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GRT
**POWERLESS FEMALE FIGURES IN TWENTIETH
CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA**

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Abstract:- Before the 1960s and 1970s period of the American Feminist movement, women had no separate identity from that of their husbands, deprived as they were of any legal or political rights. In the American capitalist, patriarchal system of the early twentieth century, marriage was the only way for women to secure financial stability for the future. The early twentieth century patriarchal ideas confined women to the domestic sphere. Hence the playwrights of this period portray women as passive, dependent and weak. Women are shown as committed to the service of the family in the traditional feminine nursing role. Twentieth century American sociologists like Talcott Parsons argue that woman's role within the family is primarily linked to "the internal affairs of the family, as wife, mother and manager of the household" (14). Even the 1950s TV shows such as *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet* displayed a kind of family model managed by a patriarch whose authority was usually absolute. Women were presented as happy in their role of a full time homemaker, rearing children. Women who had trouble adjusting to creative homemaking were labeled unnatural, neurotic or schizophrenic. The present paper serves to illustrate the victimhood of women as depicted in the family dramas of American playwrights Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard. The plays selected include Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and Shepard's *Buried Child* (1979). In these plays, the male struggle extends itself into the public world, while the female struggle is confined to the private sphere of the home. Even though women occupy a central position within the family, it is men who confront society.

Keywords: Submissive, stereotypical, masculinity, patriarchy, victim, other

INTRODUCTION

Female characters have been allotted a marginalized status in majority of early twentieth century American dramas. The women in such dramas seem to be 'othered', succumbing to the periphery of a paternal world. Feminist readings of these plays tend to view females as mere victims of a patriarchal culture and they disapprove of the stereotypical representations of submissive female characters by these kinds of playwrights.

The roots of this othering of the females lie in the notions of 'masculinity' that twentieth century American men have inherited through the patriarchal inheritance of American frontier mythology. The masculine myth of the frontier infused a notion of 'rugged individualism', 'freedom', 'isolation' and 'independence' into the psyche of American males. The frontier came to stand for freedom and adventure, a place for men, opposed to the constraints of the town and civilization associated with women. Intertwined with this concept of individualism was the myth of the American Dream- the gospel of wealth. The American Dream provided the frontier's openers an environment ripe with opportunity in which the settlers could pursue 'dreams' of limitless wealth and self-realization. The myth of the American Dream was thus an offshoot of industrialization, capitalism, and consumerism - in short, the modernization of the western economy. Motivated by a desire to strive and succeed, the twentieth century American male now assumed the role of a patriarch with an absolute authority. He was the sole bread-winner

of the family and the woman had to take charge as a full time homemaker, rearing children.

The western tradition gradually came to view independence and concern for others as mutually exclusive traits. Caring for others was confined to women, and personal autonomy was denied them; personal autonomy was reserved for men, and caring for others was denied them. The success of the man was achieved at enormous cost to the wife, who was expected to subordinate her own needs and aspirations to those of both her husband and her children. They were thus first and foremost defined in relation to their roles as wives and mothers.

The dramatic world of twentieth century American playwrights Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard is a world of men. The female figures in their plays follow the typical fictional role of the submissive wife and mother. Such female characters tend to be what men would desire in women, without giving a too- accurate portrayal of an actual person. They can only be defined in relation to other characters and they exist only to support their husbands. According to Matthew Roudane, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* "presents a grammar of space that marginalizes Linda Loman and, by extension, all women, who seem othered, banished to the periphery of a paternal world" ("*Death of a...*" 61). Miller's drama is often criticized for its limited representation of female characters. Similarly, Judith E. Barlow while commenting on Eugene O'Neill's depiction of females in his play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, describes O'Neill's Mary Tyrone as "a figure whose suffering exposes the limitations and paradoxes imposed on women in a world shaped around male desires" (172). Florence Falk states: "[m]en are the energy centers of most of Shepard's plays, while women take peripheral roles" (95-96).

The female characters of O'Neill's *Journey*, Miller's *Salesman*, and Shepard's *Buried Child*, give an expression to the way the women's lives are restricted to femininity, confined to the domestic sphere. Mary Tyrone in *Journey* and Linda Loman in *Salesman* are women who have devoted their lives to the wellbeing of their families. Mary and Linda follow the footsteps of their husbands, thereby fitting well into the category of "The Second Sex". Willy Loman in *Salesman* is obviously defined in relation to his role in the public world while Linda is defined only in relation to her husband. Her reliance on Willy and her position in the home is immediately brought to mind. Considering Willy's frequent attempts to silence Linda, the husband's desire for authority over his wife is made strikingly evident by Miller. Willy tries to affirm his role as a patriarch by subjecting Linda to verbal abuse:

LINDA: Isn't that wonderful?

WILLY: *Don't interrupt...*

LINDA: Maybe things are beginning to—

WILLY [*wildly enthused, to LINDA*]: *Stop interrupting!* ...

LINDA: He loved you!

WILLY [*to LINDA*]: *Will you stop!* ...

LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him—

WILLY: *Will you let me talk?* (62, 64-65).

Linda remains a less interesting character and very little information is available regarding her past or her family. It seems as if like a colonized being, her history started only after she became Willy's wife. Linda exists to fan the flames of her husband's longings and 'ideals', thus making it impossible for the audience to see her loyalty in a positive way.

Similarly, throughout *Journey*, Mary's needs are completely eclipsed by the frequent demands made by the male members of the family. She recalls her thwarted dreams after marrying Tyrone: "I had two dreams. To be a nun, that was the more beautiful one. To become a concert pianist, that was the other"... "For a time after my marriage I tried to keep up my music. But it was hopeless" (106). Her husband Tyrone expresses his disgust at his wife's dreams as, "They are innocent women, anyway, when it comes to the world. They don't know that not one in a million who shows promise ever rises to concert playing (...) And the idea that she might have become a nun. That's the worst" (140). Mary thus stands as an example of women who are subservient to men who don't allow them to harbor ambitions of any kind. Mary and Tyrone's physiognomy too has polarities. Marked by extreme nervousness, Mary is portrayed by O'Neill as the insecure, delicate female while the latter is depicted as the confident, powerful male.

One must reflect on the noteworthy changes in the roles and opinions of women brought by the Women's Movement during the 1960s and 70s. However critics still evaluate the 1960s American playwright Shepard as displaying a tendency to downgrade his female characters. He pushes his female characters off stage. This is primarily because Shepard's masculinized landscape victimizes women and critics have accused Shepard of being a misogynist. While commenting on Shepard's 1980 *True West*, Doris Auerbach argues that "[t]he father's mythical western world of manliness, rootlessness and violence is pitted against the world of mom and her kitchen" (57). In Shepard's Pulitzer winning play *Buried Child* (1979), the major power imbalance between husband and wife is suggested by the fact that Halie and Dodge inhabit different floors in the house. Halie remains an intangible voice during much of the first act of the play, occupying a position upstairs while Dodge is situated downstairs. Dodge constantly tries to ignore her, begging her: "Don't come down!" (64). He tries to distract the audience from everything she says and refuses to reply to Halie's questions. Halie is an absent mother, mostly upstairs, unaware of what is happening to her family. Even Dodge recognizes this: "Things keep happening while you're upstairs, ya know. The

world doesn't stop just because you're upstairs. Corn keeps growing. Rain keeps raining" (Buried...19). Like most of Shepard's female figures, Halie is too weak to counteract the violence of the males (fathers) in the family. As Doris Auerbach asserts: "The powerless mother figure is not only unable to protect her children but has the violence of the father projected onto her: 'You never saw a bitch eating her puppies?'" (44). Halie upholds the stereotypical notions of masculinity dismayed as she is by the lack of achievements that distinguish her husband and sons: "What's happened to the men of this family! Where are the men!" (124). As a writer, Shepard does care more about his male characters than his female characters, but he does provide a scathing critique of patriarchal ideas wherein he depicts a kind of patriarchal structure that fails not only women who are subjugated but also the men who are supposed to benefit from it.

The women in such dramas thus merely prioritize their husbands' needs; their responsibilities reflect American masculinized and patriarchal models of rewards. Their function is exclusively that of women providing assistance to the plays' male protagonists. The powerlessness of these female characters is a tool that the men use to assert their masculinity. The relationship between men and women in these plays is as Matthew Roudane says that of a colonizer and colonized: "...the colonized subject is viewed as a feminized subject in the sexist sense of being weak and in need of subjugation, while the colonizer is presented as masculine in the sexist sense of being powerful and a natural leader"(164).

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