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The She-Tragedies of Marsha Norman: Twentieth Century American Drama

Harshita Dwivedi

Research Scholar, Deptt. Of English, A.P.S. University, Rewa (M.P.), India.

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 infant American drame was born amid the din and howl of a revolution, a birth unnoticed by the press of events at the time, but nonetheless significant. After the battle or Independence was won, America was too busy proving itself a nation to nourish drame. To curry favor with European nations, translation, adaptations of the works of accomplished foreign playwrights were permitted and even encouraged in the United States. All this time the translators were busy keeping abreast of the dramas containing the latest trends of thought from Europe. The plays of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and August Strindberg came as a startling revelation to American playwright. Particularly the young hopefuls longing for greater substance in the offering of the American theater, it served as a stimulus and challenge to fledging dramatists eager to try their wings. The theatre has always been bound strictly by the entry, the dramatist as its has always been the least independent of artists, because he employs so many distinct elements, all of which must be properly united in his work. The year 1912 was really an extraordinary year in America as well as in Europe. It was the year of the election of Wilson, a symptom of immense political discontent. It was a year of intense women-suffragist activity. In the arts in marked a new era. Color was everywhere - even in neckties. It was now that the Irish players came to America. It was then that plans were made for the Post - Impressionist show, which revolutionized American ideas of art. In Chicago, Maurice Brown started The Little Theatre. One could go on with the evidence of a New Spirit, come suddenly to birth in America.

Keywords: Submissive, stereotypical, masculinity, patriarchy.

Introduction

For a long time there was no theatre in America. America was a wilderness that had to be tamed first, and then it was a colony, not a country. To these shores came people of many nationalities, most of them seeking refuge of some sort - refuge from religious or political persecution, from justice or injustice. Some sought adventure, some riches, some romance, many merely longed or peace. All, whether they wished or not became pioneers whose years were spent in wrestling the land from the Indians; in felling the trees, building homes, building soil. Small time for recreation, for entertainment, for literature and no time at all for an art the combined the three: the theatre.

By its very nature the drame - The literature o the theatre - is more closely bound to the marketplace than any other literary form. Poetry exists even if it is not published, and a novel may sell very few copies but remain on the literary shelves to be discovered later. But a play is simply not a play until it is put on stage and it is likely not to exist for posterity unless it proves itself on stage, it is the general rule that plays are not published unless they have had successful productions. The theatre took a long time come of age. The novelists early told their tales. And the poets sang their songs. But those who might have written great drame involved the people, the public was concerned. The government could raise its iron hand.

The American theater at the ends of the nineteenth century was in the seemingly unbreakable hold of business who had slight interest in the merits of drama as an art but were very aware of the theatre's possibility for financial reward. The theater at the start of the century was strictly commercialized popular art of transitory value. Little more than a means of making money for theatre managers and a limited number of leading actors in a system geared to profit as its sole means of survival, any idealized concept of dramatic art was necessarily sacrificed to money - making.

Monopolist control of theatrical production, well established at the end of the nineteenth century had long maintained the commercial safety of familiar formulas geared to second rate dramatic writing. For a national public beginning to awaken the possibility of high - quality original American drama, there was little to choose from. Almost every first class house throughout the country was controlled by either the Syndicate of Mark Klaw and A.L. Erlanger or the Theatre Trust operated by Sam, Lee, and J.J. Shubert, playwrights and star actors alike found themselves caught between two powerful booking agencies that often ruthlessly exploited their talents. With the increasing corrosion of the restrictive influence of the business oriented, formula - bound producers, American drama, late as it was, began to change in direction that could even be termed revolutionary. Gradually relaizing their growing influence, actors, dramatists, directors, and designers began to develop a rapport among themselves that soon led to the formation of independent theatre companies dedicated not to the business of money-making but to the creation of a meaningful art.

The growth of the Little Theatre Movement that began the rapid turnaround of American drama received a powerful impetus when the Abbey Theatre brought its troupe of Irish Players to the country. For the First time Americans were provided with a direct demonstration of what the evolving artistic ferment in Europe was all about. There was, indeed, a

sense, even before the First World War opened a gap of experience and perceptions between the generations, which the world was on the move. Partly it was the natural hubris of a new century, the feeling that forms and conventions adequate to the nineteenth century could hardly be adequate to the twentieth century, but partly it was a general reflection of signs of change. Bu the end of World War One little theatres zealously devoted to abandoning the old entrenched positions that had been organized throughout the United States.

As early as 1909 an attempt was made in New York to found a permanent art repertory company at the New Theatre under the direction of Winthrop Ames. Though technically very advanced, it undertook an ambitious program of star - studded production that relied too heavily on European initiation without ever becoming a part of American artistic life. It failed within two seasons. Immediately afterward, and on its own Winthrop Ames founded the Little Theatre in New York in 1912, only to experience another quick failure. Int he same year two other noteworthy if short lived, groups were established with the same anti - commercial artistic standards. Chicago's Little Theatre was opened by Maurice Brown and world last for five seasons. Mrs. Layman Gale's Toy Theatre in Boston endured for little more than two years.

In 1916 the Cleveland Playhouse, at first strictly amateur but soon fully professional, began its long and influential career. In the same year Gilmore Brown founded the prestigious Pasadena Community Playhouse and Same Hume began the important Detroit Arts and Crafts Theater. In the Deep South the Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre' appeared in New Orleans in 1919. Others of varying distinctions and endurance sprang up around the country, the best known including the Indianapolis Little Theatre, the Wisconsin Players, and the Los Angeles Little Theatre. While isolated from each other and relatively few in numbers totaling at most fifty groups across the nation. These semiprofessional and professional little theatres were indicative of America's growing interest in creating its own native art theatres paralleling those already established in Europe.

ON the academic level experimental groups, often known as Workshop Theatres, were also playing their part in fostering a more respected attitude towards Native American drama. The most influential was created in 1905 first Radcliffe and then at Harvard, by George Pierce Baker, who began a playwriting course called English 47, its purpose being to train students in dramatic and theatrical techniques. For all the surge of devotion to the new spirit in these widely varied experiments, in following the course of modern American drama we must first turn to the three little theatres of New York, all dating from 1915. The Neighbourhood Playhouse, the Provincetown Players, and the Washington Square Players. Appearing as a nation's theatrical activity, they presented their wares to the public as genuine alternative choices. Their impact was immediate, their influence permanent.

The Neighbourhood Playhouse, established in 1912, grew out of the activities of the Henry Street Settlement. Alice and Irene Lewisohn, started by a directing lively annual spring festivals for the children of the area as well as pageant like dramas for the adults, using native songs and dances of the various immigrant groups to help integrate into American society a population whose native language was not English. By 1912, however organized as the Neighbourhood Players, they had begun to mount full - length plays in such area venues as a Trade Union - hall, The Settlement Gymnasium, and even the neighbourhood streets.

The Neighbourhood Playhouse opened for its first production on 12th February 1915 with a dance drama, Jephthah's Daughter, based on an incident from the Old Testament. Between 1915 and 1927 the Neighbourhood offered a diversity of theatrical fares truly remarkable in its daring and in its scope. There were productions of plays by dramatists as varied as Sheridan, Chekhov, Shaw, Lord Dunsany, Galsworthy, and O' Neill. More frequent were ventrues into foreign and domestic works, some with music and dance, written or adapted by individuals virtually unheard of by the regular theatre - going public.

The phenomenon of the success of The Neighbourhood Playhouse in its fifteen years of existence was all the more exeptional because the mainstarys of the theater were all women. These and other women of comparable talent mae a tremendous contribution to the drab life of this blighted urban area, and their productions often out shone those of the commercial theatre because they incorporated novel settings, new kinds of music and dance, and authentic folk drama from other parts of the world.

For some fifteen years the Neighbourhood had brought entertainment at the very small price that its audience could afford and had trained innumerable young people to appreciate the best in art, dance, music and drama, while also providing an imaginative or alternative for uptown audiences bored by the commercial theatre. The words of the Joseph Wood Krutch in his introduction to Alice Lewisohn's History of the Neigh bour hood Playhouse well express what it had set out the do and what it did. Its goals, says Krutch, were "less concerned with intellectualized convictions, with morals, or sociology, or manners, more with song with song and dance and rituals as direct expressions of the beauty and joy of life, or as one might sum it up, less interested in drama as literature than in what the theatre and theatrical presentation, can accomplish as an independed art". (Quoted in American Drama).

The Neigh bour hood Playhouse opened its doors in February 1915, and during the summer of the same year the Provincetown Players, operating in the living room and on the front porch of a house in the artist colony village far out on the tip of Cape Cod, took its first uncertain steps as an alternative little theatre. The Provincetown Players evolved not from the immigrant settlement - house surroundings of the Neigh bour hood but from the small group of artists, writers and political activities who chose to escape the heat of New York summers by gathering to work, play and interact in the tiny isolated community of Provincetown, Massachusetts, where radical ideas, unorthodox philosophies, and unconventional life styles could be practical and accepted without inhibition. And finally, the Provincetown is remembered for the enthusiastic support it provided to its most famous member, Eugene O' Neill.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit the historical significance of the Provincetown to O' Neill alone. Giant figure as he eventually became, there were others whose devotion to the group from its beginning was paramount in advancing its purpose to further American dramatic art, in line with the new spirit, by encouraging new playwrights and eventually forcing commercial producers to make the Broadway stage increasingly innovative. Foremost, of course, are the names of George Cram Cook and his wife, Susan

Glaspell. Joining the Cooks were others, any of them products of the intellectual and political ferments of Greenwich Village 1915 who shared the same enthusiasm for new movements in the arts.

Scripts were supplied by John Reed, Louise Bryant, Susan Glaspell, and others, but the play most often chosen to represent the beginning of modern American drama was provided by the young, shy, somewhat brooding Irish - American named Eugene O' Neill. The Provincetown Players - were never reticent about their objectives. In the folder announcing the first New York season they explained that.

The present organization is the outcome of a group of people interested in the theatre, who gathered spontaneously during two summers at Provincetown, Massachusetts, for the purpose of writing, producing and acting their own plays. The impelling desire of the group was to establish a stage where playwrights of sincere, poetic, literary and dramatic purpose could see their plays in action, and superintend their production without submitting to the commercial manager's interpretation of public taste. The aim of the founder of the Provincetown Players, as yet imperfectly fulfilled, is to make all hands work from that level and to do it by recreating in a group of modern individuals for more highly differentiated than primetime people, a kind redness of minds, a spiritual unit of the tribe, a unity which may spontaneously create the unity necessary to the art of theatre.

The Provincetown was one of many 'Off - Broadway' dramatic troupes organized in various communities by people to whom the restrictions, both economic and artistic, of the commercial theatre had become irksome. Among their first plays was Susan Glaspell's Suppressed Desires, a good - humoured satire on psychiatry which has held the stage to this day. O' Neill himself is perhaps the best proof that this new drama was professional and traditional and at the sometime determined to discover the capabilities of the medium. The American Theatre in the decade after 1916 quickly caught up with the theatres of Western Europe which had led the way. The readiness of American playwrights to seize the new tools they had been offered and their willingness to experiment with dramatic technique soon produced a repertory able for the first time to take its place in the great repertory of the world theatre. And from his first production, as play followed play, success or failure Eugene O' Neill was recognized as the leader in the renaissance of American Drama.

The next major little - theatre groups of 1915, and through its evolution into the Theatre Guild the most enduring, was the Washington Square Players. The intent of the dozen or so Greenwich Village organizers of the Washington Square Players was to produce plays regardless of origin that were being ignored by the Broadway establishment. Those who undertook the venture included many who would become nationally famous as the force behind the Theatre Guild: Lawrence Langer, Theresa Helburn, Philip Moeller and Helen Westley. Even jig Cook had been an early member before he, and eventually Robert Edmond Jones, moved to the Provincetown. They had developed a strong interest Modern English and American playwrights, and like the people behind the Provincetown they were attracted to the one - act play because it was both artistically exciting and logistically feasible for a small company. What prompted Cook's early departure was the founder's fairly conservative outlook. They were eager to take up some of the Broadway theatre's slack but avoided commitment to the outright experimentation so attractive to Cook. In addition, their aspiration was to become a professional theatre in the full meaning of the term.

The Washington Square Players are accorded less attention for a number of reasons. They lacked an individual with the drive and personal vision of George Cook. They lacked also a resident playwright of the power and stature of O' Neill, through O' Neill, Cook and Glaspell all had plays produced by the players. They were also less concerned with creating a specifically American repertoire. Their first programme announced that they would have only one policy in regard to the plays which they would produce the plays must have artistic merit. Preference would be given to American plays but they would also include in their repertory the works of well-known European authors which have been ignored by the commercial managers.

Following the first impromptu performance of Lord Dunsany's The Glittering Gate, the group which included among others Robert Edmond Jones, Ida Rauh, Albert Bone and Langner, acquired The Bandbox theatre at 57th and Third Avenue. The first public performance as of Maeterlink's Interior on 19 February 1915. At first they offered only two performances a week but this was gradually extended. In the first season seventeen plays were produced, of which five were European in origin. IN the second season performances at the 299 seat theatre were given nightly, and admission rose from fifty cents to a dollar so that the actors could earn twenty five dollars a week. In the third season the Washington Square Players moved from the and box to the comedy - as Oliver Sayler remarked, from the byways to Broadway, from spiritual freedom hampered by arterial bondage to material freedom hampered by spiritual bondage.

This move signaled an increased emphasis on foreign plays, so much so that Waldo Frank was led to protest at their irrelevance to American audiences. And though, faced with financial difficulties and the absence in Europe of a number of their personnel, they closed their doors in 1918. From the ashes emerged the Theatre Guild which was a direct successor, formed by the same group with a capital of $500 and a lease to the Garrick Theatre. It's declared objectives were –

1. To improve the Guild standards of play production.
2. To improve the Guild standards of acting.
3. To experiment to a greater extent than heretofore, especially with the works of American dramatists.
4. To develop a permanent ensemble acting company.
5. To maintain a repertory of fine plays which shall be presented from year to year.
6. To establish a studio for all branches of the Art of the Theatre, in which young people of talent may study as an inherent part of the life of the theatre.

Though Oliver Saylor could regret four years later that whatever it may hope to accomplish with more elaborate equipment, the Guild on its record is not an experimental theatre. It has taken no more chances than the average earnest Broadway producer, not so many as Arthur Hopkins, the Neighbourhood Playhouse, the Provincetown Players or its own earlier self, the Washington Square Players. Considering the short life of the Washington Square Players before their metamorphism into the Theatr Guild, their record of accomplishment was remarkable. True, they produced no figure as large as O' Neill or as charismatic as Cook, and they

were faulted sometime for paying too much homage to foreign writers. Nonetheless, their presentation of quality productions of works that the commercial theatre still hesitated to touch was praiseworthy ad successful as well. Though competing directly with established Broadway producers, the Washington Square Players consistently refused to be trapped into long money making runs, not infrequently terminating a play at the height of its popularity to make way for a new production. The wide diversity in tone and style of their programs is illustrated by the authors represented over the three years of the groups existence (1915-18) Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Moliere, Musset, Wedekind, and Wilde appeared regularly, but the Players also produced American plays by Elmer Rice, Alice Gerstenberg, John Reed, Zoe Akins ad even two headlines from Provincetwon, Susan Glaspell ad Eugene O' Neill.

By 1920 at the latest, New York City had achieved an absolute dominance and virtually absolute monopoly of the American theatre, with the rest of the country reduced to local amateur fare and touring companies of last year's New York hits, 'Broadway' is the name of a street in New York City, and the label has come to be attached to the commercial theatres of that city. And for roughly the first half of the twentieth century 'Broadway' was for all intents and purposes the entire American theatre.

This was obviously an imperfect state of affairs. When virtually all the new playsm, all the major playwrights, all the best actors, directors and designers were to be found in one suare mile of one city, then the over whelming majority of the population was being deprived of the opportunity to experience the American theatre at its best. Meanwhile intense competition for its limited audience meant that many talented artists were invariably squeezed out or not given a chance. On the other hand, the concentration of the best and most ambitious in one place had some salutary effects. Writers and performers could be inspired and challenged by each other, and build on each other's accomplishments. It is surely not coincidental, for example, that the psychological realistic performance style called 'Method Acting', the emotionally evocative powers of such directors as Elia Kazan and Jose Quintero, and the major plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller all appeared at the same time, in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Each of these, along with the responsiveness of an experienced and sophisticated audience, fed on and nourished the others, helping to create an identity, a unified style and a very high standard of accomplishment that a more dispersed theatrical community would probably not have achieved.

The period of experiment leading to the discovery of a dramatic mode that seemed most amendable to the task of adhesive American concerns, and the subsequent development of this mode to its fullest potential is itself clearly a product of a small community of artists observing and learning from each other's errors and accomplishments. It is quite likely that the shape of the American drama by mid-century would have been quite different, in unpredictable ways, if the performance arena of American theatre had not been so concentrated and localized.

This state of affairs began to alter around 1950, as a result of four distinct changes in the structure of the American theatre. The first was an alternative theatrical environment within New York City, as young actor’s directors, and designers who could ot find employment on Broadway formed their own shoestring 'Off-Broadway' companies. Motivated by the desire to be seen and to exercise their craft they performed in lofts, unused theatres and various converted spaces, few to do un-commercial and experimental work simply because there was so little money or prestige to lose. And because there were so many good young actors, directors and designers in New York, some very good work was done Off-Broadway leading critics and audiences to discover and appreciated the potential of this new venue.

With its lower budgets Off-Broadway concentrated in its first few years on clasics and revivals. By 1960, though it found a new function, as a show case for commercially risky new writers. Its generally younger and more adventurous audiences were open to newstyles and subject matters, encouraging a period of experiment and stylistic diversity recalling that of forty years earlier. A generation of American dramatists had their first plays produced Off-Broadway, and the alternative theatre was soon recognized as a significant complement to Broadway.

About the same time that an alternative theatre was developing in New York, alternatives to New York Theatre were being born elsewhere in America. In the late 1940's and early 1950's new Professional Resident Theatre companies were founded in Dallas, Heuston and Washington, and by 1960 there were a dozen such companies around the country. By 1966 there were thirty, with, for the first time in the century, more professional actors employed outside New York City that on Broadway. By 1980 there were more than 70 large, permanently established Resident Theatres in America and, since many of them awakened a hunger for theatre in their areas, at least ten times as many smaller professional companies fuctionining in local equivalents of Off-Broadway. The opening of new theatres all over the country meant more opportunities for new writers, particularly those from outside New York City and those doing challenging work.

The development in theatre history that helped change the shape of America drama around midcentury was a revolutionary alteration in the financial basis of the American theatre. Most of the theatre companies, at least at the beginning, had such tiny budget that profit or loss was not a significant consideration. Even more radically, virtually all-regional theatres were established as non-profit corporations with the quality of the work more important than its profit making potential.

Until this point in its history, the United States was one of the very few countries in the world with no tradition of public support for the arts, those artistic institutions (museums, symphony, orchestras, etc.) that could not support themselves had to rely on the generosity of individual philanthropist. But his also began to change in the 1950's. In the 1950's some of the largest charitable foundations in America - The Ford Foundation. The Rokefeller Foundations etc turned their attention to the arts and began making large gifts to non-profit theatres, to fill the gap between ticket sales and production costs. In 1966 the Congress created the National Endowment for the Arts to distribute government funds to art institutions, as many individual states and cities followed with their own arts-funding arms. For the first time in American history the majority of theatres in the country were at least partially liberated from the pressure and constraints of having to make a profit or even to break even.

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The last third of the century brought the decline of the Broadway. Not only was its monopolistic hold on the American theatre audience broken, but many of the most talented theatrical artistic and virtually all of the most talented new dramatists in the country very happily finding opportunities, and building careers everywhere. Broadway continued to be the home of musicals, light entertainment and star vehicles, but a loss of artistic energy and creativity was inevitable. Financial constraints also worked against Broadway: as production costs escalated by the natural forces of inflation, it became more and more risky for the commercial theatre to attempt anything but the safest, most conservative fare. By the 1980, Broadway had virtually abdicated the job of producing new American plays.

Thus while for the first half of the twentieth century the terms 'Broadway Theatre' and 'American Theatre' are virtually synonymous. The years after, say 1960 can rightly be called the post-Broadway period. Important new plays and playwrights were as likely to appear in Chicago as San Francisco, Buffalo at Seattle, Louisville as Milwaukee; and many more new plays and playwrights were given the opportunity to appear. If some of the benefits of the Broadway monopoly-the intense concentration of talent, the artistic inbreeding- were lost, the openness of the now truly national American theatre to a variety of new voices and new styles made up for them. The American Drama developed into new and diverse forms- Black, Gay, Feminist, Jewish and Irish. It is this drama which meets the greater fiction of national identity meets it Read-on and thrives within it.

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