Exploring Female Consciousness in Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out*

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Feminist drama has carved its identity as a distinct theatrical genre during the late 1960’s both in Britain and America. During the 1960’s the female playwrights became self-conscious about the absence of women on stage. In this long struggle, women who were suffering had given vent to their feelings through their writings in America. *Getting Out* is Marsha Norman’s first play which won the Great American play contest, when it was premiered at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1977. The play is a critique of the most sacred tenets of capitalist and patriarchal ideology.

*Getting Out* focuses on the central character Arlene, who deliberately struggles to liberate herself from her past. *Getting Out* depicts the twenty four hours following Arlene’s release from a state prison. In the beginning of the play Arlene is set free legally but she has been surrounded by a system of enclosure. The split in the central character plays a vital role. Arlie represents her past and Arlene represents the present nature of the character. The opening scene reveals Arlene’s release from the prison. Bennie, the guard who has retired from Pine Ridge, drives her home from the prison. Bennie shows a loving concern towards Arlene. Arlene understands his motivation of driving home and setting her an apartment and going out for a roasted chicken.

Arlie’s flashback reveals her tempestuous past, how she has been sexually abused by her father. Carl, her former lover and pimp comes to meet her. He has escaped from the prison and has come with his meal ticket to persuade her to run away to New York to lead a luxurious life. Arlene refuses his proposal as she knows, it would end in jail again as he was cause for her imprisonment in jail for eight years. Arlene firmly rejects his proposal and decides to be independent though there might not be any prospect in life. Bennie comes and he is shocked to see Carl. Arlene reveals that Carl is the unknown father of her child. Later she says her mother left home suspecting her. When Bennie drags her and pins her into his bed and tries to abuse her sexually, she rebukes him using harsh words. Shocked at his behavior, she calls him a rapist, Bennie backs off; insisting that “I ain’t no rapist, Arlie”.

In Act II, there is a change in the development of the character of Arlie. Though she refuses to see the chaplain in the beginning, later she wishes to see him and waits for him. Her curiosity to read the Bible develops. Carl, former lover, tempts her to run away to New York. He argues, she can lead a sophisticated life in New York and earn four hundred and fifty a week if she works as a dishwasher. Arlene is more concerned about Joey, when he traps her saying that she can give him a luxurious life like a trip to New York and so on. But Arlene knew it would end in disaster. Ruby, her new neighbor comes in while the discuss goes on. Carl gives a matchbook and departs.

*Getting out*, the play enhances both the literal and metaphorical meaning of the title of the play. The split nature is used to enact the prison days of Arlene and also illustrates the restriction placed on Arlene in the world outside the prison. In *Getting Out*, each act begins in the prison. The announcement made by the prison official is unseen throughout the play. The stage lights are on while the announcement takes place so that the audience will be included among the prisoners who listen and comply with the instructions.
Arlene, the central character of the play undergoes a torment of split personality. Norman has used the technique of flashback to bring out the interior reality and the emotional effects within her during the life of imprisonment. As Kerr observes that “The psychological interplay between Arlie and Arlene was ingeniously sustained, the overlapping of past and present virtually musical in its counterpoint” (Kerr 113).

Arlie is the symbolic representation of cultural construct that forms the play’s realistic elements. As a result Arlie entering into the scene makes the audience understand the past events and the external force that drove Arlene to crime. Arlene’s life outside seems to be similar as that of life in the prison. Though she had been let free legally she has been restricted by the society. This is made clear when she wishes to remove the bugler – proof bars that line her apartment window where she is told that ‘The landlord owns the building. You gotta do what he says or he’ll throw you out… (GO 9).

The change of ‘Arlie’ to ‘Arleen’ is made significant through the chaplain who calls her by her full name. He was the only person who acknowledges her as a full human being. Arlene’s mother appears very generous as she brings gifts. Later Arlene feels hurt when she comes to know that she has treated her son as she has treated her with coldness and contempt. Then her mother viciously attacks her where she is most vulnerable with her appearance, her character, and her competence as a mother. Maliciously she squashes the dreams of Arlene having Joey live with her as Arlie in her childhood squashed the frogs.

The emotional conflict between herself and her mother erupts when her mother discovers the hat hidden. Stripping her gift, the bedspread she stuffs it into her basket and moves to the door. Bennie, the guard is portrayed as a man whose decent instinct has been corrupted by his role in the prison. His concern sounds like a parent but the tries to seduce her. He drags and pins her on his bed.

Carl, her former lover and pimp, persuades Arlene to run away to New York with him. Carl’s proposal evokes Arlie’s memories of her bitter past droolers slobbering all over her, crazy drunks, and “sickos” tying her to the bed. Arlene’s final encounter is with Ruby who has accepted her relationship and offers a possibility of hope to the struggling Arlene.

Walter Kerr points out that “Playwright Norman undoubtedly wants us know just how rugged the straight and narrow can be; be her own right, she’s surely being honest” (113). As Harriott critically comments about the playwright, “Norman knows how to write for the theatre, making a virtue of its limitations. Barbara Kachur comments that the play Getting Out, Norman’s most overtly feminist play, dramatizes the first day of Arlene Holsclaws release after an eight year prison term for killing a cab driver during a robbery.

Despite the squalid surrounding narrow vistas; and insoluble problems that Arlene must contend with, Getting Out is not a depressing play. The dramatic tension, the humour, and the playwright’s empathy for her protagonist and uncondescending pity for her other characters infuse it with life. In Getting Out it appears that Arlie will succeed in finding herself just because she recognized her problem.

Norman succeeds in her goal of giving voice to some of the silent and underrepresented members of American society. The feminist voices of these characters which reverberate throughout the American society is an indication that feminism has penetrated deep into American society. Norman’s plays reflect encircling compassion and an
imperishable will to freedom. Her plays are based on the quintessential American values of self-reliance, freedom and hope.

Works Cited: