached?

DEAN. It grows out of your head—

GRETA. Oh yes?

DEAN. And each Friday you dip it in blood—in human blood.

GRETA. In babies' blood.

[...]

DEAN. Tell me something of yourself, ma'am.

[...]

GRETA. I was reared in a cave by a female wallaby. Until I was seven I ran about on all fours and barked. (p. 73-4)

Once unable to 'decipher' Greta, Dean attempts to mystify her by describing her through non-human attributes. Having failed to categorise her according to the patriarchal framework, he resorts to this conclusion: "You sure are an extraordinary creature" (p. 74). However, Greta ridicules his vain efforts to fit her in a proper place within the binary oppositions of patriarchy through fabricating a past for herself, which, however unreal it may appear to a healthy mind, satisfies Dean because this is what he expects from her. She dehumanises herself on purpose on the grounds that for a woman to attain such power is not natural and she should be an anomaly. Furthermore, by

attempting to define and thus control her, Dean aims at “mastering Greta” (Snyder, 2000, p. 50). As a representative of the West, Dean tenaciously desires to define and understand everything because “[t]he West insists on the discrete identity of objects” with a “delusional certitude” (Paglia, 1991, p. 5). However, Dean’s yearning to verify the true identity of Greta is not gratified because, as Harold Pinter eloquently argues, “the desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied” (1991, p. ix).

Even though he believes that “[i]f people will only have patience and intelligence and will power there’s nothing we can’t master and control” (p. 66), he gets frustrated at being unable to master Greta. Then, he starts to preach her about ethics and responsibility, which will be shortly violated by himself:

DEAN. The human race is my business. [...] Strong people have a responsibility towards weak people. If the strong don’t help the weak where will it end? It’s back to chaos. Looking at it even from the meanest angle of self-interest: if you’re a strong person you must help weak people, you must look after old people, for instance. In your own interest you must establish it as a social habit, part of the morals of civilised society that the young and strong protect the weak and old. One day you yourself will be weak and old and then the social law you have made will be your protection. [...] [E]very time anyone does anything cruel or immoral he betrays mankind. (p. 81-2)

On the surface, Dean seems to be really interested in ethics and mutual responsibility of people as part of the human race. In this sense, his ideas resonate with John Donne’s famous remarks in “Meditation XVII”: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent. [...] Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind” (2003, p. 108-9). Dean seems to be very convincing in his argument that we are all vulnerable beings and hence we are ethically responsible for the well-being of one another. In this respect, Judith Butler’s ideas on vulnerability and responsibility prove quite helpful:

To say that any of us are vulnerable beings is thus to establish our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining world. This has implications for understanding who we are as passionate beings, as sexual, as bound up with others of necessity, but also as beings who seek to persist, and whose persistence can and is imperilled when social, economic, and political structures exploit or fail us. (2011, p. 1-2)

Thus, it can be asserted that we are bound to each other for the continuity of the life as it is. This lays bare the vulnerability of each and every individual with the implication that “translates into a binding ethical obligation toward that other” (Butler, 2011, p. 3). The kind of ethical obligation Dean pretends to feel towards the old and the weak, however, is triggered by a motive to protect solely his own



interests.

Nevertheless, Dean's seemingly genuine adherence to mutual responsibility and ethics is understood to be shallow in its philosophy in that just a moment after his tirade of a world of "serenity," "mutual assurance, a bedrock of mutual trust, of laws and decencies" (p. 83), he lashes out at Greta, who is in labour at the time:

DEAN. Pregnant! Pregnant woman! You pregnant! You're not fit to have a child. What'll your child be? What'll it's life be? [...] You're disgusting! You destroy people. [...] You gross thing! Man/woman, cruel! Unstable! Frigid! [...] You and your kind—how dare you? Look at me! [...] This is the first time, the first time you've had it, had it strong and true, and the first time, yes. And me? (p. 83-4)

Dean loses control of himself when he realises that he cannot subdue Greta, which emphasises "how his high-flown, abstract moral concepts have no grounding within reality but are simply a method for patriarchal society to contain the female power of creation which might prove overwhelming" (Snyder, 2000, p. 102). Moreover, he feels that his fading authority completely slips through his fingers. He wakes up to the fact that it is actually his first time that he receives a severe blow from a woman and his masculine identity is shattered by it. His misery is such that he calls for help from Dodo, who "runs away and exits" (p. 85), which is the second blow he receives. When he sees that his identity is at stake, he resorts to attacking Greta's identity and accuses her of being unstable, which supports the feminist argument that "'woman' is only a position that gains its (provisional) definition from its placement in relation to 'man'" (Poovey, 1988, p. 51).

His crisis of identity is understandable in view of the fact that identity formation of the center/self is in a close relationship with that of the 'other'. As Greta assumes the central position, he realises that he has become the 'other,' which brings an unnerving recognition to him that his identity is unstable and vulnerable to change. He needs the patriarchal construction of the weak feminine to position himself as the strong one. As Stuart Hall claims, identities "are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity—an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In this respect, the 'other' becomes indispensable in the construction of the identity of the center/self because "it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term — and thus its 'identity' — can be constructed" (Hall, 1996, p. 4-5, emphasis in the original). As the difference between Greta and Dean marks him as the powerless party, he does his best to occupy center again and become intelligible as the powerful and the authoritative one. By doing so, he inadvertently undermines the grand narrative of the notion of natural and unchanging identity in a world enriched with myriad identities.

In conclusion, Greta reinforces her utmost authority over all the characters by giving birth at

the end of the play, which highlights her capacity to give life and take it away, albeit indirectly, as she wills it, and underscores also how she does away with patriarchal rules and rigid codes of propriety with “an explosive promise of the new” (Carlson, 1994, p. 240) through the birth. She exclaims: “Rails, rules, laws, guides, promises, terms, guarantees, conventions, traditions: into the pot with the whole bloody lot” (p. 86). Hence, she challenges the social order established by patriarchy by giving birth despite Dean’s insistent claim that she should not and cannot, and also by unsettling the gender boundaries. Furthermore, *Sport* subverts the notion of inherent and primordial identity that is encrypted on the surface of the body, but emphasises the idea that identity is a term in process, thus never fixed and stable. In order to be eligible to bear an intelligible gender identity, individuals are expected to conform to gender-based definitions constructed by patriarchy and exercise the culturally established codes to remain one thing or another. Finally, by creating such a powerful woman figure as Greta who occupies centre stage through her subversion of patriarchal notions of femininity, Jellicoe underlines the fact that women should “put themselves on the stage—their history, their oppression, their humour, their experience, their *bodies*” (Thompson, 1992, p. 41; emphasis in the original) without heeding any voice arguing otherwise.

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