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TRAGEDY AND WOMEN : PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN FEMINIST THEATER.

1.0 Theater since the beginning of civilization has been an all male activity, as the woman was not whole-heartedly accepted into its arena. Even when accepted, woman had to play roles demanded by the male aesthetic patterns. Their tragic situation was shifted to their male counterparts. Even the revised view of Aristotelian tragedy excluded woman from the center of the stage. Tragedy seemed to be the birthright of the male, from the point of view of theater historians/directors. The female's tragic experience was ignored in traditional theater. But with the advent of the women's Theater project and Feminist playwrights entering the male bastion of theater, the necessity to define the aesthetics of Feminist Theater has risen.

1.1 For this purpose, I propose to examine whether there exists a separate aesthetics for tragedy in Feminist Theater. The nature of the Feminist tragedy and the woman's tragic experience are to be analyzed. But the dramatic theories from Aristotle to Miller are found inadequate for such an analysis. For, Aristotle's contention that, a female character being manly is inappropriate, banishes the women from tragedy. The French philosopher Saint-Evremond maintained that the actress 'shall put on grief all along' as she pleases best with her art of weeping. Elder Olson's interpretation of Clytemnestra sounds more of the voice of the man rather than the woman. A reading of the essays on tragedy by Schiller, Schlegel and Nietzsche reveal the exclusion of woman from tragedy by the very non-mention of woman in these treatises. The tragic heroines in Ibsen and Strindberg are only the extension of the man's idea of how a woman 'should be' (and not a woman 'is'). Even the modern theories of Miller/ Tennessee Williams see the tragic woman only through the male consciousness. The serious and typically woman's issues of these feminist playwrights, make it indispensable to evolve separate tools of dramaturgy for Feminist Theater.

2.0 Tragedy is still relevant as a genre in the modern era, though Joseph Woodkrutch claimed it otherwise. Woodkrutch in his essay "Tragic Fallacy" argues that we have moved to the anthropocentric Universe, where God is not the subject and man is the centre. Hence god-like men or heroic men, protagonists of tragedy are non-existent. Heroic suffering, a fundamental characteristic of tragedy is not possible for ordinary men. However Miller, Hegel and other modern dramaturgists focus on Man— his conflicts with his self, or with his society. Therefore, as long as the personal is political, as long as there is an awareness of the dignity and seriousness of life, tragedy will live. But why there has been no great tragedy on woman? If Othello's tragic flaw is jealousy, is not jealousy a flaw of the female too? The only answer to this query could be that tragedy involved great power and authority of the hero, and power/authority never involved women. With the shifting of this power structure gradually from men to women, the woman too is accepted as capable of tragic intensity.

2.1 To limit the scope of this paper, the focus on Feminist tragedy as a genre is limited to four plays of four American playwrights-Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, Maria Irene Fornes' *Mud*, Marsha Norman's *Night Mother* and Joyce Aron/Luna Tarlo's *Acrobatics*. The tragic mood and the tragic protagonist of each play are studied, also paying attention to the setting and costume.

3.0 Before going into the actual analysis of the plays, 'What is Feminist Theater?' and 'What are the tragic elements of the Feminist Tragedy?' are a few questions that loom large.

3.1 Aimed initially at gaining for woman her rightful position in society, the Feminist Theater was propagandist and primarily an assault on men. The traditional concepts of hero/heroine were destroyed in feminist theater for the purpose of which, history was re-examined and heroines were re-defined. Not only the characters, but also traditional concepts of love, sex, marriage, family, pregnancy/ childbirth and many issues overtly female were re-considered and re-interpreted. The acting styles of Feminist Theater made unconventional use of costumes, with emphasis on greater freedom in body movements, thus de-glamourising the woman's body. Though feminist theater was primarily the struggle against patriarchy, it now plays attention to "the lives of women as individuals, in relation to each other, and in relation to men". (Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre*, p.3).

3.2 The tragic element in the feminist theater is the misery/hopelessness felt by the tragic protagonists. This misery-partly created by the cultural/familial pressures and partly by their reluctance/ dilemma/ uncertainty in over-coming them. Miller's definition of tragedy could be applied, to the woman also: the failure of an individual to gain his/ her rightful position in society. (Arthur Miller, *The theater Essays ed. Robert Martin*, New York, 1978), 11. But tragedy need not end in physical death. The death of a protagonist is not an essential element to make a play tragedy. If so 'Tughlaq' is not a tragic figure. For in him, it is not physical death, but it is the death of his principles/ideals. Thus the death of one's principles/ ideals could be the basis to identify one as a tragic figure. Similarly, the loss/ death of one's hope (on oneself, or fellow beings or humanity) could be the grounds on which tragedy could be built. Tragedy then might be the individual's failure to rise above this hopelessness, or her unpredictable/futile practise of solving her problem herself.

Thus the modern tragic heroin symbolizes the new order of humanity that stands apart from the older one. In her hopelessness, she does not negate herself from the world, but turns in/out, struggles/succeeds/fails and reaches ultimately what could be called as sainthood-seeking her-self for a solution. The root cause of all this struggle, or, in other words, her tragic flaw is: her awareness of herself and the world around her. What O'Neill expressed on tragedy is relevant here : "Tragedy was the natural consequence of the human condition: existence is tragic; anguish, man's (woman's) penalty for his (her) awareness". (Quoted by Barret. H. Clark. *European Theories of Drama*. p.363). This idea of tragedy was developed by Schopenhauer, Kierkegard and Nietzsche. As reflected by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno:

Man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is a deceased animal. (quoted by Marvin Carlson in *Theories of the Theater*. p.363). Thus, relating it to the Feminist tragedy, it is the awareness of the woman-as a woman and her position in the world and her inevitability to change/ improve it, which is tragic. In the process, the Feminist tragedy could be interpreted as demonstrating the woman's attempt to free herself from the bonds- external and internal (the 'external' being stimulated by the society, especially the patriarchy, and the 'internal' stimulated by her body and self).

4.0 Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* is the drama of/between the three MaGrath sisters-Lenny, Meg and Babe. The drama moves in two levels of crisis : external and internal. At the external level, the crisis is due to the critical condition of their bedridden grandfather

and the sudden shock following the shooting by Babe (the youngest sister) of her husband Zackery. The internal crisis lies in the tragic history of their sexual relationships and in their helpless suppression of their dreams for the sake of the domineering grandfather. Further, their lives are overshadowed by the cruel suicide of their mother, who hangs herself after her unhappiness with her husband. For Lenny, the oldest sister, her 'shrunken ovary' distances her from any sexual/ marital relationship. Hence she spends her life with her grandfather and slowly loses her identity/dreams. Meg, the second sister—known for her singing and her notorious relationships—suddenly faces failure as a singer. Babe is sexually oppressed by Zackery and secretly turns away to a relationship with a young teenager. The McGrath sisters would like to come out of their destinies but for their grandfather, for whose sake they silently bear them. Hence Lenny refusing the only man, Charlie who seeks her; Meg speaks lies of her singly career and Babe tolerates her husband though finding him uninteresting.

In the wake of the grandfather's illness, the three sisters re-unite and unveil their secrets to one another. In their solemn gathering, in their sharing and sisterhood come the silver lining. Thus, Lenny resolves/ succeeds in renewing her friendship with Charlie. Meg, renewing her relationship with Doc Porter, senses the hopelessness of this affair, but discovers that she has not lost her concern for life, and in this discovery returns to her zeal for singing. Babe who attempts suicide finds that she has no will to die like her mother.

Thus the heroines isolate themselves from constrictions of the grand-father and decide for themselves about their lives. The play ends with Lenny's vision of "... the three of us smiling and laughing together". (*Crimes*, p. 124) the tragic protagonists resolve: "We've just got to learn how to get through these real bad days here.... it's getting to be a thing in our family" (*Crimes* p.120).

4.1 Maria Irene Forné's *Mud* is the tragic story of the unsuccessful life of a woman with two men and the failure of her dreams of a decent/cultured life far away from the rottenness in which she lives. Mae, the tragic protagonist has been brought up along with Lloyd and they are sexual mates too. She realizes the redundancy in such a relationship, she tries to improve her thinking/manners by going to School and by encouraging her friend Henry to live with her. Finally in the two men vying with each other, Mae is destroyed. The image of the "hermit crab", likened to men, describes the parasitical nature of the two men.

When Mae finds Henry no better than Lloyd, she is disillusioned with them and decides to leave them :

"I'm going somewhere else... Both of you are no good... I work too hard and the two of you keep sucking my blood... I'm going to find myself a job. And a room to live in" (*Mud*, p.39) Though Mae dies in the struggle, her intention to break away from Lloyd and Henry establishes her triumph over the external and internal forces. Death of Mae only heightens the tragedy as the external forces prove to be powerful. *Mud* is the tragedy of a woman who has an awareness of the rottenness of her situation and yearns to break new grounds. The tragic vision of the protagonist is summarised in Mae's final words: "Like a starfish, I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I long for it. I thirst for it. I would die for it... I am dying." (*Mud*, p.40)

4.2 Marsha Norman's *Night Mother* sets, in the kitchen, a terrifying drama of Jessie's enormous preparations for killing herself and of her Mama's futile attempts to stop her. The tragedy of these two women, sharing the house, is their failure to reach out to each other. Mama, old and dependant, does not understand her daughter's failures. Jessie, the tragic protagonist has no way out. She is tired of the uselessness in living with her epilepsy—with her husband Cecil abandoning her and with her only son Ricky turned into a Criminal.

Her tragic situation is : "I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used". (*Mother*, p.22) The crisis she faces is both external and internal. She perceives the decay of the society around her. Internally, the crisis is her loss of her—self, who she never was, whom she tried to be but failed. Hence she concludes that things are "not any better out there than they are in here". (*Mother*, p.23). At the brink of such a decay, she decides to put an end to everything—to say 'No' even to hope, even to deny her existence. The tragic heroine thus tries to balance the disharmony within and without by her single-minded pursuit of suicide. Her suicide is more like a sainthood which she seeks with acceptance: It is her only way of reconciliation with her world: 'I'm not giving up'. This is the other thing "I'm trying" and she has no qualms/self pity about it. So, she goes to it calmly, elaborately preparing her mother, than herself, for this death.

4.3 *Acrobatics* by Joyce Aaron and Luna Tarlo reveals the meeting/living/sharing of experiences of two women friends in a hotel room. The whole play is a reflective expression of their lost relationships, their attitude towards love/men /family/themselves as women. The isolated selves of these women are revealed when the 'woman' says : "I used to imagine somewhere there was a tribe of people that were different from all people... and one day ... I'd find them". (*Acrobatics*, p.24). The other character, the 'girl' no more wishes to pursue a 'domestic life'. Her attitude towards love too is revealed in : Joel, I Love you,— David, I love you. *Angelino, I love you—would you believe it if I told you I'm just too old for all this to start all over again*". (p.31). 'Love can be found only in fairy tales' is a strand suggested throughout the play. For, the 'Primal desire is not love but sex, which is suggested by the film of 'Love-making' in black and white projected on the back wall. The wearing of the clown make-up by the women, during this film projection reinforces this idea of life as game/acrobatic to charm the lover. And the removal of facial mask symbolizes the removal of the glamour of love. For"... once it (love) was possible, but not any more, not these days—Times have changed". (p.32.)

Acrobatics is a metaphor of what Woolf demanded as 'a room of one's own'. The woman and the girl, through sharing and sisterhood, find solace with each other from the deterioration that has set in their lives. The tragic heroines, like those in '*night Mother*', are aware of their futile existence. The longing to set themselves to die and to start all over again is there. But this motif is not explored in this play. Hence tragedy arises out of the individual's dissatisfaction with the order of civilization and her resulting breaking away from it, but without having a new one that satisfies her. Hence the tragic heroines of '*night Mother*' and *Acrobatics* resort to existential living.

5.0 One radical trait of the feminist theater—as traced through these four plays —is that it has reduced the distance between playwright and actress, actress and character. Feminist theater is increasingly being written from the woman's point of view. This is one point for which the dramatic theories of the male writers are found inadequate. For, the heroines of writers like Tennessee Williams are seen as products of the male point of view.

5.1 The collective scripting of the plays, common to feminist theater has resulted in dramas becoming 'choral play's where female playwright, writing from a woman's point of vie, focuses on groups of woman and not on one female protagonist. Hence the heroine in the feminist tragedy is not one single individual but a single 'female consciousness'. The sharing and sisterhood of the heroines identified in *Crimes of the Heart* and *Acrobatics* are a proof of this presence of the 'female consciousness'.

6.0 The setting of the four plays is another proof of the 'female consciousness that pervades the atmosphere of these plays. The woman playwright might have stepped out

of the home physically, but atleast in the subconscious plane, home is frequently a setting sought after. The "Kitchen-Family room" as worded by Helene Keyssar, is an important/ recurring setting in the feminist theater. The suggestion is that it is the 'woman's space' her personal/intimate space. The setting of the Kitchen with a dining table and a cot in *Crimes of the Heart* reveals this 'Woman's space'. Since the action takes place only in that space, it throws light on woman's autonomy. The settings of the kitchen in '*night Mother*' becomes Mama's space, where she finds solace in her apple cakes and chocolates. Kitchen becomes a kind of obsession in '*night Mother*'.

The claustrophobic setting of the hotel room with two beds and a bathroom in *Acrobatics* defines on the one hand the sobriety of the woman's situation and on the other hand the 'private space' of the feminist plays. This privacy is further developed by the informality in the costumes, i.e. night gowns worn by the women. The image of the woman in the bathtub and the girl sitting on the toilet with drinks in hand and talking is bizarre but, typical of the 'woman—to—woman' relationship of the feminist theater.

In *Mud*, the setting of a claustrophobic stage space mounted on an 'earth promontary' with the 'blue sky' in the back wall—symbolizes the woman's life of 'stagnation' and her yearning for 'hope/sunshine'. Mae's continuous work on the iron-board suggests the monotony and gloom in her world.

7.0 Tragedy in feminist theater is not an 'imitation' of life but a re-thinking, and re-defining of life, thereby rendering a new approach to it. As *Eric Bentley* said, it should be a "broad and deep account of the life of the individual". Where "neither man's problems nor his ability to cope with them is belittled". (quoted by Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (p.400). In such a case, feminist tragedy could be universal too, in that it need not be the struggle pertained to the woman alone but that the whole humanity partakes in it. Thus the tragic protagonist could appeal to all sections of human beings. The researcher hopes that the feminist tragedy could be a promising beginning to promote a female canon in the generic study of the feminist theater.

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