

**Mansoura University**  
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**Marsha Norman's ' *night Mother* :**  
***A Postmodernist Reading***  
**by**  
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**Postmodernism . . . points to the collapse of  
Western humanism and of the literature and  
culture sustained by it.**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to explore some of the salient postmodernist features in Marsha Norman's Pulitzer-Prize play *'night Mother* (1983). Marsha Norman (1947-), is considered a contemporary American playwright who wrote "seven full-length plays, five one-act plays and one novel *The Fortune Teller*" (Mehta 11). This study is intended to show the extent to which the play exemplifies some features of the postmodernist theory. Before embarking on the play's critical analysis, it is indispensable to refer in passing to the infinite discussion in order to come up with a satisfactory definition of postmodernism.

To start with, postmodernism "as a term entered the lexicon with the historian Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1947)" (Dash 236). Postmodernism is also a succession of modernism; yet, it is not and will never be an identical twin of modernism. Linda Hutcheon in her article "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History" observes that "postmodernism does not entirely negate modernism. It cannot. What it does do is interpret it freely"(193). Dash also affirms that "Postmodernism is thus both a continuation and a break from modernism" (237). Linda Hutcheon, on the other hand, points out that the relation between the two is paradoxical since such a relation "marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither" (18). The debate regarding a decisive definition of postmodernism seems to be

infinite. Even the most prominent theorists of postmodernism such as Baudrillard and Jameson give us "apocalyptic theories" (Zurbrugg *The Parameters of Postmodernism* 2014 ).

With regard to postmodernism's bearing to culture, Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* says that postmodernism is a kind of challenge to all the prevailing culture. "Postmodern culture, then, has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture" (6).

Frederick Jameson claims that the postmodernist viewer is expected to do the impossible in the sense that such a viewer is asked to "see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference;. . . something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name" (76). As Jameson puts it, to "see all the screens at once" means that a postmodernist viewer finds himself/herself in a state of confusion, dizziness, deliriousness, uncertainty, and finally at a loss.

Worthy of note is the fact that notions such as uncertainty, absurdity, and challenge to our official standards are unquestionably part of postmodernism. Such notions bring about an "intellectual threat to orthodox religious, social and political leaders" (Suresh 6). In his paper entitled "Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel as a Postmodernist Text," Thakur Pritam insists that "Wholeness and certitude are no longer possible; fragmentation, uncertainty, ambiguity and doubt are accepted as a part of life" (41).

In her article "Is Postmodernism Dead?" Dash affirms that postmodernist literature stresses three important notions: "Postmodernist literature . . . acknowledges the death of man (i. e. the subject) and the death of God (as declared by Frederick Nietzsche 'God is dead') but instead of being repentant it celebrates the absence of meaning in life" (237). In this concern, death of man may embrace man's loss of identity as well as suicide and death of God most assuredly refers to the relentless challenge against religion while the 'absence of meaning in life' is closely linked with futility, despondency, meaninglessness and it most importantly leads to suicide.

Such an 'intellectual threat' to 'social and political leaders' results in one more feature which is known among theorists to be the rejection of elitism. Kerstin Schmidt observes that "postmodernism rejected all forms of elitism and freely incorporated pop art forms, such as television, film, and others, as valid points of reference" (Kerstin 41). Among postmodernists, this feature is also referred to as 'no brow' since 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' have been superseded by 'no brow' (Suresh 6). This seems to be quite apparent in our everyday life when 'highbrow' people are no longer revered.

Suresh Wakchaure points out that postmodernism is a challenge not only against elitism, but against almost everything. "Postmodernism has consistently challenged understanding of unity, subjectivity, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, history and politics" (4). In a seemingly satisfactory definition, Suresh adds that postmodernism indicates the collapse of the whole structure of modern society. "Postmodernism is a phenomenon, literary and cultural, that points to the collapse of Western humanism and of the literature and culture sustained by it" (4). The 'collapse of Western humanism' is accompanied with a state of skepticism, which becomes an inseparable part of "postmodern irrational psyche" (Suresh 5). In her thesis, Olena Gorelova sheds more light on the same idea when she remarks that postmodernism affects almost all aspects of our life, and in the meantime it does not take our traditional values for granted. Gorelova says: "Postmodernism . . . influences all spheres of life; . . . It reconsiders the values of modern society and puts them into question" (64). Some of postmodernism's features, from Olena's view, are "absurdness, confusion, play, irony, and challenge to official seriousness, . . ." (60).

In her indispensable book *Theater of Transformation : Postmodernism in American Drama*, Kerstin Schmidt recounts some postmodern features in American drama. First, postmodern American drama should be emptied of character, plot and struggle (13). Second, by having no traditional forms, postmodern American

drama is expected to be in a state of 'transformative progress'. Kerstin Schmidt means that " postmodernism is not concerned with postulating a new concept to replace an older one. What matters more is the search for new forms and the concomitant ability to revitalize art" (Schmidt 18). Third, Schmidt adds that the "fragmentation of existence and of the sense of self" is another inseparable feature of postmodernism (20). A fourth element of postmodern American drama lies in the fact that "characters freeze in a static image" (50), which means that the scene should be static and the characters should remain, if not imprisoned, in one place. Fifth, the author stresses the point that postmodern American drama does not rely on "a moral-didactic message" (76). Sixth and the last to mention here is concerned with the "Scarcity of stage props" (76).

To come up with a satisfactory set of features of postmodernism in drama, one can say that it is a natural procession of modernism and it embraces many significant features, the most important of which are: Apocalypse, Nihilism, Fragmentation of Existence, Pluralism (Collage), being emptied of Plot, Character, and Agon, Deleting the notion of Truth, Rejecting All Forms of Elitism, A Static Image, No Moral-didactic Image, and finally the Scarcity of Stage Props.

Before dealing with the most important of the above-mentioned features of postmodernism, it is mandatory to refer to the previous literature, which shows that not even one study on Norman's play *'night Mother*, as far as one knows, is concerned with showing the conspicuous relation between *'night Mother* and postmodernism. Some of the most renowned works on Norman's play *'night Mother* are: First, Hetal J. Mehta, *Feminist Concerns in Marsha Norman's Plays: A Critical Study*, 2010, in which the author deals with the idea of suicide on pages 36-46. Second, Kristin Hanson, *Staged Mothers: Mother-daughter Tropes in Twentieth-century American Drama*, A Ph. D. dissertation, May 2006, in which the author concentrates on the relation between the two women in the play. Third, Megan P. Kaplon's paper "Food, Love and Death in Norman's *'night Mother*." Megan in this paper tackles the relationship between the type of food Thelma or Jessie eats and the way they behave. Fourth, Ruth Eshbaugh, "Literary Analysis of Marsha Norman's *Night Mother*." In this article, the author concerns herself with the idea of suicide and the reasons why Jessie Cates commits such a horrible act. Fifth, Kia Tomille Elizabeth Fisher, *The Tracks of My Tears: An actor's Account of Her Progression in the Role of Jessie Cates in Marsha Norman's Play's Play 'night Mother*, 2004. In this thesis, the author refers to her insightful approach and her journey through playing the role of Jessie Cates (the main character of the two women in the play) as an actress.



To start with the play *'night Mother*, it is about Jessie Cates who suffered from epilepsy many years before the opening of the play. As the play opens, she seems to be very well more than ever before. *"It is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body, and tonight, she is determined to hold onto that control"* (Marsha Norman, *'nigh Mother 1*) . Jessie who is in her late thirties or early forties lives with her mother Thelma Cates, divorced by her husband Cecil, and deserted by her ungrateful son Ricky. From the very outset of the play, Jessie plainly announces her sturdy decision to commit suicide. Norman says that *"She has a peaceful energy on this night, a sense of purpose, but is clearly aware of the time passing moment by moment"* (Norman, *'nigh Mother 1*) .

The first feature of postmodernism to be traced in the play *'night Mother* is the scarcity of the props which has been deftly manipulated by the playwright Marsha Norman. The postmodernists believe that their tenets lead them to rebel against the conventional rules of dramatic writing. Norman's stage directions illustrate the extent to which the author strictly follows the technique of the scarcity of the props. The setting of the play as well as the characters' accents should not indicate any regions in the country. In this regard, Marsha says:

*Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgement about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Thelma. It*

*should simply indicate that they are very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country. Heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Thelma are also wrong ('night mother 2).*

In her dissertation *WRITING ABOUT THE SOUTH "IN HER OWN WAY": GENDER AND REGION IN THE WORK OF SOUTHERN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS*, Jasey Kayser highlights the same point when she refers to Norman: "[S]he instructs that there should be no accents and that the set and props should not indicate that the characters live in any specific area in the country ('night mother 69).

The second postmodernist feature to discuss here is hyperreality, which means that "imitations or 'fakes' take precedence over and usurp the real" (Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* 201). In *'night mother*, fakes displace truth and lies are rampant when such a feature is applied to the character of Thelma Cates. In this respect, telling the truth is the conspicuous face of reality while telling lies usurps life of both truth and reality.

Jessie through her relation with her mother seems to solicit the truth from her mother who has been accustomed to telling lies to her daughter in almost all their conversations especially before the play opens. Jessie admits that it might take her a night to solicit the truth from her mother. Only in some situations like when Thelma speaks to Jessie

about the place of her father's gun or about the fact that she never loved her father does the mother tell the truth. In this concern, Jessie who could not stand her mother telling lies all the time talks to her mother this way: "You lied about setting fire to all those houses and about how many birds she has and how much okra she eats and why she won't come over here. If I have to keep dragging the truth out of you, this is going to take all night" (*'night Mother* 37). It is hardly surprising that Thelma Cates' life seems to be nothing but a pack of lies. To her, lies are the stamina of life without which life seems to be impossible. Regarding this point, she tells Jessie, "I thought I might get a laugh out of you for once even if it wasn't the truth, Jessie. Things don't have to be true to talk about 'em, you know" (*'night Mother* 35). Thelma who crystallizes the element of hyperreality in the play sees nothing wrong in telling lies; quite the contrary, with lies things seem to be fine. She says: "That's fine with me" (*'night Mother* 38).

No wonder, then, that telling lies is one of the most precarious habits that may wreck the whole structure of society. Great authors like Edward Albee warn all the people against the consequences of telling lies as Marsha Norman says: "Edward Albee warned a whole generation about what happens when you don't tell the truth" (Norman, *Articles and Citations*, *Edward Albee*).

The third feature of to tackle in this paper deals with one of the most prominent features of postmodernism—namely apocalypse. This core feature strongly and mercilessly preys upon the family ties as well as the society structure. Before divulging the boundless effect this feature has on both families and societies, one has to show the intimate link between this feature and postmodernism.

Apocalypse, in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, means "the destruction of the world" or "the end of the world, as described in the Bible"(59). Again, the author of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines apocalyptic as "revealing the secrets of the future through prophecy; or having the character of an apocalypse or world-consuming holocaust" (16). This 'world-consuming holocaust' can be overtly applied to the play *'night Mother* in two different aspects: the family ties and the social structure.

First, let us deal with the broken family ties. To show the extent to which the family ties are shattered, it is suffice to refer to the mother-daughter relation which suffers a great deal of disintegration. It is quite noticeable that "Norman has spoken of the relationship between mother and daughter as one seldom explored in American drama and of the paucity of works which place a woman, actively determining the action, at the centre " (Biggsby 231). Norman who believes that "A theatre that is missing the work of women is missing half the story, half the canon, half the life

of our time" (Norman, "Not There Yet") shows a meticulous exploration of such an apocalyptic relation between mothers and daughters. In this concern, Bigsby points out that no other American playwright has explored the mother-daughter relationship as dexterously as Marsha Norman has done since she "offers a cogent and fascinating explanation of the nature and meaning of that relationship . . ." (Bigsby 232).

To divulge the vile aspect of the mother-daughter relation, we have to refer to Thelma's sense of remorse, which increases the moment she recounts the way she has raised Jessie. It is quite horrific for the mother to remember the way she fed or carried or even married her daughter to a wrong man. The following dialogue elaborates on how a mother like Thelma in America and in the second half of the twentieth century dealt with and brought up her daughter.

THELMA Maybe I did drop you, you don't know.

JESSIE If you say you didn't, you didn't.

THELMA (*Beginning to break down.*) Maybe I fed you the wrong thing. Maybe you had a fever some time and I didn't know it soon enough. Maybe it's a punishment.

JESSIE For what?

THELMA I don't know. Because of how I felt about your father. Because I didn't want any more children. Because I smoked too much or didn't eat right when I was carrying you. It has to be something I did.

JESSIE It does not. It's just a sickness, not a curse. Epilepsy doesn't mean anything. It just is (62).

All these wrong doings the mother has committed against her daughter including dropping the baby, feeding a wrong type of food, ignoring the sickness the child is suffering from, too much smoking, or not eating the right food during pregnancy are all but features of apocalyptic family relations. They, no doubt, lead to feebler generations or no offspring at all.

Jessie's relation to her ex-husband who has forsaken both her and her son Ricky is no exception. The readers and the theater-goers find no pretext why he has forsaken his wife, who is quite ready to do all she can for the sake of living with him. In an attempt to find an excuse for him, Jessie says: "He gave himself another chance, that's all. But I did beg him to take me with him. I did tell him I would leave Ricky and you and everything I loved out here if only he would take me with him, but he couldn't and I understand that" (*'night Mother* 53).

To show how the mother-daughter relation suffers a great deal of apocalypse, Norman refers to the familiarity, not the intimacy, of this relation. Again, this kind of familiarity, as the playwright states out, is achieved only physically, not spiritually. Norman remarks: "There is a familiarity between these two women that comes from having lived together for a long time. There is a shorthand to the talk and a sense of routine comfort to the

way they relate to each other physically" (*'night mother 1*). Norman is absolutely meticulous in describing the relation between the two women as a 'familiar', not an intimate one.

To make matters worse, it seems quite apparent that Thelma the mother cannot establish any healthy relation with any member of her family. In this concern, Thelma negates any positive relation either with her departed husband or with her daughter when she says: "Well, I wasn't here for his entertainment and I'm not here for yours either, Jessie. I don't know what I'm here for, but then I don't think about it" (*'night mother 42*). It is distressing that the simplest jobs of a mother as well as a wife escape Thelma's mind when she easy-mindedly says that she does not know her job either as a wife or even as a mother, simply because she never thinks about it.

Thelma's broken family ties are not the only ties that obviously witness the epoch of apocalypse; Agnes' family relations do, too. Such a sense of degeneration in Agnes' family ties can be deduced from the way Agnes (Thelma's neighbor) speaks with Thelma about her birds more than Thelma can do about her family. Norman is quite witty in saying that Agnes can speak a great deal about birds, not about her family. It is paradoxical that one can speak a great deal about birds or animals rather than about families. Here, broken family ties can be witnessed in the two families in the play—Thelma's and Agnes'.

Not only does the mother-daughter relation seem to be in a state of apocalypse, but the husband-wife relation is, too. When Jessie asks her mother whether or not she has ever loved her father, Thelma gives a negative answer (*'night Mother* 38). Later in the play, Thelma unearths the reason why she couldn't love her departed husband. Thelma ironically comments: "How could I love him, Jessie. I didn't have a thing he wanted. (*Jessie doesn't answer.*) He got his share, though. You loved him enough for both of us" (40).

A few pages later in the play, Thelma asks her daughter about the reason why Jessie wants to know about whether or not her mother ever loved her father. Thelma light-heartedly answers her daughter: "It didn't matter whether I loved him. It didn't matter to me and it didn't matter to him. And it didn't mean we didn't get along. It wasn't important. We didn't talk about it" (43).

It is not surprising, then, that Thelma could not bear staying beside her late husband on the night he died. She divulges the reasons why she did not remain beside him at that crucial moment. Referring to her husband, Thelma observes, "He didn't have anything to say to me, Jessie. That's why I left. He didn't say a thing. It was his last chance not to talk to me and he took full advantage of it" (45).

No wonder that family disintegration as a sign of apocalypse reaches its climax when a husband and a wife who have begotten more than one child and lived together for so long a time



under one roof and at the time of the husband's passing away they find nothing to speak about.

Though Thelma's relation with her departed husband has been quite severed, Jessie assiduously attempts to defend her parents against any sin they might have committed against her. Jessie claims that epilepsy is just a disease, not a curse to be passed down to her because of her father. Thelma, however, cannot forget how she unscrupulously treats her daughter Jessie, and sorrowfully remembers how she has sinned against her. Thelma regretfully says: "I'm talking about this killing yourself . . . . This is all my fault, Jessie, but I don't know what to do about it, now" (*'night Mother* 62)! Jessie, however, defends her mother when she tells her: "It doesn't have anything to do with you (*'night Mother* 62)! Thelma, now telling the truth, admits: "Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie. You can't do anything, wash your face or cut your finger, without doing it to me. That's right! You might as well kill me as you, Jessie, it's the same thing. This has to do with me, Jessie" (*'night Mother* 63).

Nonetheless, the readers and the audience very well know that almost all the woes and throes from which Jessie is suffering throughout her life are due to some gross mistakes committed by the mother against her. This leads the mother to acknowledge that her daughter's resolute decision to commit suicide is because of her.

It is also pitiable to know that Jessie's decision to put an end to her life is due to the fact

that Thelma vehemently wants to possess everything and have control over her daughter Jessie, the only person who lives with her. As Norman states out that the house is hers and the daughter is expected to be hers, too. Her last five words in the play are: "I thought you were mine, (*'night Mother* 77)" and these words signify the fact that Thelma believes that all people and all things around her are unquestionably hers; a fact that Thelma lives an apocalyptic life when one imagines or even tries to imagine that he/she can get a firm grip on everything and all people around him/her. Such a conduct is not just an act of selfishness or egoism; it is no less than the end of the world—at least the deterioration and degeneration of all family ties.

Regretfully, Thelma realizes her ghastly mistakes when it is too late to act reversibly. A moment before Jessie's death, Thelma implores her daughter to abnegate the idea of killing herself, promising Jessie never to tell lies, give her the chance to express herself, take much more care of her than she has ever done, and have better relations with her daughter. Yet, Jessie informs her mother that her decision is irrevocable. She tells her mother that such a healthy conversation takes place simply because it comes a moment before her suicide. Thelma, now in tears, implores her daughter: "Don't leave me, Jessie!" Being more determined than before, Jessie, ignoring her mother's entreaties, "*stands for a moment, then turns for the bedroom*" (*'night Mother* 63).

A few pages later, the mother attempts to turn over a new leaf in her relation with her daughter Jessie. Yet, Jessie is quite adamant in putting her decision into practice. It is her last moment in life when she unyieldingly and pleurably turns her back on everything in life. Jessie adds: "This is how I say what I thought about it all and I say No. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say No" (66)!

Jessie's preceding words disclose the fact that Jessie cannot quit her resolute decision of suicide which is the natural corollary of the unhealthy milieu she lives in as well as the disintegrated family ties she suffers from. In addition to the detrimental treatment she has received from her mother, (a life rampant with lies, malnutrition while she was a baby, careless upbringing while Jessie was a child, marrying her to the wrong man and owning everything around her, beginning with the house and ending with the towels), Jessie has faced unruly behavior from other people though she herself strives to turn such vile actions into good deeds. No wonder, then, that Jessie loves her father far more than her mother does. "I liked him better than you did, but I didn't know him any better" (39).

What ceaselessly gets on Jessie's nerves is the way her family as well as her neighbors vehemently aspire to know everything about her life. Jessie, as a hypersensitive lady, wants no body to divulge any of her own secrets. It is also

pitiable that indulging in Jessie's hidden life as well as obliterating her identity is something enacted by all people around her. In a postmodern world, no secrets can be kept under the rug, nor can any privacy be preserved anywhere; everybody's secrets are easy to be exposed whenever others want to. In this regard, Jessie seems infuriated since her neighbors got and learned about her mail order bra before she knew about it. Though the mother claims that this happened by accident, Jessie answers: "All the same ... they opened it. They saw the little rosebuds on it (19).

Expressing her dismal feelings towards the way people and society treat her, Jessie is quite perturbed. People as well as the members of her family yearn to know everything about her private life. Though her mother strives to convince her that they will never ask about her affairs, or about her fits, or about her falling hair, or about her drinking too much coffee, or even about her never going out of the house, Jessie does not believe in what her mother says since it is a postmodern society where truth is missing and lies are dominant. Again, Jessie, in a desperate attempt, tries to find her lost identity in an unruly society. She cynically says that even writing her name on the account of the grocery seems to be disgraceful and forbidden. It is Dawson's name that should be written down, even though Dawson is always away (Norman, *'night Mother* 19). It is the apocalyptic epoch when people lose their identities and are stripped of their privacy.

It is quite apparent that Jessie's personality is always demolished and she cannot find her identity neither in society nor among the members of her family. Hence, Jessie seriously begins to think of suicide, and the members of her family unscrupulously help her get the tools with which she can put an end to her precious life. Her mother tells her where she can find the gun, and her brother again unknowingly helps her to buy some bullets to kill herself with. Yet, two questions may be raised: 1) how could a mother never think of the reason why an adult lady like Jessie wants a gun, even if the daughter says that she wants to protect herself? It is a sort of protection against the whole community, not against a particular enemy. 2) In what way could a brother like Dawson not grasp the idea why his divorced, lonely, and handicapped sister needs to buy some bullets? Even if Jessie tells him that she "was worried about prowlers" (*'night Mother* 11). It is not surprising, then, that Jessie lives in a postmodern society where family ties are ruthlessly shattered. Speaking about the way her brother helps her get the bullets, Jessie remarks: "He took it as a compliment. He thought I might be taking an interest in things. He got through telling me all about the bullets and then he said we ought to talk like this more often" (*'night Mother* 11).

Thelma is taken aback to hear from Jessie that during such a conversation between Jessie and her brother, the mother has been preoccupied with talking to her neighbor Agnes. Jessie says that both her mother and Agnes have been talking

about milk. As a matter of fact, Thelma and Agnes have been used to killing time chatting about trifles while there is a divorced daughter whose mind is teething and boiling concerning her decisive decision to commit suicide. Jessie's brother also helps her get the bullets by asking those in charge to send her the needed bullets. Thelma, then, wonders how everyone of the family helps Jessie in one way or another to fulfill her horrific act of suicide. To affirm that this is a postmodern society, Jessie, who smiles and enjoys the joke, addresses her mother and cynically says: "See? Everybody's doing what they can" (*'night Mother* 12).

The mother then comes to the conclusion that everybody in the family plays his/her role to help Jessie fulfill her aim in committing suicide. Two questions arise here: 1) what would have happened had Thelma not informed Jessie about the gun's place? and 2) what would Jessie have done had Dawson not helped her get the bullets? The answer would be that the situation then would have been quite different and the family ties would not have been broken. No wonder, then, that the characters live in a postmodern community, where Jessie the heroine unyieldingly determines to terminate her life.

The second apocalyptic feature this paper is concerned with is intended to be about the collapse of the structure of the western society. Part of Jessie's social ordeal lies in the way society looks at her. She becomes apparently aware of the fact that people do not feel at ease to be in her

company, nor does society seem to be apt to accommodate her. When she gets a job, she is not financially rewarded. When she stays at a place, she very well knows that her existence in such a place aggravates its condition. Jessie is sometimes ready to indulge in social activities, but it is society which castigates, negates, ostracizes, and segregates her. Jessie, then, fully realizes that there is no way to find her identity except through the withdrawal from community. Any apocalyptic society is expected to look at Jessie as an welcomed lady-- a lady to be secluded and imprisoned as if she were Hester Prynne—yet without a sin. As such, Jessie plainly expresses the horrid situation she finds herself engulfed in. Thelma assiduously attempts to find a solution to her daughter's dilemma though she knows that it is too late. Jessie, on the other hand, looks at society with a cynical eye and very well knows that she is not a welcome being in her community. It is life in a postmodern society. The following speech reveals the extent to which the degenerated life from which Jessie suffers is so gigantic. She addresses her mother this way: "I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure any time. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse" (*'night Mother* 29)!

It is noteworthy that society is the foremost victimizer that ruthlessly preys upon Jessie's character. Fully realizing the fact that society does not digest her existence, Jessie thinks of her most serious decision to make in her life. She heroically

thinks of jeopardizing and sacrificing the only thing she owns in life—it is her body and soul. Jessie, the more sinned against than sinning, makes her decision of committing suicide to show a kind of rebellion against the postmodern society, which never displays any empathy towards her. In this regard, Jessie informs her mother that she has come to a decisive point where going back is more than impossible. Jessie strongly believes that this moment and this place are her last bus stop where she has to get off. It is the most indicative moment of the apocalyptic era when hopes are shattered and dreams are nipped in the bud. Accordingly, she is not waiting for any better conditions to come overnight; nor is she expecting a new leaf for any better life to be turned over. Now, Jessie cannot stoop to her mother's entreatings not to commit suicide, and she seems adamant regarding the decision of her suicide. Jessie's philosophical point of view about life is so enchanting and indicative; she is fully alerted that her life is meaningless, futile, fruitless, hopeless, and unpromising. Since her life is the only thing she owns in life, and there is not even a ray of hope to change it to a better condition, Jessie unhesitatingly utters her farewell to everything in life.



JESSIE (*Quietly.*) . . . And I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. So. Let's just have a good time (30).

This is an insightful way of expressing a woman's woes in society when such a woman has nothing to own but her own life. Marsha Norman insists that American women playwrights express their own issues and not leave them for men. She remarks: "Our task now is not to write about ourselves the way men write about us. It is to convey our inner lives in ways that are exciting to watch. We must find and tell stories that SHOW who we are (Norman, 'Women Writing Plays'). It is quite apparent that Norman expresses the "inner lives" of her characters. Jessie, in this regard, is a representative character of a postmodern society woman in an apocalyptic period. That Jessie is quite determined to finalize her life evidently symbolizes the end of the world.

Yet, the play should not be read only as a tragedy or as a play about death and suicide; quite the contrary, it is about the relation between life and death and why some people like Jessie find relief in death, not in life. To ordinary people, death means panic, darkness, and the unknown; to

Jessie, it is peace, tranquility, and easiness. Unlike her mother and the majority of the people, Jessie is not afraid of death since she observes: "It's exactly what I want. It's dark and quiet" (*'night Mother* 14).

The fourth feature to deal with here is nihilism, which makes death 'dark and quiet'. Ashley Woodward defines nihilism as the "denial of life itself because of its apparent meaninglessness" (52). Hooti and Torkamaneh add that "Nihilism is a radical philosophy of meaninglessness. The world and the people in it exist without meaning, purpose, truth and value" (45). In his book *Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature*, Will Slocombe highlights the same meaning when he says that nihilism "is based upon the belief that reality is illusory, an arbitrary set of rules that has no meaning" (12 ). Again, Ashley observes that "Nihilism is the sickness, destruction and decay symptomatic of the decline of the West" (52). Accordingly, death, to Jessie, is not just 'dark and quiet', it is the abode of tranquility. Death is also the natural corollary of a nihilistic life. Though the play seems to be based mainly on the idea of death, it explicitly tackles the philosophy of death, the burdens of life, the relation between life and death, and the causes that lead man to think of untimely death. Christopher Bigsby argues that the play *'night Mother* is not just about the American society, it is a play about the value of life. Bigsby affirms that *'night Mother* asks the most important questions: "[W]hat is our life worth and how may we justify its continuance? But at the

same time it is most assuredly not a study of a suicide. It is the study of a life" (Biggsby 232-33). It is worth noting that such a nihilistic life naturally results in loneliness, hopelessness, suffocation and segregation, all of which culminate in death.

The milieu Jessie finds herself in is more than frustrating and suffocating since she admits that there is nothing that may gratify her. Having a disgusting feeling about the whole universe, Jessie says that everything in the world is distressing. She tells her mother that she is sad because everything seems to be bad here and everywhere: "Oh, everything from you and me to Red China" (*'night Mother* 24).

Referring to her society in particular, Jessie expresses her opinion about the whole society in the sense that it appears to be awful 'in here' and 'out there'. Jessie points out: "I read the paper. I don't like how things are. And they're not any better out there than they are in here" (*'night Mother* 25). This is the same idea, highlighted by Peter Zima who points out that postmodern societies are expected to move from bad to worse. Zima claims that postmodernism "deletes the notion of truth and the complementary modern and modernist question concerning a better society and a more humane world" (76-77).

Not until she recognizes the fact that society casts her out that Jessie begins to hate life, detests society, and yearns for death. It is nihilism that makes out of Jessie a victim of her society in general and all the people around her in particular.

It is absolutely true that life and society offer her nothing since "Until this moment she has been the victim of her own physiology, of her medication, of her husband's needs and desires, of her mother's misguided and unfocussed love, of her son's wayward behaviour" (Bigsby 230). Such a miserable life led by Jessie is an indivisible part of absurdity and nihilism.

Jessie's predicament lies in the loss of her identity, due to physical frailty as well as social negligence. This agonizing situation she lives in makes her believe that such a nihilistic society cannot accommodate her, nor can anybody enjoy her company. As such, there is no outlet for her to find her lost identity but through putting an end to her life. Jessie contemplates: "Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn't much matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even" (*'night Mother* 66).

No wonder, then, that the image Jessie has about herself is more dismal than that of both Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like Vladimir and Estragon, she is waiting for somebody to save her and she very well knows that such a person will never come.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon tackle the same issue. They strongly believe that the person they are waiting for will rescue them from the mire situation they find themselves in. Unfortunately, such a person will never come.

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow.  
(*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved (Act 2, 35).

Again, part of nihilism lies in the sense that Jessie and Estragon compare themselves to Jesus Christ, which is an act of obvious defiance of the social and religious norms. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon finds nothing wrong in comparing himself to Jesus Christ. He says: "All my life I've compared myself to him" (Act 1 42).

Like Estragon, Jessie compares herself to Jesus Christ regarding her suffering, which must culminate in suicide. She surprises her mother who looks at what Jessie says as a kind of blasphemy. "Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me," says Jessie, and her mother firmly answers, "You'll go to hell just for saying that. Jessie (*'night Mother* 15).

The affinity between the two plays *Waiting for Godot* and *'night Mother* is quite apparent. As such, both plays embrace the elements of both nihilism and absurdity. Bigsby points out that *'night Mother* reminds him of absurdity when he says that "The question thus becomes not why suicide but why not suicide. This, after all, was exactly the question which Albert Camus saw as being posed by the absurdity of the conditions of our existence" (Bigsby 234). In addition to absurdity, which results

from living in a postmodern society, the deplorable conducts of the people can be regarded as one of the rampant features in *'night Mother*. Worthy of note is the fact that one of the major features of a nihilistic society lies in people's defying social and religious conducts; to compare oneself to Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of defiance against society and religion.

The fifth feature of postmodernism that can be overtly traced in *'night Mother* is what theorists call *Pluralism* or *Collage*. As Frederick Jameson claims that a postmodernist viewer is expected to 'see all the screens at once', which has been mentioned earlier in this paper. Collage in *'night Mother* is clearly observed in Jessie's act of defiance of religion, namely in comparing herself to Jesus Christ. In this regard, collage means that the people who live in one society should represent a myriad of religions, colors, and nationalities. Hooti and Torkamaneh affirm that "The postmodern world is shaped by pluralism, democracy, religious freedom, consumerism, mobility and increasing access to news and entertainment" (41). People in such a community are expected to adopt different religions, diverse beliefs and varied cultures. Those who live in a postmodern society, as claimed by Hooti and Torkamaneh, can witness "many beliefs, multiple realities and an exhilarating, but daunting profusion of world views, a society that has lost its faith in absolute truth in which people have to choose what to believe (41).

The sixth and the last feature of postmodernism this paper is concerned with is about some dramatic aspects. Kerstin Schmidt mentions in her book *"Theater of Transformation : Postmodernism in American Drama"* many dramatic features that are pertinent to postmodernist drama. Some of these prominent features are: a) the scarcity of stage props (which has been discussed as the first feature of postmodernism in this paper), b) the emptiness of plot, character and agon, c) a static image, and d) no moral didacticism. Regarding the last three features, they are all quite conspicuous in the play *'night Mother*. The fact that this play is empty of plot, characters, and agon is quite apparent in that the plot and the characters are not conventional, in every sense of the word. There is no development in the plot since Jessie declares from the very outset of the play her irrevocable decision to terminate her life. Though Thelma the mother does her utmost to dissuade Jessie from committing suicide, Jessie seems more than adamant in fulfilling her aim. The two main characters and the only two who appear on the stage do not develop, either. They both remain the same from beginning to end, perhaps except for Thelma who seems to comply with the Jessie's directions, only after the latter's death. The moment Thelma begins to act according to Jessie's orders, an act which is utterly different from what she has been accustomed to, the curtains are ready to fall. Again, the agon in the play seems to be static, too. It is only Jessie who may be misinterpreted as a heroine who lives in a state of struggle; yet, the element of agon is not

quite apparent since she never seems to be hesitant regarding the notion of suicide. Had she seemed even for a moment to shrink away from accomplishing the idea of suicide, there should have been a sort of the internal agon. Again, Jessie does not seem to be in a struggle with any of the other characters or outer powers whether they appear on the stage or not. All she strives to do is to turn other characters' bad deeds into good ones. Hence, it can be safely said that this play *'night Mother* is a representative play of postmodernist dramas.

As for the static image, the audience and the readers are fully aware that the two actresses spend all their time in one closed house. Marsha Norman states from the very beginning of the play that the two characters can move only within the boundary of three areas: the living room, the kitchen and the bedroom. *"The play takes place in a relatively new house built way out a country road, with a living room and connecting kitchen and a center hall that leads off to the bedrooms"* (*'night Mother* 1). This is exactly what Kerstin Schmidt means when she says that "characters freeze in a static image" (50).

The last dramatic feature to refer to is that a postmodernist drama has nothing to do with didacticism. In this concern, *'night Mother* is no exception since it is mainly about the relation between life and death, hyperreality, apocalypse, nihilism, collage, and suicide. Such a play is not intended to teach some moral lessons or deal with



some well-known axioms; quite the contrary, it is about postmodernism and man's agonies and calamities in postmodern societies.

To put it in a nutshell, Norman's play is a representative work of art of postmodernism since it embodies a large number of postmodernist features. Most of the maladies, if not all of them, that accompany postmodern epoch lead Jessie to irrevocably make her suicidal decision. Since Jessie lives in a myriad of insurmountable problems, she loses her identity and in vain searches for her autonomy. "The play dramatizes one woman's search and struggle for autonomy, self-definition, and self-actualization" (Mehta 41). In failing to attain her autonomy, Jessie Cates becomes like a tragic hero who can lead no path to attain her identity except by committing suicide.

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## **Abstract**

This paper is intended to show to what extent Marsh Norman's play *'night Mother*, awarded Pulitzer Prize in 1983, embodies some postmodernist features. Before dealing with the postmodernist features that can be overtly traced in the play, the readers have been presented with some theorists' definitions regarding the theory of postmodernism. Some prominent features of postmodernism which are quite conspicuous in *'night Mother* are: Apocalypse, Nihilism, Collage, Being emptied of Plot, Character, and Agon, Deleting the notion of Truth, A Static Image, No Moral-didactic Image, and finally the Scarcity of Stage Props.

All the above-mentioned features have been dealt with, especially apocalypse and nihilism since they are two of the most representative features of postmodernism, as stated by the prominent theorists such as Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon, and Fredric Jameson. Both features apocalypse and nihilism are closely concerned with most of the events in the play since Jessie Cates the heroine in the play declares her irrevocable decision to commit suicide. Her mother Thelma Cates does her utmost to dissuade her from terminating her life, but all her attempts vanish into thin air. Such a dangerous decision made by Jessie Cates is an indication of the wretched life Jessie lives.

The other features are again obvious in *'night Mother*. Collage, for instance, shows the different

beliefs represented in the play and this seems in the way Jessie compares herself to Jesus Christ. Also, the absence of the conventional plot, characters, and agon is quite apparent in the sense that the readers and the theater-goers do not find the kind of development they witness in conventional works of art.

The absence of truth can be clearly observed in the way Thelma Cates speaks to her daughter Jessie. The other features are no exception in that the image in the play is static i, e, the scenery is closed in one place. Again, there are no moral lessons to be delivered by the playwright. Finally, the stage props are really scarce in the sense that even the place does not change.

To sum up, Norman's play is a representative work of art of postmodernism since it embodies a large number of postmodernist features. Most of the maladies, if not all of them, that accompany postmodern epoch lead Jessie to irrevocably make her suicidal decision. Since Jessie lives in a myriad of insurmountable problems, she loses her identity and in vain searches for her autonomy. In failing to attain her autonomy, Jessie Cates becomes like a tragic hero who can lead no path to attain her identity except by committing suicide.

## ملخص البحث

هذا البحث يتناول مدى اشتمال مسرحية "تصبحين على خير يا أماه" - وهي المسرحية التي نالت جائزة "بولتزر" الأمريكية عام 1983م- على بعض من ملامح نظرية "ما بعد الحداثة". وقبل أن يتناول الباحث هذه الملامح التي يمكن تتبعها بشكل واضح في المسرحية، فقد قدم الباحث للقارئ بعضاً من تعريفات نظرية "ما بعد الحداثة" لوضع هذه النظرية.

إن بعض الملامح لهذه النظرية تبدو وبشكل واضح في مسرحية "تصبحين على خير يا أماه"، ومن هذه الملامح: فكرة نهاية العالم، النهلسية (العدمية)، التعددية، خلو المسرحية من الحكمة والشخصية والصراع، انعدام الحقيقة والصورة الثابتة، ألا تكون المسرحية مبنية على التوجه الأخلاقي، وأخيراً ندرة الوسائل المسرحية.

إن كل هذه الملامح السابقة قد تم تناولها وخاصة فكرتي نهاية العالم والنهلسية، ذلك لأن هاتين الفكرتين هما من أهم سمات نظرية ما بعد الحداثة كما حدد ذلك أصحاب النظريات البارزين أمثال "بودريلارد" و"ليندا هاتشيون" و"فردريك جيمسون". إن هاتين السمتين ترتبطان بشكل وثيق بمعظم أحداث المسرحية ذلك لأن بطلة المسرحية وهي جيسى كيتس تعلن عن قرارها الذي لا رجعة فيه أنها مقدمة على الانتحار وتبذل أمها ثلما كيتس ما في وسعها كي تثنيها عن وضع حد لحياتها إلا أن محاولاتها جميعاً تذهب أدراج الرياح. إن مثل هذا القرار الخطير الذي اتخذته جيسى كيتس ما هو إلا دلالة على الحياة البائسة التي تعيشها جيسى.

كما أن الملامح الأخرى تبدو واضحة في مسرحية "تصبحين على خير يا أماه" فالتعددية على سبيل المثال تظهر من خلالها العقائد المختلفة متمثلة في في الطريقة التي تقارن فيها جيسى نفسها بالسيد المسيح، كما أن غياب الحكمة التقليدية وكذلك الشخصيات والصراع، كل ذلك يبدو جلياً بمعنى أن القارئ والمشاهد لا يجد ذلك النوع من التطور في أي منها كما يرون ذلك في الأعمال الفنية التقليدية.

إن غياب الحقيقة يمكن ملاحظته جلياً في الطريقة التي تتحدث بها ثلما كيتس إلى ابنتها جيسى، كما أن الملامح الأخرى ليست عن ذلك بعيداً،



فصورة المسرحية ثابتة؛ بمعنى أن المشهد مقصور على مكانٍ واحدٍ، وأيضاً لا توجد دروس أخلاقية تقدمها الكاتبة المسرحية، وأخيراً فإن الوسائل المسرحية نادرة بالفعل؛ بمعنى أن المكان لا يتغير.

وخلاصة القول فإن مسرحية نورمان تعتبر عملاً فنياً نموذجياً لنظرية ما بعد الحداثة، ذلك لأنها تحوى بين دفتيها عدداً لا بأس به من سمات نظرية ما بعد الحداثة.

إن معظم العلات -إن لم تكن كلها- التي واكبت حقبة ما بعد الحداثة أدت بالبطلة جيسى إلى أن تتخذ قرارها الذى لا رجعة فيه بالانتحار. إن جيسى التي عاشت عدداً كبيراً من المشكلات التي لا حل لها قد فقدت هويتها، وعبثاً حاولت البحث عن استقلالها، ولما باءت بالفشل فى تحقيق هدفها أضحت مثل البطل التراجيدى الذى لم يجد سبيلاً لتحقيق هويته سوى بالإقدام على الانتحار.