

## The Image of the Convict in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*

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**Abstract:** *Getting Out* depicts the image of women as a victim of the socio-political system. Women have been oppressed throughout the ages by various institutions including; religious, moral, educational institutions. This study aims at shedding light on the fact that women's rights are violated and women are victimized in the patriarchal societies. Many individuals in the society are trying to make use of women as they are one of the vulnerable and fragile categories in the society. This could be seen clearly through the protagonist Arlie and Arlene throughout the play. The play shows that Arlie has been the victim of her family first and then of the society. She is raped by her own father before she reaches the age of puberty, later by the cab driver who represents the patriarchal society. Even during the process of rehabilitation in the prison she has been represented as the victim of the formal governmental institute. When she is released she tries to build a new life for herself, but she is seen as an ex-convict and the society tries to victimize her once more.

**Keywords:** violence, identity, gender, convict, victim, women, oppression

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern American playwrights try to highlight and comment on the conditions of American society through individual characters and their situations. As the social interactions complicated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many playwrights of the age focused on the issues, such as feminism, civil rights, chronic diseases, color conflicts, political crisis and the individual's position in relation to those issues (Benjamin 2). Women playwrights mainly focus on the theme of feminism. They depict the image of female characters' entrapment in materialistic world. This could be clearly seen in the female characters depicted by Marsha Norman (Gussow 40).

Feminists believe that woman oppression should be ended (Coleman 606). Feminists in the United States began in the mid-nineteenth century with the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention and this was known as the first period of feminism (ibid 607). They primarily advocated the women equal legal rights, particularly the right to vote (ibid 608), and the struggle continued until the time when the nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified. This was known as the first wave of U.S. feminism (ibid)

The late 1960s witnessed the second wave of feminism. People looked at the social world in greatly different ways. Domestic violence, for instance, wife battering, child abuse, and sexual rape and sexual harassment in the workplace started to become intensely important for the playwrights of the period (Carden 17). In America, Mary Ellman's book *Thinking about Women* in 1968 was believed to be the beginning of the modern feminism (ibid), a year later, Kate Millet's work, *Sexual Politics* (1969) was published and it strengthened the feminist views. Millet's work unveiled Freud's male bias and some writers' negative depiction of women as objects or pure sexual gratification. She strongly attacked the social system for men's domination over women (Carden 18).

Thus, feminist drama deals particularly with female experience and focuses on woman, giving her a sense of self-respect and dignity in a patriarchal society. The frequent themes are women's struggle for self realization, self-definition, search for identity, domestic violence, individuality, pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, the mother-daughter relationship. Sometimes there is a presentation of woman as an outsider, an object, and the other (Gussow 41). Women come to be the central character in most feminist drama. They are often depicted as both the protagonist and

antagonist. They have been portrayed in such a way that they are not allowed to continue patriarchal system unless they are regarded as enemies to be oppressed by the new women. Janet Brown states; "The victim in the new feminist drama is not man but traditional womanhood or traditional woman or male-identified woman." (Parshley xviii)

## 2. OSTRACIZED CHARACTER

*Getting Out* (1978) by Marsha Norman is about an individual's struggle to reform. Arlene, who is the female protagonist in *Getting Out*, is trying to save herself after she has been released from prison. She is trying hard to find a better life, but she faces many problems that hamper her reformation. Most of her obstacles arise due to negative labels given to her (Mohideen 2). Arlene tries to liberate herself from the past because of the crimes she has committed in the past. The main character is presented as two different characters; Arlie the former criminal and Arlene the character who is seeking a new different identity (Mohideen 1). She herself reiterates and confirms that now she is a different character, as she says:

ARLENE. (*Picking up old newspapers and other trash from the floor.*) I kin take care of myself. I been doin it long enough.

BENNIE. Sure you have, an you landed yourself in prison doin it, Arlie girl.

ARLENE. (*Wheels around, won't this guy ever shut up?*) Arlie girl landed herself in prison. Arlene is out, O.K.? (GO 11)

Arlie has been depicted in a way to represent the social barriers imposed on the character. Through Arlie the author tries to make the audience understand the past and the reasons that cause Arlene commit the crime. When Arlene is released from the prison she finds that her life outside is not different from her life in the prison. Although she is free, she has been living as an ostracized character and she has been restricted by the society (Mohideen 2). Arlene insists to start a new life, she is trying to find her son who has never known her and who is now living in a Foster home, but the incidents of her past haunt her and cause her deviate. The obstacles make the remarkable relationship between Arlie and Arlene and make the audience be familiarized with her past life (Shelnutt 18).

From the very beginning of the play Arlene has been introduced to the audience as a violent and conflictive child who enjoys watching the suffering of others.

ARLIE, You never heard such a fuss. (*Makes croaking sounds.*) Slimy bastards, frogs. We was plannin to let em go all over the place, but when they started jumpin an all, we just figured they was askin for it. So, we taken em out front to the porch an we throwed em, one at a time, into the street. (*Laughs.*) Some of em hit cars goin by but most of em jus got squashed, you know, runned over? It was great, seein how far we could throw em, over back of our backs an under our legs an God, it was really fun watchin em fly through the air then SPLAT (*Claps hands.*) all over somebody's car window or somethin. Then the next day, we was waitin and this little kid comes out in his back yard lookin for his stupid frogs and he don't see any an he gets so crazy, cryin and everything. So me an June goes over an tells him we seen this big mess out in the street, an he goes out an sees all them frogs legs and bodies an shit all over the everywhere, an, man, it was so funny. We bout killed ourselves laughin (GO 10)

In this extract, it is clear that Arlie enjoys a kind of sadomasochist satisfaction when she provokes the death of the frogs causing them suffering. Then, after childhood, she works as a prostitute the sense of violence increases to the extent that she commits a crime when she accidentally kills a taxi driver because he tries to rape her. The audience is unaware of the fact that Arlene's violent conduct results from a distress hidden in her early childhood when her own father abuses her sexually and her mother leaves her (Gallardo 44). After she is released from the prison, Arlene realizes that she is in need of having a better relationship with her surroundings and she feels she needs to be a part of the family again. Based on that, she tries to establish a new constructive relationship with her mother, but her mother talks about trivial things such as cleaning the house or the need to create a good impression.

ARLENE: (A Clear request) I'll probably get my Sundays off.

MOTHER: Sunday... is my day to clean the house now. (Arlene gets the message, finally walks over to straighten the picture. Mother now feels a little bad about this rejection, stops

sweeping for a moment.) I woulda wrote you but I didn't have nuthin to say. An no money to send, so what's the use? (GO 25-26)

From her Mother's words, it is clear that Arlene is not welcomed into the family again which makes her ostracized and unwanted (Gallardo 45). Her mother comes and behaves according to the expectations of the society, not because she really feels the need to get closer to her daughter. In addition, when Arlene asks for her son who has been taken away from her in prison if he resembles her, Mother answers that "He don't even know who you are, Arlie (...). You forgot already what you was like a kid." (GO 26). It could be observed that her mother still calls her Arlie, not Arlene and that is because she does not believe in Arlene's change (ibid). Later on, when Arlene recalls sweet memories of her childhood, her mother can only remember the disobedient Arlie;

MOTHER: (...) Little Snotty-nosed kid tryin to kill her daddy with a bologna sandwich. And him being so pleased when you brung it to him... (Laughing.)

ARLENE: (No longer enjoying the memory.) He beat me good.

MOTHER: Well, now, Arlie, you gotta admit you had it comin to you (Wiping tears from laughing.)

ARLENE: I guess. (*Getting Out*: 24)

It is clear that the mother is unaware of the reason behind Arlie's intention to kill her father by putting toothpaste in a sandwich. Therefore, the mother supports Arlie's father when he beats up Arlie because she "was asking for it." Thus, it is obvious that Arlene dislikes her past memories about the stories of abuse and violence:

MOTHER: You remember that black chewing gum he got you when you was sick?

ARLENE: I remember he beat up on you.

MOTHER: Yeah, (Proudly) and he was really sorry a coupla times. (...) (*Getting Out* 19)

Arlene's mother is neither able to help nor comprehend the situation of abuse against her daughter by her own father. Her mother fails to acknowledge the reality when she finds a man's hat in the apartment; Arlene tries to explain that it belongs to Bennie, the guard who has helped her bringing her back home from prison. Arlene's mother gets mad thinking that her daughter is still working as a prostitute, thus, she fails to see the reality of Arlene's being changed:

OTHER: (...) I knowed I shouldn't have come. You ain't changed a bit.

ARLENE: Same hateful brat, right? (Back to Mother.)

MOTHER: Same hateful brat. Right (Arms full, heading for the door)

ARLENE: (Rushing toward her.) Mama...

MOTHER: Don't you touch me. (Mother leaves. Arlene stares out the door, stunned and hurt, finally, she slams the door and turns back into the room.)

ARLENE: No! Don't you touch Mama, Arlie (*GO* 30).

It seems that Arlene's struggle is not only with her past abuse, but also with her challenge to stand against social and familial conflicts (Cline 4). Arlene comes to realize that she has lost all the possibilities to have a better relationship with her own mother because her mother does not even want her daughter touches her. Therefore, the familial relationship is broken that is mainly due to lack of trust between Arlene and her mother (Gallardo 47). Normally, the relationship between mother and daughter is a strong one, but in this play such relationship between mother and daughter is broken.

### **3. MALE DOMINANCE OVER FEMALE**

For Arlene, the outside world is the same as the world of the prison, Dolmage states that

It could be seen as a dystopia in which the prisoners, the guards, and even the people on the outside, are never really safe or secure in their knowledge of God's love for them. Ironically, the politics, the religion, the rules and the breaking of those rules are, in prison, a microcosm of the world outside in which Arlene must once more learn to survive (54)

In her youth, Arlene violates all the social rules and norms when she starts working as a prostitute then commits the crime of murder. Arlene is under the effect of her past when she has been raped by her father even before reaching puberty, and it seems that this action has a great impact on her life that leads her to the prison. On the other hand, her mother keeps herself silent about this violation though the evidence is available (ibid). Her mother tries to lead her in and Arlie tries to convince her mother not to ask about what is wrong with her:

ARLIE (*Curling up into a ball*) No, Mama, don't touch it. It'll git well.

It git well before. . . . I'm tellin' you the truth. . . . Daddy didn't do nuthin' to me. . . . Ask him. He saw me fall on my bike. . . .

(*Screaming*) No Daddy! I didn't tell her nuthin'. I didn't! I didn't! (GO 17)

Arlie or Arlene is exploited by most of the characters in the play including her father (Holsclaw) who is the first to oppress her sexually. Even the cab driver tries to rape her when she kills him. Other male characters like Ronnie and the guards try to abuse her and they use a verbal seduction and threat

GUARD-CALDWELL. Gotta see you get fattened up.

ARLIE. What do you care? (*Arlene goes into the bathroom.*)

GUARD-CALDWELL. Oh, we care all right. (*Setting the food down on the table.*) Got us a two-way mirror in the shower room. (*She looks up, hostile.*) And you don't know which one it is, do you? (*He forces her onto the seat.*) Yes Ma'am. Eat. (*Pointing to the food.*) We sure do care if you go gittin too skinny. (*Walks away, folding his arms and standing watching her, her anger build-ing, despite her hunger.*) Yes Man. We care a hog lickin lot (GO 18)

The other two male characters in the play Carl and Bennie also look at Arlene as a sexual commodity

BENNIE. (*Stops rubbin, but deeps one hand on her back. Rubs her hair with his free had.*) See? Don't that feel better?

ARLENE. Let me up.

BENNIE. Why, I ain't holdin you down.(*So innocent.*)

ARLENE. Then let me up.

BENNIE. (*Takes hands off.*) O.K. Git up.

ARLENE. (*Turns over slowly, begins to lift herself up on her elbows. Bennie puts one had on her leg.*) Move your hand.

BENNIE. (*Arlene gets up, moves across the room.*) I'd be happy to stay here with you tonight. Make sure you'll be all right. You ain't spent a night by yourself for a long time (GO 37)

These characters try to control Arlene and her life using sexual abuse and violence as well as the position of power (Shelnutt 20). It seems she is unable to get rid of the depressing male dominance from her childhood to the present though she is making every possible effort to start a new life after serving her eight year prison punishment (Dolmage 56). Thus, the male characters have been represented in such a way that they are trying to impose their power and control over the woman. Hence, they represent the oppressive system of patriarchal society that the author introduces as the foundation of entrapment. The patriarchal society in the play "imposes a limited way of thinking and living" (Shelnutt 21).

This idea leaves a negative impact on both men and women in the play, but the author extensively shows its impact on female characters. Arlene in the play undergoes two different types of oppression; she suffers for murder, and her conflict against the society (Shelnutt 22). Arlene has been put in the dungeon, but her real dungeon is the society outside the prison because the society does not accept a deviant woman. While she is imprisoned for eight years the male characters in the play avoid any types of punishment including Ronnie, her father, and the guards. Ruby, talks about women saying: "well, you can wash dishes to pay the rent on your 'slum', or you can spread your legs for any shit that's got the ten dollars" (GO 53). When she gets out of prison, Arlene

cannot have a respectable life because the society does not accept her. She is obliged to give up her hope to establish a better life, consequently, she accepts to live in an old apartment. She and other women around her are unable to obtain autonomy and it is something illusive. Thus, women have been depicted in the way that they are dominated by men and they are denied from their identity in the male dominant patriarchal society (Shelnutt 23).

Ruby is also obliged to accept her cooking job, she describes herself "Queen of Grease" saying that she can "make the finest French fries you ever did see" (GO 49). Arlene is able to get rid of both Carl and Benny, but she is unable to get away from the life shaped for her by her society. She refuses to work as a prostitute and she decides to have a different life. Ruby is obliged to accept the identity shaped for her by her society, it is clear for some of women, like Ruby, the essential role in life is to have some domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, and watching television. Otherwise the society will oppress and isolate them (ibid). Norman presents the Arlene as a victim of more complex structure of authority, restrictive system, and standards of male dominant society which is the source of sufferings for women. Within this restrictive system, Arlene has her own individuality and she refuses to surrender to the social system because she accepts to strive and suffer in order to preserve her identity and refuse to accept oppression (ibid). Her effort to run away from prison and her ceaseless conflict with the authorities of the prison, her attempt to have control over the guards as well as the way she obliges them to put out the fires when she burns the cell are clear evidences that she is a confident and determined character who is really different from other female characters in the play

ARLIE. There's ways ... gettin outta bars... (Appears to light a fire in the cell, catching her blouse on fire too.)

BENNIE. (As Arlie is lighting the fire.) This ol nail's pretty loose. I'll find something better to hang it with... somewhere or other...

ARLIE. (Screams and the Doctor runs toward her, getting the attention of Evans, a guard who has been goofing off on the catwalk.) Let me outta here! There's a fuckin fire in here! (Doctor arrives at the cell, pats his pockets as if looking for the keys.) Officer! (GO 14)

She is different from other traditional women because she cannot be subjugated easily like other female characters in the play; she refuses to surrender to society that imposes the restrictive system on her. She prefers to commit suicide rather than having no self-identity. Unification of Arlene's double characters and her friendship with Ruby suggest the beginning of autonomy for Arlene that will provide the hope for a brighter future and more individuality (Kane 23).

#### **4. THE EX-CONVICT**

In the play Arlene has been imprisoned for eight years for a crime of murder. She kills the cab driver who wants to rape her. Thus, she is the victim and she can be considered as a battered woman. The theory of women being victims of crime 'emerged in the 1970s with the grow of radical feminism and demands to make violence a public not private matter' (Carrington 86), this theory was developed by many academics, focusing on women as victims of domestic violence, rather than as perpetrators of the violence themselves (ibid) This is possibly because women as perpetrators of violence is considered to be a relatively infrequent occurrence (Morrissey 169). Accordingly, Arlene can be viewed as a victim of sexual violence; first she is raped by her own father even before the age of puberty, second when she is about to be raped by the taxi cab.

As a matter of fact, after being released from the prison, Arlene's sufferings do not end. She faces many other crises including: homeless, unemployment, and social discrimination. Both condition of detention and general attitude of the society towards her are the same, thus, she moves from one hell to another. While she is in the prison she suffers from loss of contact with relations, torture and other practices that undermine human development and self actualization. It is in these issues that the first hell where the ex-prisoner is coming from could be found. All these lead to reduce the ability of the ex-convict to cope, or even meet the basic necessities of life. This could be seen clearly in Arlene who is unable to cope with the situation in the prison and the society even after she is released. While she is in prison the guards are trying to seduce her and after the prison Carl and Bennie try to attract her. In the world of *Getting Out*, Norman has presented a determined exposure to the world of ex-convict who is going to suffer due to her past life. The society does not support her in finding a new way in a world that insists to defeat her (Stauffer

10). In fact, the reintegration process of ex-convicts is an interactive one, between ex-convicts and their private, parochial, and public social networks (Hunter 1985). These different interactions have various roles in the reintegration process of ex-convicts, influencing their ability to successfully rejoin society. In Arlene's case, these interactions are weak, though she is making her efforts to be reintegrated into the society, her surroundings always do not respond to her will in a positive way. At the family level, Arlene is not welcomed back home, even by her own mother because she has been viewed as a "double deviant" because she violates both the law and gender norms (Owen 12). The other male characters in the play try to exploit her instead of supporting her to start a new life.

Stephanie Covington argues that many female offenders might have faced abuse and violence in their past lives; she adds that usually female's main motivation is to have a association with others, she believes its essential for ex-imprisoned women to build relationships in order to make change happens in their lives and that is not to let their histories of loss, deprivation, and abuse repeat (74). The case is different with Arlene, though she is trying to have a different life when she is released; her surroundings try to make use of her. Her family fails to provide her a comfortable and peaceful life in her childhood, and as an adult she is exposed to abuse by a prison inmate. All these misfortunes are resulted from her parents' failure to afford a protective and nurturing milieu. Thus, the play reflects an important issue which is related to the inescapability of family legacy, which is face by Arlene's desires to look to the future. Arlene tries to find herself in the context of future possibilities and her search takes her through a painful examination of her past to obtain some sort of autonomy (Dolmage 51). Arlene physically gets out of prison while she remains as a prisoner outside because her past forms its own prison from which she will never completely be free.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *Getting Out*, Norman shows that women's behaviors are shaped by the social forces. The protagonist is searching to define her role and she wants to start a new life, but her cruel self and the people around her hinder her attempts. Normans depicts an oppressive system in which men have entirely controlled the female characters. Arlene and Ruby are committed to the system established for them by the society. With the support of another female character Ruby, Arlene is successful in regaining part of her previous self and through Arlene's amalgamation of her two selves she is able to get back her full sense of identity. Thus, Norman shows a beginning of female independence and depicts the image of women in such a way that they will enjoy more liberty in the future.

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