

**THE MOTHER - DAUGHTER BOND:  
"DAUGHTERLY PERSPECTIVES" BY  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS.**

**Yard. Doç. Dr. Nur Gökalp (\*)**

In very general terms American drama has been defined as family drama. Especially in the post-World War I period, a period in which American drama established its own tone and distinctiveness and started to achieve world-wide recognition, a wide variety of family plays attract attention. These are either autobiographical plays through which playwrights attempt to come to grips with their pasts by retelling the familial stories or they are plays aiming at social and/or political criticism within a family situation. This long line of playwrights from Eugene O'Neill to Sam Shepard presents a haunted image of the American family, a once glorified institution which gradually came to signify entrapment, enslavement, loss of identity and a mixture of love and hate. A characteristic all these American families have in common is the negative mother figure: They are mostly women who are considered to have emasculated their husbands; they are strong-willed, possessive and selfish; they have total control and power in the domestic realm and in the upbringing of their children. These children later in their lives suffer from problems resulting from maternal repression and interference. Their problems of breaking away and their efforts to establish an identity and life of their own become one of the central issues of these plays. The mothers of Sidney Howard's **Silver Cord** (1926), Clifford Odets' **Awake and Sing** (1935), Tennessee Williams' **Glass Menagerie** (1944), Eugene O'Neill's **Desire Under the Elms** (1923), Arthur Kopit's **Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad** (1960), and Edward Albee's **The American Dream** (1960) are just a few memorable examples that come to mind immediately and show mothers at their worst.

American mothers at their best are pictured as detached, weak shallow and self-centered. They are always peripheral and do not have any directly destructive or constructive effect in the family

(\*) Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Öğretim Üyesi

sphere. Though they have major problems of their own, these problems are never central to the play. The issues raised are generally related to the father or the children or they are specifically about the relationship between father and son. The mothers of Eugene O'Neill's **Long Day's Journey into Night** (1955), Arthur Miller's **Death of a Salesman** (1949), **All My Sons** (1947) and **After the Fall** (1964), Sam Shepard's **Curse of the Starving Class** (1977), **True West** (1980) and **Buried Child** (1978) are some typical examples.

In view of the fact that all the above mentioned generalizations and examples are related to male playwrights, one might wonder about the maternal figures created by women playwrights. As opposed to one's expectations that women playwrights would create more positive images of women and motherhood, their plays reflect polarized attitudes to motherhood which have frequently changed according to the social and political climate of the country. Nevertheless it is still possible to claim that the emerging image of the mother created by women playwrights is not quite optimistic.

Especially at the beginning of the twentieth century with the burgeoning of the first wave feminist movement, mother figures became the center of attention. Both the first and second wave feminists made motherhood their central concerns and in one degree or another considered maternity and child-raising an important aspect of female life. Some considered maternity the source of female oppression and children as the sole reasons of keeping the woman tied to the home and thus preventing her participation in the outside world. Particularly in the 1970s, attitudes fluctuated between trying to find ways of liberating women from the drudgery of motherhood, to stigmatizing the mother as the forebearer of patriarchy by rearing her children into traditional gender roles. This was followed, in the 1980s, by a new trend to rediscover motherhood and glorify the pleasures and power of it. But still the topic has done little to change the unpleasant image of the mother.

The most outstanding aspect of the literary works on the subject of motherhood by male and female playwrights alike is that it generally concentrated on relations between mothers and sons. It was only in the mid-1970s that the neglected topic of women to women, specifically, mother-daughter relationships attracted the attention of women writers and turned out to be a versatile and delicate subject. The topic resulted in a body of work on the theme of the mother's presence in the literary daughter's consciousness. A quick look through the contents of **Mothers: Memories, Dreams and Reflections by Literary Daughters** edited by Susan Cahill shows the importance

of the mother in the daughter's formation. This collection of non-fiction by well-known women writers presents the mother figure with affection and sympathy. The writers describe their mothers in terms of

what they looked and smelled and sounded like, what they said and did, how they thought as mothers and neighbors, and citizens, who they were as people and what difference it all made to their daughters' unfolding.  
(xii)

Cahill continues by claiming that these narratives take us to the "heart of reality and that the experience between mother and daughter is one of attachment and state that this relationship and communion are the clues that tell us the most about who women are (xiv).

This question about female identity was actually what started feminist drama in the United States. The consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s not only helped women to discover who they were and how to interact with other women, but also created interesting material for the stage. During this process of self-questioning women realized that, among the many problems they faced in forming their identities and communities, their relationships with other women, specifically their mothers, were the most enigmatic, Helene Keyssar, too, had observed a similar problem in plays written by women playwrights in the sixties and early seventies and had noted that for these playwrights "authentic reflections of women had to reveal the hesitations women had in making themselves vulnerable with each other" (121).

Maria Irene Fornes was one of the playwrights who emphasized this problem and tried to overcome it by way of her works, but dealt with it most emphatically in **Fefu and her Friends** (1978):

Men are well together. Women are not. .. Men have natural strength. Women have to find their strength, and when they do find it, it comes forth with bitterness and it's erratic... Women are restless with each other. They are like live wires ... either chattering to keep themselves from making contact, or else, ... they avert their eyes (13).

A community of women could be established only when women learned to make contact with each other and could be comfortable in each other's presence. Then they would be strong enough to overcome oppression of all kinds. Many women playwrights have preferred to explore this process by analyzing mother-daughter relationships and the emerging picture was not as "affectionate and sympathetic" as Susan Cahill's collection indicated.

In the majority of such plays, the tone is angry, grudging, bitter and even hateful. The mother infiltrates into the daughter's life so deeply that the daughter has to move away and stay away from her mother in order to grow up and form an autonomous self. This over-protective and over-demanding type of mother threatens the daughter's integrity and sanity; she imbues the daughter with feelings of guilt and shame, reminds her of the sacrifices she has made for her and expects the same in return. On the other hand, there is the disinterested, self-absorbed mother who has abandoned her daughter, and the daughter has to cope with the bitterness and pain of desertion. In both cases, the daughter is torn between her need for the mother's love and approval, and a desire to be free of the pressure. As Marianne Hirsch observes, these "mothers are either powerful and angry or they are frustrated, trivial, inconsequential, sometimes comic. Dead or absent mothers are the only positive maternal figures" (47).

Ursule Molinaro's **Breakfast Past Noon** (1968), is an archetypal example of the relationship between an interfering mother and a daughter savagely fighting for her privacy and independence. The moment her forty-three year old daughter wakes up, the sixty-eight-year old mother fixes her attention on her "little girl" and starts "advising" her on cigarettes, black coffee, locking the bathroom door, letting the water run too hot, ruining her marriage, seeing a black man, etc. She believes she is imperative to the health, happiness and reputation of her daughter. She does not realize that her daughter is a separate individual with a life of her own. She is possessive and obstinate in protecting the life she has given birth to. Her daughter calls this a "proprietary way of thinking" about her, "as though I were an investment she had made. Worrying that it might not pay off" (94). The mother's concern is presented more as an obsession than as a result of love and care. The battle of words builds up to such a suffocating point that when the daughter stuffs her burning cigarette into her mother's mouth and the mother tries to strangle her daughter (neither of them believing that the other is trying to hurt her "in earnest"), the audience feels that there was no other recourse.

A similar imposition of will is seen in Gina Wendkos and Ellen Ratner's **Personality**. The fifty-four-year old Lorette keeps close track of her thirty-year-old daughter Ellen, over the telephone. Ellen has her own inspirations and desires but at the same time she is trying to live up to this "enviable" image of hair, smile, figure, face, and personality that her mother has in her mind.

The good personality Lorette is trying to impose upon Ellen is actually formulated social attitudes: Four is the number of men to sleep

with before a woman gets a bad reputation; if a woman is not attractive enough to get a husband, then she should get a skill, find a job and find the husband in or around her office; a woman should know how to cook and clean; a woman who is "aware" should be the right weight and wear the right colors; everyone should watch, imitate and like her. But Ellen rejects all this, she wants to take the magazine images out of her head;

I want the little things, things I can understand. ... A piece of corn I can understand, but what is a personality? Huh Ma? What is a personality? I'm lazy, I'm sloppy, and I have flat feet. Take me or leave me. Hopefully she'll take me. (37)

The play ends with the phone ringing, but Ellen does not answer it. Though she wants her mother's love and approval, she also knows that she has to stop the interference to be able to develop her own personality.

A mother who tries to imbue her daughter with patriarchal values is also at the center of Joan Holden's feminist parody of melodrama, **The Independent Female**, written in 1970. The heroine, Gloria is engaged to marry a young executive and the price she has to pay is to give up her career and become a supportive wife. Gloria has her doubts, but her mother advises her against any foolish notion of independence though her own marriage had been an unsuccessful enterprise:

You'll get used to it. You see, darling, there is one thing education and modern home appliances and the pill can't change, and that's the basic difference between a man and a woman. A man has his pride. We may not be slaves in our homes any longer, but our main job is still to help our man feel strong. (196)

When Gloria is converted to feminist ideas and starts leading a campaign for women's rights despite the threats of her fiancé, her mother cries out "I've failed again! Failed as a mother!" (200). Her daughter's satisfaction and happiness is no relief to her.

In Martha Boesing's **Trespasso** (1977), Mickey and Agatha's mothers are also failures in the sense that, in order to survive, the girls have to break free from the unhealthy maternal bond and forget all the teachings and preachings of their mothers. Agatha cannot stop quoting her mother whose instructions she is trying to base her life on. Her mother had taught her, "whatever you do, do it with all of your heart. When you give, give all of yourself. ... But save yourself for the best. No one is good enough for you", but she also said, "don't wear your heart on your sleeve; don't show what you're feeling" (4), implying that girls who were mysterious had much better luck with men.

As a result, Agatha cannot seem to adjust to this confusing world her mother has presented and prefers to live in the hallucinations she creates one after the other. On the other hand, Mickey calls her mother "creep" because once she gave her this doll with curly hair and blue eyes, saying it reminded her of Mickey whose hair was "straight as a fence post" and her eyes were not blue. Her mother's life was a "vale of tears"; she mourned over her dead son and kept warning Mickey, "Life ain't no bowl of cherries. You'll get your comeuppance" (13), as if she wanted Mickey to be punished for living. So, Mickey thinks everything is a test and that she will be punished if she does not pass that test.

In general, both girls were taught that someone was constantly watching everything they said and did. This ominous and omniscient eye that aimed to guarantee their good behavior is in fact an accumulation of centuries; it is what their mothers were taught by their grandmothers to be passed on to their daughters. This has resulted in a haunting sense of worthlessness and constant fear in Agatha and Mickey until they meet and start to communicate with each other. Towards the end of the play Mickey realizes that she is not that bad, and Agatha considers the possibility that Mickey might not be an hallucination. As Mickey says:

I've lasted this long... I mean I have seen the face of hell...  
Anyone who's lasted as long as I have must be o.k. So  
make hay while the sun shines, Nelly. That's what I say. I  
am a survivor. Hey! we're all survivors. (13)

Realizing her own strength and supporting Agatha in her plight, Mickey forms a bond between them. From now on they will walk together.

The possessiveness of the mother and her desire to protect and keep the child with her forever is depicted in a striking episode in Tina Howe's **Birth and After Birth** (1973). As narrated by an anthropologist couple, Mia and Jeffrey Freed, when a baby is born in the primitive Whan See tribe, the very instant it emerges, the women of the tribe lift the baby and reinsert it back into its mother's womb. As soon as the baby is born another time, the act is repeated over and over again. These fetal insertions as Jeffrey explains, were meant to be an act of prolonging the experience of motherhood. As Jeffrey continues:

When a civilized woman has a baby, she too is possessive, only in more subtle ways. She's possessive in her birth experience and delights in retelling it. She's possessive of her baby and tries to keep him helpless for as long as possible. Well, these Stone Age women were just acting out the same possessiveness by reinserting the baby into its mother's womb. (167)

A civilized version of a similar possessiveness can be observed in Martha Boesing's **Pimp** (1974), where Jo decides to sell her daughter when she realizes she cannot keep Adrian as hers forever:

She was such a beautiful child - always smiling in her sleep. I'd touch her ever so lightly, tucking the covers up under the chin. I'd lay my hand against her cheek. It was soft. I wanted to take her in my arms, hold her against my breast. I had to resist waking her up and pushing her back inside of me somehow! Don't you understand? She was my flesh! But now she thinks she is separate from me! What does she know of that? She said that I smothered her! That ungrateful little wart! That's when I decided to sell her. She owed me that much at least. (212)

As Hirsch states, psychoanalytic theories while telling the story of child development, traditionally cast the mother as the one who desires connection and the child as the one who struggles to separate (105). In fact, separation for the child is a necessary step to maturity. It is a process which implies that the mother will be slighted or replaced; so, it becomes a process that the mother would like to hinder.

In **Pimp**, Adrian needs to grow, but this does not mean that she has no need for a mother. In fact, when she desperately tries to persuade her mother against selling her, she is ready to give everything she has, especially love which she offers in various forms:

Who will comb my hair?  
My hair will get all tangled.  
.....  
I'd sweep the floors, mama.  
I'd wash the dishes  
I'd clean my room.  
I'd comb your hair, mama.  
Your hair's so pretty.  
I'd read to you at night.  
When you can't sleep at night, mama?  
.....  
And scratch your back.  
Like you did when I was seven.  
Do you remember, mama?  
Don't make me go.  
I'm your daughter, mama.

I'll be your sister.  
You never had a sister.  
I'll be your mama, mama.  
I'll take care of you! (212)

In the absence of healthy mother-daughter relationships, one of the most widely applied solutions was to replace motherhood by sisterhood or surrogate motherhood. The daughter who willingly or unwillingly separates from the mother still needs nurturance and support. So she turns to her "sisters" as maternal figures. The most important aspect of this relationship is that the nurturance and encouragement are mutual and the bond involves no power structure. As Hirsch states, "the ideal of sisterhood and of reciprocal surrogate motherhood highlights the maternal as function but rejects and makes invisible the actual mother, who, it is implied, infantilizes the daughter and fails to encourage autonomy" (164). Agatha and Mickey in **Trespaso** form a sisterly bond of this sort when they start by developing interest in each other and then decide they have to help each other. Adrian in **Pimp** emphasizes not only her need but her mother's need for love and support when she offers to be sister and mother to her mother. If they cannot be mother and daughter, they can at least be sisters or the daughter can become the mother. The three sisters in Beth Henley's **Crimes of the Heart** (1982), after many years, gather in the "motherless" family home during a family crisis and discover the strength and beauty of their union. In **Getting Out** (1980), Marsha Norman's heroine also finds solace in another woman when her mother refuses her. The schizophrenic character Arlie/Arlene has just been released from prison and is trying to adjust to a new life. This new life includes getting rid of the memory and/or presence of all the men that have abused her, including her father. But the women have treated her no better. Of the numerous sisters she has, none have called or visited for years, neither has her mother. The mother, out of a belated sense of duty, visits Arlene shortly after her release, brings some presents and tries to help her settle down in her new apartment. Nevertheless, during her visit she constantly criticizes Arlene's "stringy" hair, and "skinny" body, and makes clear that she does not want Arlene, this "hateful brat" to be a burden to her and a bad example to the kids she has at home. As she leaves, taking back her presents, she does not allow Arlene to embrace her, as she had done when she first entered. Having failed to revive the mother-daughter bond between them, and left on her own, Arlene turns to her neighbor Ruby, an ex-convict. As a woman who has lear-

ned to survive and has the capacity to support another, Ruby becomes a positive model in the play and serves as the mother-surrogate.

As seen in the examples above, all written through "daughterly perspectives", as Hirsch calls them, the tones of these plays are bitter or pained. The playwrights, themselves mothers or not, never employ a mother's point of view. They need to dramatize their sufferings of having been neglected or smothered. They offer no solutions to the problems between mothers and daughters other than escape or replacement. The daughter satisfies her need to be nurtured through other women. She performs "radical surgery" in Adrienne Rich's term, and cuts her mother out. In fact this is the expression of a deeply rooted fear as Rich claims:

Daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are trying to break free of. ... Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. (Hirsch 136)

When Kim Chernin's mother decides to write the family history and asks her daughter's help for this project that will take years, though she loves and respects her mother, Chernin experiences a similar "dread":

It will draw me back into the family, waking its ghosts. It will bring the two of us together to face all the silences and secrets we have kept. The very idea of it changes me. I'm afraid. I fear, as any daughter would, losing myself back into the mother. (64)

Chernin's is an excellent description of what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia" - "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood, but of becoming one's mother" (Hirsch 136). And becoming one's mother, looking into her and through her, seeing and understanding the forces acting upon her seems to be the unavoidable and most pivotal step in the daughter's relation to her mother. The most common situation in which this is experienced is the impending death or the loss of the mother. This experience is also accompanied by the horror of ultimate separation and loneliness. The daughter has to accept the absence of this omni-present, protective being and has to adapt to being an adult. She is no longer a daughter, she is now a separate in-

dividual. She has to face her mother with her negative and positive sides and usually for the first time becomes aware of her love for her mother and appreciates the good she has done to her. These are instances of forgiveness and become the most crucial moments in a daughter's life - the separation of selves into an autonomous self. As Margaret in Honor Moore's **Mourning Pictures** (1974) asks at her mother's deathbed:

I can't see myself. How do I know I'm me and not her? ... I have always been her, and it has never mattered who was who. (242-43)

Martha Boesing deals with the similar issue in **The Story of a Mother** (1977), a ritual drama which explores the separation of mothers and daughters by means of uniting them. The scenes are about the myths, memories, feelings and the bonding of mothers and daughters and are "interspersed with structured audience participation in which all present are invited to see the world as their mothers did, and to speak both the spoken and the unspoken words which hang in the air between all daughters and their mothers" (44).

The production begins with the "Mourning" segment in which each actress mourns the death of her mother. This is followed by the first ritual of "The Calling forth of the Mothers" in which each actress and audience member evokes her mother, approaches her, looks at her, speaks, touches and asks her "Can I enter you?" Once the daughter enters the mother and fits in, fully aware of herself as the mother, she is asked to open her eyes and see the world as the mother saw it. Then each, speaking as her mother, calls out "I always said" and finishes it with a phrase appropriate to her own mother. When everyone has spoken, each woman is asked to close her eyes, to get in touch with that part of her which is not her mother, to leave the mother in the same way she entered her, to see herself separate from the mother, to tell the mother what it felt like to be her, to say goodbye, to open her eyes and see the world again as she herself sees it.

This most interesting segment is followed by others entitled "Hiding", "Initiating", "Separating" and "Birthing" in which the whole cycle of a girl growing into a mother is acted out. The last segment is called "The Introductions: The Conclusion" in which each actress introduces herself and her mother's name ("I am Celia, daughter of Margaret"), inviting the audience to stand and do the same.

The production acknowledges the hidden pains and secrets, the destructive and constructive aspects of mother-daughter relationships, but ends in a celebration of motherhood, a celebration of being

the daughters of those mothers and leaves the audience with an affirmation of recreation and continuity.

Quite few in number, these types of plays are compassionate and reconciliatory. The daughter, so engulfed in her own victimization during her mother's lifetime, can manage to see things through her mother's perspective only after her death. Initially bewildered, she tries to come to terms with the buried problems and ghosts of the past. Gradually, her anger is transformed into remorse. As Hirsch states, it is only after the death of the mother, that the daughter shows an effort to know and explore the details of her mother's life and tries to incorporate them into her own vision; only then can desire and memory become instruments of connection, reconstruction and reparation. Death enables mothers to be present rather than absent (97).

Although these two situations may seem different from each other - the first depicting a negative, the second a positive image of the mother - they are in fact extensions of each other or rather one is a sequel to the other. A daughter, no matter how angry or hurt, at one time of her life, has to recognize her mother. She must learn to see beyond differences and generations. The survival and maturation daughters have been striving for is incomplete when achieved by ignoring the mother, because a woman cannot be fully grown unless she acknowledges the woman who has given her life. These women overlook the fact that while complaining about their own victimizations, ironically, they victimize other women. They bury their mothers alive, and when the mother is dead they try to bring her back to life. Acknowledging the mother after her death, naturally, causes greater pain compared to the struggle given for reconciliation during her lifetime. Nina Baym claims that the difference between woman and woman is more profound than the male-female difference. If a woman does not recognize her mother as a woman, but a monster; sees other women as her mother, then, there is no future for a commonality of women (58). Daughters speak for and about their mothers, mothers speak for and about their daughters, but the real communion will never happen unless mothers and daughters learn to speak to each other.

Reminding us that the earth was forced to cease its fertility until Demeter's daughter Persephone was returned from Hades, Susan Cahill states:

Nothing can live or grow on earth while the mother-daughter bond is broken... this bond is essential to the

progress of life itself. Nothing can grow while this relational circle of love and care remains violated. (xiv)

*BIBLIOGRAPHY*

- Baym, Nina. "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory." **Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship**. Ed. Shari Benstock. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Boesing, Martha. **Pimp in A Century of Plays by American Women**. Ed. Rachel France. New York: Richard Rosen Press, Inc., 1979.
- . **Story of a Mother in Women in American Theatre**. Eds. Helen Chinoy and Linda Jenkins. New York: Crown Publishers, 1981.
- . **Trespass** Unpublished script. 1977.
- Cahill Susan, ed. **Mothers: Memories, Dreams and Reflections by Literary Daughters**. New York: Mentor, 1988.
- Chernin, Kim. "In My Mother's House." **Mothers: Memories, Dreams and Reflections by Literary Daughters**. Ed. Susan Cahill. New York: Mentor, 1988.
- Fornes, Maria Irene. **Fefu and Her Friends in Wordplays: An Anthology of New American Drama**. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1980.
- Henley, Beth. **Crimes Of the Heart**. New York: The Viking Press, 1982.
- Hirsch, Marianne. **The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Holden, Joan. **The Independent Female in A Century of Plays by American Women**. Ed. Rachel France. New York: Richard Rosen Press, Inc., 1979.
- Howe, Tina. **Birth and After Birth in The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary Women**. Ed. Honor Moore. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Keyssar, Helene. **Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women**. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Molinaro, Ursule. **Breakfast Past Noon in The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary Women**. Ed. Honor Moore. New vintage Books, 1977.
- Moore, Honor. Mourning Pictures in **The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary Women**. Ed. Honor Moore. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Norman, Marsha. **Getting Out**. New York: Nelson Doubleday, Inc., 1979.
- Wendko, Gina and Ellen Ratner. **Personality in Women Heroes: Six Short Plays from the Women's Project**. New York: Applause Books, 1986.