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Five Female Characters Driven to Suicide in Plays by 20th-Century Female Playwrights as a Result of Domestic Violence in a Patriarchal Society

by

Shelley R. Terry

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

Master of Liberal Studies

________________________________________
Lawrence Anderson, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

________________________________________
Ashley Pryor, Ph.D.
Committee Member

________________________________________
Holly Monsos, M.S.A.
Advisor

________________________________________
Dr. Patricia Komuniecki, Dean
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

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An Abstract of

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This study explores the theme of domestic violence and suicide in five plays by 20th-Century female playwrights. It proposes that these playwrights show principle female characters who were driven to extreme measures to escape verbal and/or physical abuse, and oppression. These playwrights allow their characters to free themselves from the oppressive and/or abusive patriarchal society in which they find themselves through a voluntary death, which ultimately constitutes an act of empowerment. The texts explored include: Ripen Our Darkness, by Sarah Daniels; Perfect Pie, by Judith Thompson; The Day of the Swallows, by Estela Portillo-Trambley; 'night, Mother, by Marsha Norman, and And the Soul Shall Dance, by Wakako Yamauchi.
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Introduction

“Domestic violence is the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior perpetuated by an intimate partner against another,” according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) (2009). It is an epidemic affecting people in every community, regardless of age, income, social status, race, religion or educational background. Domestic violence, including violence against women, is often accompanied by emotionally abusive and controlling behavior, and is a part of a pattern of dominance and control. Domestic violence can result in physical injury and even death, and yet domestic violence is one of the most chronically under reported crimes in America, according to the NCADV. That is why the five plays discussed in this study, and written in the second half of the 20th century, still hold value for 21st century women.

Women’s stories need to be told by women themselves. By showing the plight of their characters experiencing domestic violence, female playwrights appeal to their audience and attempt to trigger a desire for change. Real women who suffer trauma, such as the psychological abuse experienced by Mary in Ripen Our Darkness, the physical abuse endured by Marie in Perfect Pie and Emiko in And the Soul Shall Dance, and the oppression that smothered Josefa in The Day of the Swallows, provide an “impossible history” that cannot be possessed but rather possesses the victim (Debling, 2008, p. 260). Consequently, stage plays fill an important role in representing trauma and healing.
As Judith Herman (1992) explains, healing cannot happen in isolation, but rather, needs a speaker and a listener (Herman p. 133). Theater fills this role and can be particularly powerful because the suicidal woman not only talks to another character on stage, but also to the audience. “The medium of theatre provides a feminist forum to make public women’s testimonies of abuse beyond the private confessional sphere of the therapist. Theatre becomes a means of publicly bearing witness,” child abuse advocate Elaine Aston (2003) writes (p. 43). And it’s working, according to Helen Tierney (1999), who commented on Portillo-Trambley’s *The Day of Swallows* saying it, “stirred much controversy because of its depiction of lesbianism and denunciation of traditional Mexican male domination” (Tierney p. 217). In a 1982 interview in her native El Paso, Texas, Portillo-Trambley said she believes the Chicano theater should be used to make people aware of the injustices of America (Vowell p. 61). Making people aware of injustice is the first step towards changing policies.

Women are reporting only one-quarter of all physical assaults, one-fifth of all rapes, and one-half of all stalking (NCADV 2009). Theater provides an exceptional forum for women to reach out to other women, to make people aware of injustices where the audience can see, feel, and hear things ‘up close and personal.’ In live performances, the actors are right there with the audience, sharing the energy, the struggles, and bringing women’s stories to life. That’s the beauty of theater. The actors are working in the same room, breathing the same air. The theater is the perfect forum for change, and change is what is needed in an unequal society where abuse and oppression exist. There is no place like the stage to see the tears drop from Emiko’s face when she begs Oka for her money back so she can return to her beloved Japan or to hear the audience laugh at
Ripen Our Darkness when Mary shouts, “Christ alive. I’m dead!”, when she finds herself in an all-female heaven (Thompson, p. 66).

The five 20th Century plays explored in the following paper show the trauma and injustice incurred when women experience domestic violence which ultimately leads them to attempt suicide. In so doing, these plays show the results of the abuse and oppression from a male-dominated society, also known as a patriarchy. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the definition of patriarchy as a social system in which the father or eldest male is head of the household, having authority over women and children.

These plays, perhaps best referred to as social dramas, exemplify the best that female playwrights have to offer. The first play, Perfect Pie, by Judith Thompson, gives a voice to two tragic victims of sexual abuse. The second play, Ripen Our Darkness by Sarah Daniels, takes a satirical approach to illuminating oppression and verbal abuse. The third play, The Day of the Swallows, by Estela Portillo-Trambley, deals with a lesbian, rebelling against the expectation of heterosexual marriage; in a male-dominated culture. The fourth play, And the Soul Shall Dance, by Wakako Yamauchi, explores a male-dominated Japanese-American society whose culture includes tolerance of verbal and physical abuse and oppression of women. The final, and fifth play, ’night Mother by Marsha Norman is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play concerning a woman who has lost control of her life and reveals her controversial plan to win it back. All of these plays, though of different content, are bringing the abuse and oppression of a male-dominated society to center stage; to be illuminated by the footlights, and expose the long hidden pain felt by the women who endure it.
Chapter One

_Perfect Pie_ by Judith Thompson

Judith Thompson is one of Canada’s most accomplished playwrights. Editor Ric Knowles suggests she may well be the “…subject of more MA theses, PhD dissertations, scholarly chapters, articles, and interviews than any other Canadian playwright, with the possible and partial exceptions of Sharon Pollock and George F. Walker” (Knowles vii). But Thompson’s plays are rarely, if ever, pleasant to watch. Rather, her works touch on the brutal side of life. In _Perfect Pie_, written at the very end of the 20th century, Thompson exposes the challenges faced by two women whose struggles demonstrate the oppressive power of a patriarchal society. The past slams into the present when Marie, who joined Patsy in a failed suicide pact years before, shows up one day while Patsy is baking a pie in her kitchen. Marie has changed her name to Francesca and is now an actor. She has been married three times and is still looking to escape from her past. _Perfect Pie_ is not always a treat to watch or read, as it touches topics such as bullying, gang rape, suicide, and child abuse. However, the play demonstrates how violence against women, when in the context of a patriarchal society where men yield greater authority and more social power, can lead to a debilitating isolation and paralyzing fear of continued victimization.

The central theme in this play is that abusive experiences in childhood shape people’s identities and can lead them into a life of isolation and fear. Thompson supports
this by examining how childhood shapes our identity; what friends we choose, the consequent peer pressure, and how different people use their experiences in adulthood. These two girls, with different identities, share dark secrets involving gang rape and suicide. The play then explores what happened to these women throughout the next 25 years and how the choices they made, after their suicide attempt, shaped their separate identities.

Patsy is first introduced to the audience in the darkness of her kitchen, a visual representation of the isolation of a woman after a violent incident. The audience clearly sees this is a woman who is isolated from society. She has no windows providing light or letting her see the outside world. She is alone in her kitchen. She isn’t talking on the telephone or visiting with a friend in person; instead she is utilizing a tape recorder, a solitary method of communication. “Moonlight illuminates a perfect ball of dough, a pot of tea and a teacup. There is a small tape recorder in front of her on the table” (Thompson, 1999, p. 3). The fact that Patsy made a “perfect ball of dough,” insinuates she is a perfect housewife and she takes her duties seriously, making her pie from scratch. Furthermore, the references to her tea cups speak to her child-like desire to “play tea party,” pretending that everything is okay and remain in isolation from her own adult experiences. In a letter to Marie, Patsy speaks nothing of friends or family members. She doesn’t say anything about the town she lives in or what’s going on in it. There is no friendly gossip. Instead, she closes the letter with, “Well, Marie, I got all my chickens waiting’ to be fed and the damn cows to take care of – they been gorging on crabapples so they’re in agony with the gas, eh, bloated up just terrible so I better let you go” (Thompson, 1999, p. 4). Patsy has little interaction outside her farm life and it appears
she may not even have any friends outside her family. The first scene lets the audience know that Marie is a lonely housewife, and the rest of the play divulges what caused Patsy to be such a cautious woman who rarely leaves her farm – it is fear.

Undoubtedly, this play also shows the way in which fear can envelop a woman’s life when she has no means by which to seek justice or express her trauma. Hille Koskela’s article, “Gendered Exclusions: Women’s Fear of Violence and Changing Relations to Space,” completely describes Patsy’s life as an adult and explains how Patsy first discloses her fear when she asks Marie why she left and never came back to town. She asks, “what were you… afraid of?” (Thompson, 1999, p. 22). This pause in the question shows Patsy herself was the one who was afraid because she’s the one who never left town. Francesca, the new name Marie gave herself in adult life, responds to fear in a different way. She acts upon fear by running away; which is clearly a coping mechanism rooted in the fear of staying, of being a victim again. Patsy stayed and married the boy she dated in high school, Ric. Although Patsy praises herself throughout the play for being “farm strong,” she is still a woman. Not only is she a woman, she is a woman who experienced second-hand how powerful men are, especially as a group, through her friend Marie’s sexual assault: Koskela summarizes Patsy’s response perfectly when she says, “Because of fear, women are restricting their access to and activity within public space. Collectively, women constitute an example par excellence of the unequal victim because they are socially and physically vulnerable to victimization” (Koskela, 1999, p. 111). Indeed, Patsy represents how women have a deep-rooted fear of sexual violence. Patsy’s close relationship to Marie allowed her to connect to the emotional and physical devastation of Marie’s gang rape. Although Patsy was not raped, she suffered
emotional trauma as a result of the rape. Sexual violence is especially terrifying for
women: “Women perceive a unique and serious threat barely felt by men – sexual
violence. Violent attacks and sexual harassment remind women every day that they are
not meant to be in certain spaces. When women adopt strategies to cope with fear, they
commonly distance themselves – in space and time – from potential attackers” (Koskela,
1999, p. 111). Clearly, Patsy lives her life in fear of this violence in contrast to young
Patsy, who freely moved in the community.

Koskela demonstrates in the play how the two main characters cope with their
fear by living two distinctly different lifestyles. Francesca and Pasty get into a debate
about who missed out more – Patsy, because she never traveled or Francesca, because she
never had a family. Pasty discloses that a company offered a seven-figure payment for
the farm but they refused to sell. Francesca says, “Get outa town! You could retire in
Tahiti. Were you tempted?” and Patsy says, “For about… a day. Oh we talked about it.
We argued about it. But. Well, you know…” (Thompson, 1999, p. 57). The audience
assumes Patsy is talking about how she didn’t move because she fears change: “Living a
spatially restricted life because of fear constantly reminds women of their relatively
powerless position” (Koskela, 1999, p. 112). Francesca, on the other hand, lives on her
own and claims to love it. Patsy questions whether Francesca ever gets lonely, and
Francesca insists she is never lonely, ever. Patsy says, “I don’t like to be alone”
(Thompson, p. 59). When Francesca questions this, Patsy has no reason other than fear.
By staying in her hometown, she remains in familiar territory and avoids dangerous areas
that are known to be masculine. Francesca (Marie) lives her life away from the traumatic
experience, insisting she is never lonely; therefore closing off any real intimacy with others. She lives other people’s lives through her acting. Both women are broken.

The play now builds a case for the gradual eroding of a woman’s confidence and security. Marie no longer felt safe after being overpowered by, not just one man, but a group of men in a gang rape. The play places her in a football field, alone, completely unprotected by a date who dumped her, who should have been by her side. Marie relates that he felt superior to her, more dominant than she, because he looked down on her for being poor. After the rape, Patsy cannot live her life to the fullest and Marie disappears. Marie recalls the rape to an adult Patsy, “I walked out my head down my legs shaking across the football field. In my mother’s high heels and and” (Thompson, p. 79).

Thompson uses an interesting choice of words in prelude to Marie’s graphic gang rape. First, Marie is walking across a football field, an extremely masculine place. She is innocent and doesn’t know she is in danger. She’s a young girl, a virgin, trying to play an older, sophisticated woman by wearing her mother’s high heels. However she doesn’t feel comfortable wearing the heels, and later, one heel is broken. Marie is pretending to be a woman in the heels, but she also is broken. As women age they learn to fear areas in which they have come to know they are not safe: “In identifying safe routes and dangerous areas, women formulate different spaces: the city – especially night city – is divided into ‘masculine’ areas, with barely any women around, and presumably safer areas which fearful women find more ‘feminine’” (Koskela p. 113). Since Marie disappeared after the attack and suicide attempt, and Patsy was in a coma, the male teenage attackers got away with the crime. Football players, especially in this male-dominated society, are often idolized because of their physical prowess and game-playing
abilities. High schools, colleges and even professional football franchises often look the other way to protect these heroes. Mike Florio, a columnist for Sporting News (2010) says the off-field problems of the Pittsburgh Steelers gives the impression a double standard exists for pro football players. It happened most notably in 2008 when linebacker James Harrison and receiver Cedrick Wilson were accused of domestic violence in the same general time frame. Harrison remained a key player, while Wilson got dumped not long after his arrest. “The lower level players get the boot, he says, and the better players get a pass.” This most likely left the attackers with an extreme feeling of power because they assaulted a girl in their masculine space with absolutely no repercussions.

By the end of the play, the audience realizes it was Patsy who chose to continue the suicide when Marie wanted to back out. As Patsy reveals as an adult, “And YOU are pullin’ on me (Marie’s thinking clears, she gets off tracks and tries to pull Patsy off) pullin’ away but I am not gonna let you go I am stronger than you farm strong. I am going to stay on this track then I feel it I feel it in my feet and your fingernails diggin’ in I am the train I am big I am met! I am moving so fast I am – ” (Thompson, p. 88). Patsy was severely affected by Marie’s gang rape, so much so, that she feared what life would be like for her. Perhaps she realized in that moment that her life would always be paralyzed with fear: “It is important to recognize the fact that although fear is expressed on an individual level, it is always a social phenomenon. The threat of violence, and even actual rapes and attacks isolate the women from the space, and make them monitor their own behavior,” Kokela says (Koskela p. 115). Patsy did not grow up a frightened girl; she was heartfelt and trusting. When her father killed her dog because it was nipping
cattle she did not hold it against him. Although it upset her, she didn't make a fuss – foreshadowing of what she did when the teenage boys raped Marie. She didn’t make a fuss about it or try to seek justice. She married the boy she was supposed to go to the dance with that night. She then stayed on the farm, became a farmer’s wife with a family under the protection of the only man she could trust. Marie left town. Although the train did not kill her, she went through a kind of suicide anyway, by letting Marie “die” and becoming Francesca, turning “death” into something positive. Audiences will not forget Thompson’s lasting “Perfect Pie” just as Patsy says she would never forget Marie: “I will not forget you, you are carved in the palm of my hand” (Thompson, p. 407).

An interesting alternative interpretation one could make is that Marie actually did die and that Patsy is just imagining her friend. The audience sees how Patsy keeps begging Marie to stay and meet her family, but Marie declines. She claims she is rather famous, and Patsy backs this story. Marie is supposedly in town for a gala for which she is being honored. Even so, she can’t spare a few hours to meet her best friend’s family. An interesting conversation occurs when Marie (as Francesca) says, “I wish I could stay forever” and Patsy says, “Me too. But you can’t, I suppose” (Thompson, p. 89). The use of the word forever could be an argument for the theory that Marie is a ghost. Patsy seems to come to terms with the fact that Marie is a ghost when she says, “Marie. Is there… really… this gala happening?” and Marie states, “Of course there is, it’s for a film I made a while ago, it’s… there really really is, Patsy” as Patsy returns to her baking rolling a ball of dough (Thompson, p. 90). It is odd that Patsy is questioning her friend and even odder that Marie claims the gala is being thrown for a movie she made a while ago. This could also symbolize the fact that in her eternal resting place her suicide is
being celebrated at a later date. This interpretation rings true because her suicide happened due to an assault by several young men. This drama may reinforce the audience’s existing views, provoke, challenge or even offend them, but that is the goal for this playwright. Marie’s trauma ended in death, whereas Patsy buried her trauma in marriage. If Marie’s (aka Francesca’s) eternal resting place were anything like Sarah Daniel’s *Ripen Our Darkness*, it would make sense that a woman’s suicide to escape a patriarchal society would be celebrated.
Chapter Two

*Ripen Our Darkness* by Sarah Daniels

Verbal abuse and oppression of women is central to the dark comedy, *Ripen Our Darkness*, by Sarah Daniels, which approaches difficult subjects through satire. The “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” mentality could not be farther from the truth in this play. A woman can feel just as helpless and overpowered by a male-dominant abuser who uses isolation tactics and verbal attacks to wear the woman down over time. The main character, Mary, finds it increasingly difficult to function in her home. Her only respite is the kitchen, but even there; her husband, David, shows no consideration for her. In their marriage, everything that matters is what is important to him, not her. She is trapped in a verbally abusive heterosexual marriage with her husband, who is also the churchwarden of her church. David’s dual role in the play enables the playwright to lift up the established church as yet another element of patriarchal culture. Mary in many ways represents the mother of today’s Baby Boomers, a “Mrs. Cleaver” from 1960’s television “Leave it to Beaver.” She is a housewife, whose life centers on caring for her family. Griffin notes Mary is from “our mothers’ generation of women: women now in their 60s and 70s who lived in a heterosexist world in which women were expected, and in consequence themselves expected, to marry (and for that marriage to last a lifetime), have children, keep a home, and not go out to work” (Griffin, 2000, p. 196). Under these circumstances, it is difficult for Mary to imagine escape no matter how unimportant David and her sons make her feel. David takes full advantage of
this, alienating her from anyone who would support her. He attempts to keep her away from her daughter, Anna, because he views Anna’s lesbian lifestyle as abhorrent. Anna and her lover, Julia, encourage and support Mary, unlike her sons who treat her like a servant and take advantage of her – a behavior they obviously learned from their father. When Mary complains to David that the boys, now in their early twenties, come in at all hours and make a mess in the kitchen, David said: “Boys will be boys, and they’re not going to get any better if you persistently nag them, now are they?” (Daniels, 1991, p. 6). After refusing to get his own bowl of cereal, son Paul asks his mother for money even though he has a job, and when asked about the mess left in the kitchen replies, “Shut up, will you? You old bag” (Daniels p. 9). Throughout the play, Mary takes more and more verbal abuse until finally she refuses to engage further with the demands of the men in her life. She has no space in her life except her kitchen, and David continually invades that space and reduces her to “servant status” (Griffin, 2000, p. 197, bossing her around and projecting his lack of knowledge on to her by suggesting she is disorganized: “And remember what we agreed, eh? What we worked out about being methodical, and getting things sorted out in a logical way so that it will give you more time to do things, to get more things fitted into the day” (Daniels, p. 5). What’s important here is what is important to him, as evidenced by David inviting friends over for dinner without first asking her. As the play progresses, she withdraws more and more until she commits suicide by sticking her head in her gas oven, thus escaping her oppression. Griffin said: “Her suicide, at the end of the play, is her final refusal to engage further with the demands of the males which constitute her family and who have completely ignored her as a person in her own right” (2000, p. 197). It’s important to note the suicide takes place
in her kitchen, the place of the opening scene and the room that should have been her place, a traditionally female place. Killing herself, Mary violated the only place left to her – her body (Griffin, p. 197).

Daniels (1991) allows the audience a chuckle at Mary’s suicide note: “Dear David, your dinner and my head are in the oven” (p. 64). Women students studying plays by Daniels are unanimous about their enjoyment of the comedy in her plays (Aston 1995). *Ripen Our Darkness* is a play women have repeatedly said made them laugh out loud. Male critics, on the whole, found little humor in her work (Aston, 1995, p. 403). Daniels gives Mary the last laugh, so to speak, using the suicide as a tool of power over the men. Mary’s soul then goes to Heaven and finds an all-female Utopia, where Daniels suggests that maybe we expect a patriarchal heaven because men dominated religion and wrote religious texts. David was a churchwarden, after all. Mary proceeds to celebrate with other women who couldn’t cope in a patriarchal society, perhaps women such as poet Sylvia Plath (Griffin, 2000), who also committed suicide by sticking her head in an oven (p. 198). As Mary dies, the men are playing Monopoly, excluding her from the game – men monopolize the game as they monopolize the Church of England. This final Monopoly scene conveys the message that men are more concerned with power than the loss of their wives and daughters or with the condition of their souls.

Daniels does convey that a possible alternative to the male-dominated society is the lesbian relationship where there is no dominance, only equal respect. The lesbian relationship of Mary’s daughter, Anna, and her lover, Julie is a happier relationship than any heterosexual one presented. The women support each other. In contrast, Mary lacks female support and that contributes to her decision to end her life: “Although Mary
discusses her situation with her lesbian daughter, Anna, she has no sense of possibility of change except by changing – ie. killing – herself” (Griffin, 2000, p. 198). Though Anna and her lover are on good terms with Mary, they seemingly can’t help her escape from her domestic situation. No clear explanation is given for why Mary feels she can’t leave David to live with Anna. Griffin suggests Anna cannot effectively help her mother because of the differences in their lifestyles. Still, lesbianism is not a solution to patriarchy for all women, as Mary tells Anna: “Some things you can’t change” (Daniels, p. 46), meaning sexual preference. In this respect, Daniels’ solution to female oppression in a patriarchal society seems to point to the support of other women. Griffin points out “according to Italian Feminist thought and based on Virginia Woolf’s notion of ‘thinking back through our mothers’ the need for a female social contact between women of differential power, one of whom functions as the symbolic mother, to enable women to overcome oppression” (Griffin, p. 199). With no such support, Mary ends her life.

The cause of the suicide in Daniels’ work, as in all the others cited, is the unchanging nature of men. The only hope for women is what they can do for themselves. Griffin states:

Daniels’s plays demonstrate unequivocally that men’s domination of women, and specifically that men’s domination of women through sexual and physical abuse, is all-pervasive and not restrictive by class, culture, or historical moment. The particular reason denies the misogyny inherent in Western culture and thus fails to recognize that all women are the objects of oppression by men. The endings of Daniels’s plays leave the viewer with the issue of how change might be achieved. One might argue that
Daniels’s theatre is intended to activate the audience into reviewing the problems and thinking about possible solutions \textit{a la} Brecht. (Griffin 200)

Despite all of the education and the work of the feminist movement throughout the past 40 to 50 years, men continue to abuse women. One has only to watch television to see popular actor Charlie Sheen arrested for felony menacing as a result of a Christmas 2009 incident in which he allegedly assaulted his wife, Brooke Mueller, or N.C. Senator John Edwards allegedly having affairs and beating his wife, or the O.J. Simpson murder trial. These real-life incidents will continue to have an impact on the kinds of plays women write, direct, and produce. While many critics will say Daniels’s plays are brutal and difficult to watch, more women will say, “she’s just telling it like it is.” Mimesis, or the imitation of the real, is a defining trait of the modern theater. In this play, “telling it like it is” is probably most understood by those women who can relate themselves to Mary, who lives the monotonous life of a housewife who is more married to her “house” than her husband. The light that shines through this play is that one can laugh at her predicament only if you have, in some sense, been there yourself.
Chapter Three

*The Day of the Swallows* by Estela Portillo-Trambley

Estela Portillo-Trambley is notable in Chicano literature for writing plays that depict strong women who rebel against a male-dominated culture. *The Day of the Swallows*, one of her three-act plays written in 1971, is the story of a middle-aged Mexican woman named Josefa, a lesbian hiding her sexuality in a patriarchal society. Josefa views marriage to a man as slavery and is involved in a loving relationship with her younger, female roommate, Alysea, who she saved from prostitution some years back. Alysea was so grateful and in need of love, touch, and attention that they became lovers. Alysea stayed on with Josefa, feeling safe in her home. Josefa describes the world of beauty she has created in her home at the edge of the lake – a refuge from the patriarchal community that surrounds her: “We pattern our lives for one beautiful moment . . . like this lace . . . little bits and pieces come together . . . to make all this . . . my world . . . a crystal thing of light” (Mael, 1980, p. 81). The play is written in realistic form in a very romantic setting filled with lace and beauty. All of the events occur in one day and the following morning and in one setting – in Josefa’s unusually beautiful, and feminine, sitting room. The room is a sanctuary from the cruel world of men. The play centers on Josefa’s belief in nature gods: spirits or “magicians” as she calls them. They are magical forces that the audience never sees. Ultimately, *The Day of the Swallows* examines the way men are threatened when women cease to depend on them.
The village of Lago de San Lorenzo is described rather than shown. The town is said to have gotten its name from a lake where “young women gather … to wash their hair and bathe in promise of a future husband” (Portillo, 1994, p. 358). This tradition reveals that women are still dependent on men here, that young girls believe that without a husband, they will have a slim chance for a happy or financially stable life. The townspeople possess traditional ideas that a man must take care of his wife as she could not possibly make it on her own. Religion is another important institution in the community in which all the townspeople are willing participants in the special holiday, called The Day of the Swallows: “A holy procession is led by the priest and an honored member of the church. Offerings to the patron saint are generous amidst frugality” (Portillo, p. 359). The church is responsible for the timing of the bathing of the virgin’s ritual, and the church bell rings at 11 a.m. to signal the girls it is time to bathe in the lake, “In earnest belief, they wash their hair in spring water to insure future marriages made in heaven. It is true, no one has seen a marriage made in heaven” (Portillo, p. 359). This description of the setting lets the audience know the purpose behind the ritual and the time and place of the play. The audience gets the sense the play’s setting as that of a patriarchal society with women lacking equality to men in matters of marriage, church and business.

After the description of the male-dominated community, the description of Josefa’s sitting room is a sharp contrast. Described as “an unusually beautiful room, thoroughly feminine” (Portillo, p. 359), the room is also described as a safe place, leading one to believe the outside world is not a safe place for women. The room is bathed in a vast amount of light provided by a large French window, which looks out to a tree
covered with many birds. The birds are a symbolic reference to the title of the play, *The Day of the Swallows*. The importance of the swallows is made clear when Josefa says to Alysea, “There are things we must do to keep sanity...to make the moment clear. Any signs of the swallows?” (Portillo, p. 362). The presence of the swallows gives Josefa hope, strength, and sanity in a judgmental and patriarchal world.

This safe haven from male dominance is interrupted one night, when a young boy, David, discovers Josefa and Alysea are lovers. Alysea’s security in a “beautiful world” comes to an abrupt end when Josefa finds herself driven to violence; she cuts the boy’s tongue out to silence him. A much-loved member of her Hispanic community, Josefa knows her sexual desires are forbidden by the world beyond her walls and her desperate need to keep the truth from these Mexican men who relegate authority over domestic, social, political, and religious affairs forces her to perform this despicable act. If they discover her secret, she will be shunned and become an outcast. When Alysea breaks down sobbing over the horrifying attack on the boy, Josefa reveals a painful memory of her own childhood:

When I was seven... the swallows came... they came one hot dry dawn... and continued all day... on the edge of the desert that still hotter afternoon... I saw noisy boys with desert time on their hands... playing... I watched the playing become a violence... they were catching birds... now killing... they stoned them... plucked them... laughing with fearful joy... the sand was a sea of dead birds... I... I... couldn’t stand it... for a joke they said... they held me down, the burning sand against
my back . . . held a swallow over me; he took a knife . . . cut the bird . . .

Oh, God! So much blood. (Portillo 382)

The very type of brutality she abhors in men, the stupidity and violence that the patriarchal society represents, she now finds in herself. She has become what she hates the most in an oppressive society. Having acted as the dominant one who overpowers the boy, she now finds herself the oppressor. Fearing what people will say, Josefa’s first response is to hide her secret by whatever means necessary. Horrified, Alysea must do what Josefa says and holds the boy down while Josefa does the dirty work (Huerta, 2000, p. 23).

Alysea now wants to remove herself from the life she has chosen and is tempted to retreat to the safety and protection of a man. Eduardo enters in Act II of the play. As he walks into Josefa’s sitting room, he surveys the surroundings. He calls it a woman’s room, and when Alysea questions the statement he says, “It is a dream of gentleness . . . peace; it is not a man’s room . . . but it is beautiful” (Portillo, p. 365). It seems Eduardo is judgmental of the room, as he uses the word “but” rather than “and.” He refers to it as being unsuitable for man, marking it as less important, for it is merely beautiful, without function or purpose. Alysea has always seen the room as a haven; which Josefa made, and now realizes that Eduardo plans to take her away from Josefa. To stop Alysea’s departure, Josefa threatens to reveal what happened to Eduardo’s former lover, inadvertently revealing to him that she herself has no use for man’s love. This revelation puts Josefa even more at risk.

Another type of domestic violence, sexual slavery, from the male-dominant society is exposed in the latter part of the play when Alysea divulges her past to Eduardo,
“I remember… they brought a bunch of us from the country… they promised jobs as seamstresses; my barrio was poor… we went hungry.. so I came.. the city was a nightmare… they locked us up in an old house… they gave us disgusting soiled dresses to wear… then we found out” (Portillo, p. 367). What Alysea describes is common practice around the world for millions of other young girls and women. “Centuries of enriched patriarchal controls resulting in female vulnerability, compounded by current forces of globalization triggering new waves of feminization of migration and work, have created new spaces for female sex trafficking globally” (Samarasinghe, 2009, p. 33).

These men do not see a woman when they buy sex, instead they see a commodity. When women are viewed as commodities, men often believe they can treat them however they want in order to get their money’s worth: “Consequently, it is not unusual for customers to believe they can exercise temporary power over the prostitute. Such an attitude seems to socialize some of the beliefs that violence against a prostitute is permissible, since the customer is entitled to do as he sees fit with the commodity he has paid for” (Samarasinghe, p. 37).

Very few escape, but in Portillo’s play, Alysea is one of the few women to be saved from this life. She reveals that Josefa saved her: “all of a sudden… Josefa appeared… with her walking stick. She raised it over her head and beat the man… he cried out in pain… she never faltered… then she brought me to this world of light” (Portillo, p. 367). We get the sense that Eduardo is threatened by Josefa’s heroic act as his response upon hearing the story is to say: “We shall marry tomorrow night… that’s it!” (Portillo, p. 367). Eduardo sees his male love and marriage proposal as superior to Josefa’s female offerings. In reply, Josefa argues,” The way you mean . . . the word
‘love.’ Doesn’t it really mean… take? You men explain away all your indiscretions . . . you make the rules and enjoy the abuses . . . love is always a violence” (Portillo, p. 368). Eduardo persists in his belief.

In fact Eduardo actually is an exception. Others attempt to blackmail Josefa or make false accusations against her. This is particularly clear with the introduction of the character, Tomas, a manipulative, extortionist, who quickly acts on his suspicions about the two women. Tomas seeks to manipulate and extort women, much like the sex traffickers who took Alysea into slavery. Tomas puts the pieces together to blackmail Josefa about what happened the night of the boy’s murder. “Now the town is busy making you out to be a heroine… an intruder? That’s hard to believe… the girl looked too guilty a while ago… But you… it’s amazing!… such grace… such pious silence… yes… you are a dangerous one, all right!” (Portillo, p. 372).

Tomas illustrates how the powerful use fear, intimidation, and verbal and physical abuse to control the less powerful in a society. Alysea recognizes that if David tells the barrio what went on between the two women, they will be punished but Alysea is also a woman torn between accepting the role of a second-class citizen in a patriarchal society and fighting that inferiority. Josefa knows there will be atonement required, not only for the lesbian act but more importantly for the silencing of the patriarchal society’s messenger (David). Alysea tries to fight it, but when Tomas confronts Josefa, she accepts defeat, “All right… you win… I’ll give you money…” Tomas, however, refuses the offer of money stating, “No more crumbs… dear niece… I call the play… from now on” (Portillo, p. 379). A bribe is simply not enough for Tomas, he wants more than their
money. “You think you can always win, with your calm; you’re not made of stone… you’ll break, milady…I’ll be back, Inside you’re trembling with fear” (Portillo, p. 381).

The two women chose two different means of escape. Alysea runs off with Eduardo, separating and isolating herself from the world she knew, even though this breaks Josefa’s heart. The truth is ultimately revealed and now Josefa has lost everything: her standing in the community, her respect among her female peers and her beloved Alysea. Josefa subsequently confesses to the priest, and having lost everything: her standing in the community, her respect among her female peers and her beloved Alysea, commits suicide by drowning herself in a lake on the Roman Catholic holiday known as “The Day of the Swallows.” Ironically, this year the villagers planned to honor Josefa. To the women of the village, Josefa had always been a saint.

The truth is Josefa is a lesbian. Being a woman in the male-dominated world of the Chicano is difficult enough; being a woman who loves women creates a dilemma from which Josefa sees no solution except death. For Josefa, however, death will not be a defeat, but a mystic union with her ‘magicians,’ creations of her imagination – her internal myth that like many aspects of her life, is a defiance of the conventional, rigid, patriarchal world of the barrio. (Mael 81)

The most important narrative is Josefa’s description of her mystical union with the lake. Unlike the other virgins in the village who bathed in the lake during festival day to ensure a heavenly marriage, she bathed alone in the moonlight: “The light was me” (Mael, 1980, p. 81). This light is in sharp contrast to the violence and ugliness she perceives emanating from the masculine world. A female villager looking out her window narrates the image
of Josefa floating in the lake. The final words of the villager before the stage curtains close: “The sun is too bright . . . it is my imagination!” as Josefa returns as light just as she predicted she would. “My magicians will let me come back as light” (389).

Ultimately then, she prevails and the female power in the play wins. Earth Mother is victorious over God the Father (Huerta, 2000, p. 23). Tomas Vallejos, an assistant professor of Chicano Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, says motion is fundamental to interpreting Portillo-Trambley’s work: “While a balance between opposites is crucial to the attainment of wholeness, this balance is paradoxically achieved, not through harmony, but through struggle” (Vallejos, 1980, p. 55). Josefa’s death leads to regeneration – the circle of life completes itself as she seemingly “comes back” as light. Vallejos says the tragic fate of some of the playwright’s characters, such as Josefa, becomes a source of affirmation: “Like the ancient Mexicans, she expresses belief in the unending cyclical regeneration of the universe” (Vellejos, p. 55).
Chapter Four

*And the Soul Shall Dance* by Wakako Yamauchi

A male-dominated Japanese-American society, verbal and physical abuse, and societally imposed oppression also drove unwilling Japanese emigrant Emiko to become unbalanced and commit suicide in Wakako Yamauchi’s (1976) play, *And the Soul Shall Dance*. This play is a story of two farming families who are struggling to survive the Great Depression. The two different mother-father-daughter families struggle to adjust to America without forsaking Japanese traditions. The play begins with Murata, the father of Masako and husband of Hana, putting out a fire that his daughter started by accident. The argument between Murato and Hana is in response to the stress of this fire and establishes their marriage as one where the husband is viewed as the ultimate authority, but still a union in which the pair treats one another with respect. This stands in sharp contrast with their neighbors, Emiko and Ono, who have a turbulent relationship, filled with physical and emotional abuse. The fire serves as a means to bring the families together, where their different approaches to life in America and the importance of maintaining tradition can be easily compared.

The two male characters in the play are both oppressive of their wives as their culture dictates, but they do show that there are degrees of oppression. The first sense that Murato and Oka are opposites, when it comes to their households and how they are run, is when the men discuss Oka’s wish to sell his horse. The men engage in talk that belittles women. Hana is nearby and doesn’t share in the men’s laughter. Murata glances at her,
but the playwright doesn’t say what is meant by it. Maybe it means Murata sympathizes with her and is only laughing to appease his friend. Oka then shares a little about his personal life. He discloses that he has a daughter, Kiyoko, from his first marriage, and the reason he needs money is so he can send for her in Japan. Oka felt that their father forced him to marry Emiko: “I didn’t marry her. They married her to me! Right after Shizue died… Before the body was cold! No respect! By proxy. The old man wrote me they were arranging a marriage by proxy for me and Emiko. They said she’d grown to be a beautiful woman and would serve me well” (Yamauchi, p. 395). This was not a relationship designed for love; it was arranged on the idea of servitude. From the beginning, the intention was for Emiko to serve Oka. Emiko’s parents felt she had compromised their honor, and they found a way to rid themselves of the stain by sending her to America to marry her dead sister’s husband. Sadly, Oka only belittled her and called her names: “Your father thought he was pulling a fast one on me … thought I didn’t know (she was a whore) … thought I was some kind of dumb ass” (Yamauchi, p. 407).

As the play continues, Yamauchi brings the two wives together as well, contrasting the two female products of this culture. Both women had been waiting for the other to make an approach first, and when first brought together by the fire, they continue to be aloof. Hana says, “You know we’ve been neighbors already three, four years and Emiko-san’s never been very hospitable” (Yamauchi, p. 397). Emiko’s isolation is compounded by the domestic abuse in her marriage: she is isolated, with low self-esteem, anxious, and has experienced personality changes, all classic signs of domestic abuse, according to www.Helpguide.com (2009). Indeed, according to “You Are Not Alone,” a
2009 pamphlet on the impact of domestic abuse on victims, common coping responses to trauma, include emotional withdrawal, aggressiveness, anger, and substance abuse.

Emiko’s coping strategies have included all these, primarily alcohol abuse, and also include a fixation on returning to Japan. This escape fantasy fills Emiko’s every thought and dream. She had been stealing money – a little at a time – from her husband and stashing it, in hope of going home. As is typical of women who are victims of domestic abuse and have little control in their lives, “this loss of personal control has severe psychological and emotional consequences” (Umberson, Anderson, Glick and Shapiro, 1998, p. 443). The consequences of Emiko’s abusive environment seem to have been a reluctance to befriend other people. Murato insists, however, that she is just shy, though after the encounter at Oka’s home, he and his wife acknowledge there is a problem, but they do not do anything about it.

The playwright continues to highlight the difference between the two couples through a series of social encounters. For example, in parallel encounters, both husbands expect their wives to wait upon them and their guest, but the wives respond in different ways. Hana acquiesces to this role, though she clearly signals her disapproval of the guest to her husband while Emiko is defiant, ignoring her husband’s command to get the cups for him and his guest. To those around her, Emiko seemed insane at times, but in reality, she is depressed, isolated, and victimized. The extent of that victimization can be seen during the two couple’s first meeting when music playing on the record player provides a brief moment of happiness to the unhappy Emiko. She begins to dance, which is a bit awkward for Hana and Murata. Oka, however, becomes irate. “Oka is grieved. He finally stands as though he’s had enough. Emiko, now close to the door, ducks into the house”
(Yamauchi, p. 401) in fear. Emiko and Oka each show an ugly side when Oka and Masako begin to talk about Oka’s daughter coming to America. The conversation sparks a defiant and possibly jealous Emiko to sing very loud in order to interrupt them, causing Oka to go on a physical rampage. “Oka is exasperated. He rushes into the house seething. Masako hears Oka’s muffled rage, ‘Behave yourself,’ and ‘kitchigai’ come through. Masako slinks to the window and looks in. Oka slaps Emiko around” (Yamauchi, p. 403). When Emiko emerges from the house she is visibly beaten with a welt on her face. She remains defiant, however, and sits in front of the others, not trying to hide her injuries. Upon leaving the home, Hana remarks how uncomfortable the situation was and Murata says, “I guess Oka has his problems” (Yamauchi, p. 405). The couple does not discuss it further, clearly feeling powerless to take any action to stop the domestic violence going on right next door to their home.

Bullied by his in-laws, separated from his daughter and his homeland, and married by fiat to a woman he doesn’t love, Oka has little control over his own life. “Many studies suggest domestic violence occurs in response to a perceived lack of control over the environment and in order to obtain control over the primary individual in one’s social environment” (Umberson, Anderson, Glick, and Shapiro, 1998, p. 444). Since Oka had no control over choosing this wife, he chooses to physically dominate her. “This may occur, in part, because men feel a loss of control in such situations, and violence is an attempt to regain control over their environment” (Umberson, et al, p. 444). Even though Oka did not choose to marry Emiko, he can choose to abuse her.

This lack of control, which could be a reason for the abuse, spills over into another aspect of Oka’s life; that is his financial situation and status as an immigrant from
Japan. From 1910 to the 1930’s, Japanese Americans were treated very poorly, especially in California, which is the setting of the play. When the Japanese began migrating to America in the 1880’s they were welcomed by American farmers and manufacturers because they were grouped with the Chinese who had been excellent laborers (Marger 2006). However, by the 1920’s, Americans saw the Japanese as the enemy to white dominance. “The Japanese in California had become successful farmers, and although they controlled only about 1 percent of California’s farmland, their highly efficient agricultural practices produced more than 10 percent of the value of the state’s crops” (Marger, 2006, p. 364). This agricultural and economic success caused the Japanese to be resented and their non-Caucasian appearance helped to visually target them as competitive threats to the majority population (Marger 365). Two West coast newspaper publishers, William Randolph Hearst and V.S. McClatchy, even began using anti-Japanese propaganda in their papers in an effort to sell more copies, which helped to inflame the problem. Thus Oka’s lack of control extended to a lack of control over society’s treatment of himself and his family, of which situation he was acutely aware. “Guess they don’t see Japanese much. Stare? Terrible! Took them a long time to wait on us. Dumb waitress practically threw the food at us. Kivoko felt bad” (Yamauchi, p. 413).

Oka is a man trying to give his daughter a new life, in a new country, and all the while he is experiencing intense discrimination and racism. Anyone in that situation would be angry, frustrated and tempted to lash out at others. “This violent attempt to control others is most likely to occur when the perpetrator perceives some threat or challenge to his control over others” (Umberson, et al. p. 444). The threat of domestic violence increases when women wish to leave their partners. Early in the play we learn
that this is just what Emiko is planning to do, thus laying the groundwork for the play’s tragic ending. As the play progresses, we get hints about Emiko’s former life in Japan, and why her parents were so eager to send her away. “I had more freedom in the city… I lived with an aunt and she let me… She wasn’t so strict” (Yamauchi, p. 405). Emiko’s inability to finish her initial sentence about her aunt shows she is hiding something about her life. She also says she enjoyed singing but her parents thought it was too frivolous. “Things were like that (parents strict about singing)… in those days singing was not considered proper or nice, I mean, only for women in the profess…” (Yamauchi, p. 404). Later on, Masako recalls that Oka called Emiko a “kitchigai,” which means prostitute, during the argument she overheard from the window.

During the course of the play, Oka and Emiko continually argue around this very point. Oka says, “The whole village knows. They’re all laughing at you. At me! Stupid Oka got stuck with a secondhand woman” (Yamauchi, p. 407). He says she was, “out there in Tokyo with the fancy clothes, doing the (he sneers) dance, the tea, the flower, the koto, and the (obscene gestures)” (Yamauchi, p. 408), revealing Emiko was a geisha, a high-end prostitute. Japan historically had been a very liberal country when it came to prostitution. Up until 1867, when the Meiji era began, prostitution in Japan was acceptable. Although Oka’s term kitchiga is a derogatory term for women in this occupation, the more respectful term Fuzoku is the word used for prostitutes who work in well-established escort agencies. Prostitution establishments were officially constructed in the mid 1500’s when Hideyoshi Toyotomi ordered the construction of an “officially recognized whorehouse” (Morishima, 2008, p. 57). The Meiji era, however, was a Christian dynasty that rather abruptly illegalized prostitution approximately 20 years
before the play *And the Soul Shall Dance* was set. This was a major cultural shift in thinking, and Japanese society did not immediately or easily accept this new attitude. Shortly after being criminalized, there were many loopholes created in the new law in order to work around the new restriction.

As long as so called sexual intercourse … as defined in English is not done … prostitution is therefore not being committed, and for this reason, the substitutes of intercourse including hand relief, needless to say, as well as for a woman inserting the man’s penis between, her thighs, are not regarded as sexual act. (Morishima 56)

Emiko’s prior life as a Geisha, then, in an important but dying part of Japan’s culture, has become yet another point of conflict between Emiko and Oka; between the old world culture of Japan that Emiko so loved and mourned and wished to return to, and Oka’s determination to make it in the new world of America instead.

Once Oka’s daughter, Kiyoko, arrives in America and is living with Oka and Emiko the contrast between the two families becomes even more acute. The domestic violence in Kiyoko’s home makes it difficult for her to concentrate on her homework, affecting her grades, and she eventually turns to Hana for help. But Hana is clinging to tradition herself for the support it provides in this new and unfriendly country, and is unable to conceive of a wife’s role in any other way than the way she has always known. She tells Kiyoko this is normal behavior and when she marries she will understand. Hana’s advice to this young girl and therefore to her own daughter, is that women must accept their subservient role in society.
Ultimately, Emiko discovers that the precious money she was saving to return to Japan is missing and she knows that Oka stole it. Oka, however, accuses her of stealing the money from him in the first place, making it all his money all along. Emiko says she earned the money: “(Tearfully) But I’ve paid… I’ve paid…” and when Oka asks with what she says, “You know I’ve paid.” Oka scoffs, “You call that paying” (Yamauchi, p. 425). Although Emiko believes it is what she is due as reparations of a loveless 10-year marriage, Oka responds, “Ten years of what? Misery? You gave me nothing. I give you nothing” (p. 408). This type of conflict, particularly over money or the prospect of one spouse leaving the relationship is “associated with the initiation or escalation of domestic violence” (Umberson, et al. p. 444). Emiko cries when Oka says the money is gone because he spent it on his daughter. This type of stealing is not uncommon for perpetrators of domestic violence:

A partner who is abusive uses his or her own powers of persuasion, his or her sensitivity to the vulnerabilities of a woman, his or her physical strength, and many more personal resources to enact control. Moreover, if that partner has access to external resources, such as management of the family income, he or she can use this to enact further control, such as economic deprivation. The hierarchies of Western culture, which afford men greater resources in terms of money, cultural status, and the historical legacy of men’s right to punish their wives, support men’s abuse of women. (Umberson et al. 445)

Her dreams crushed, Emiko abruptly changes her exit strategy. She sings and dances to her favorite song, “And the Soul Shall Dance,” and walks off stage to kill herself,
choosing death over a life of abuse and servitude at the hands of her husband. Although saddened by the outcome of the play, our hearts sing along with Emiko. We sing for her freedom – freedom from the oppression and abuse she suffered at the hands of the times and place in which she was born. At last, her soul is free to sing and dance.
Chapter Five

‘night Mother by Marsha Norman

‘night, Mother is an especially interesting play about a woman’s final refusal to engage further in an oppressive patriarchal society because early in the production the character Jessie announces her intention to commit suicide. Marsha Norman’s play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1983 for its portrayal of a woman who had no control over her life and found a controversial way of finally gaining back that control. The play consists of Jessie Cates, announcements to her mother that she will commit suicide; her mother then spends the remainder of the play trying to talk her daughter out of it, without success. Suicide, Norman seems to be saying, is a valid way of resolving problems: in Jessie’s case, these are social (divorced with a wayward son, no ability to hold a job, celibate), emotional (loveless, in conflict with her mother, feeling a sense of unworthiness), health issues (epileptic), and personal (plain and shy). I would argue the play is in fact an indictment of the patriarchal system that makes life so unappealing for women that suicide becomes the only tenable solution.

This play shows how desperate Jessie is to regain her autonomy from the patriarchal society in which she lives. Jessie has little control over or say in her daily surroundings. Her mother, Thelma Cates, is introduced as an elderly woman who is anything but feeble. In fact, she’s quite bossy. “She believes that things are what she says they are. Her sturdiness is more a mental quality than a physical one, finally. She is chatty and nosy, and this is her house” (Norman, 1983, p. 794). It soon becomes obvious
that Jessie lives a life where she is ordered around and has very little privacy, no sense of autonomy, and little control of her own life. The house is decorated with her mother’s needlework, giving no sign Jessie even lives there. Jessie has had no place, no purpose but she has one as the play begins: “She has a peaceful energy on this night, a sense of purpose, but is clearly aware of the time passing moment by moment” (Norman, 1983, p. 794). Jessie is getting her mother’s needs in order for her impending absence. At first, we don’t know where Jessie is going, but she is definitely getting ready for departure.

Having been solely responsible for making sure her mother has groceries and household products, it’s clear she has received no appreciation or respect for her efforts: “Don’t go making a big mess, Jessie. It’s eight o’clock already” (Norman, p. 794). Thelma clearly does not respect Jessie as an equal in the home. To Jessie, her life is drudgery and exists only to serve at the whim of her mother’s needs and wants.

We begin to see that Jessie’s departure may be permanent when she questions her mother as to the location of her father’s old gun. The question comes out rather unexpectedly: “They (snowball and snack cakes) go in the freezer till you’re ready for them. Where’s Daddy’s gun?” (Norman, p. 795). Her mother casually answers the gun is in the attic, not thinking much about it. “Well, you ‘scan have it if you want. When I die, you’ll get it all, anyway” (p. 796). This is the first mention of death in the play. Thelma, like any mother, pictures herself dying before her child. Jessie, however, has other plans. “I’m going to kill myself, Mama” (Norman, p. 796). In spite of her mother’s assumption that there’s something wrong, Jessie doesn’t seem depressed, in fact she gives solid reasons for her decision.
When Thelma tries threatening Jessie: “Dawson will put a stop to this. Yes he will. He’ll take the gun away” (Norman, p. 797), we begin to see the patriarchal system inherent in Jessie’s family. Thelma, insinuates Dawson, Jessie’s older brother, will be able to control her and take away her ability to take her own life. Jessie is quick to state there is no way anyone, including the patriarch of the family, will stop her. “If you call him, I’ll just have to do it before he gets here. Soon as you hang up the phone, I’ll just walk in the bedroom and lock the door. Dawson will get here just in time to help you clean up. Go ahead, call him. Then call the police. Then call the funeral home. Then call Loretta and see if she’ll do your nails” (Norman, p. 797). The suggestion that Dawson has the power to stop Jessie clearly reflects the operating system in this family. Thelma goes on to say, “I think we better call the doctor. Or how about the ambulance. You like that one driver, I know. What’s his name, Timmy? Get you somebody to talk to” (Norman 797). After suggesting Dawson would have the power to force her to live, Thelma suggests Timmy may be able to coax her into living. Thelma seems to think the help of a man will help keep her daughter alive, but in fact, it is her forced dependency on men that has caused her daughter to wish to end her life.

As the play progresses, Jessie reveals her feelings about this patriarchal family, especially how her brother takes away her autonomy with his constant interference in her life, causing her to feel inferior to him. There are several instances in which the women talk like equals, rather than a mother who sees her daughter as a ridiculous woman who makes terrible decisions. At one point, Jessie admits that she feels Dawson judges her. “He just calls me Jess like he knows who he’s talking to. He’s always wondering what I do all day. I mean, I wonder that myself, but it’s my day, so it’s mine to wonder about,
not his” (Norman, p. 798). This makes perfect sense to a female reader. It’s her own business, not her brother’s business. Another fact Jessie divulges is rather personal and embarrassing. It really shows the audience how little her brother respects her. Jessie reminds her mother how her brother and his wife know too much about her, that they invade her privacy and she does not appreciate it. “They know things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know it or not. They were there when it happened and it don’t belong to them, it belongs to you, only they got it. Like my mail order bra got delivered to their house” (Norman, p. 798). A woman’s bra is a personal piece of clothing. The bra represents Jessie’s intimate femininity, and her brother opening the package represents his disrespect of her femininity. In fact, everything that characterizes a woman went array for Jessie as her mother says, “Is it Ricky or Cecil or your fits or your hair falling out or you drink too much coffee or you never go out of the house or what?” (Dawson, p. 798). Jessie says it’s just the way Dawson acts. She points out that the grocery store account is under Dawson’s name, reflecting again Jessie’s lack of control and authority in a patriarchal society. We also learn that Cecil, Jessie’s ex-husband, left her for another woman and her son is a delinquent, making Jessie a double failure – as a wife and as a mother—to a society that holds those roles as valid ones for women.

Jessie goes on to describe Cecil as very controlling, even preventing her from smoking cigarettes. Jessie says, “Cecil left me because he made me choose between him and smoking.” It appears Jessie saw smoking as a constant in her life, a conscious choice of which she alone was in control. The audience learns Jessie didn’t want a husband; it was her mother who pushed her to marry. Her mother admits, “All right! I wanted you to
have a husband.” Believing her daughter would not amount to much without a husband. Thelma also found Jessie’s worth as a woman to be diminished by her husband’s infidelity. Clearly, the relationship between Thelma and Jessie was anything but honest and healthy and in fact it could be argued that it was only the announcement to her mother that she was going to kill herself that allowed them to have an honest conversation. Instead, Jessie’s mother was a contributing factor to the patriarchal society Jessie despised so much.

In a patriarchal society, the woman is expected to be the nurturer of any children and her again Jessie is revealed to be lacking. As Jessie distributes her possessions and tells her mother who gets what, she says she wants her son Ricky to have her watch. Shocked, her mother yells, “He’ll sell it!” and Jessie says, “That’s the idea. I appreciate him not stealing it already. I’d like to buy him a good meal.” Thelma then informs the audience that Ricky is a drug addict as she yells, “He’ll buy dope with it!” (Norman, p. 812). Jessie takes her son’s addiction in stride and sees it as almost humorous saying, “Well, then, I hope he gets some good dope with it, Mama” (Norman, p. 812). The patriarchal society looks poorly upon women who not only fails at marriage but at raising their child. Her gender role is to train, therefore when the child goes astray, it is the mother’s fault.

Having failed to fulfill her appropriate gender roles, Jessie next reveals that she has also failed at finding a place in the work force, saying, “You know I couldn’t work. I can’t do anything” (Norman, p. 801). She discusses her past jobs. None of the jobs required much skill or knowledge. Of course her mother sees a woman’s place in the working world as useless, saying, “(Change) into what? The Queen? A clerk in a shoe
store? Why should I?” (Norman, p. 804). Jessie, taught to fulfill her gender roles by her family members and teachers, would understandably find it difficult to break out of that expectation and do something as “masculine” as preparing for a career. Thelma McCormack (1993) discusses how gender roles are taught to young children in her article, “Post Mortem-Lepine: Women in Engineering.” As soon as babies are born; girls see their mothers glue handles on to cups, shove rags into leaky plumbing and change light bulbs, but seldom see them repair the car, install new wiring, or build radios.” Throughout a girl’s life she is praised for people skills, not an interest in cars and electronics. Once a girl enters school it only gets worse. “The educational system streams girls away from science and math, not always intentionally, but the teachers of science are male, the textbooks are written by men, and the histories of science and technology give almost no attention to the achievements of women or show great interest in those fields of science where women have excelled” (McCormack, 1993). All too often if a girl does manage to develop a passion for science and math, by the time she reaches college she faces more obstacles. Young women in college often find themselves the topic of sexist attitudes and beliefs; many peers and teachers see a women’s time in college as an attempt to find a husband, not to learn. Not only that, young women are often subjected to harassment and inappropriate language. This type of treatment can cause young girls to drop out of college and submit to the self-fulfilling prophecy of simply using college to find a husband.

Jessie relentlessly pursues her suicide and in this way, she succeeds in finally taking control of her life; she no longer needs to be dependent upon a man. In one of the last conversations between Jessie and her mother, we learn that Jessie suffers from
epileptic seizures, “I call Dawson. But I get you cleaned up before he gets here and make him leave before you wake up” (Norman, p. 807). Even when she is unaware, men are taking care of Jessie. But in her final hours, Jessie is finally in full control of her life through controlling the time and place of her own death. Before she goes in her room to kill herself, Jessie tells her mother what she wants to happen afterwards. “You stay out here with Dawson and Loretta. You keep Dawson out here. I want the police in the room first, not Dawson, O.K.?” (Norman, p. 811). Jessie’s final wishes will follow her to take control over her brother, the patriarch of the family. Her final wish is to have Dawson lose control, thus leaving the world victorious, and making a statement through her suicide – her final refusal to engage further with the patriarchal society that judged and oppressed her; that kept her a domestic prisoner and from being the autonomous being she was meant to be. Jessie, in complete clarity, has found her way out of this male-dominated system.


**Conclusion**

When theater and feminism converge, a powerful tool is birthed to convey the consequences of a patriarchy in which women experience domestic violence in the form of rape, abuse, oppression or isolation. These subjects, taboo in the past, now have become center stage for some very talented female playwrights. In actuality, telling women’s stories has only recently emerged in the last two or three decades. Most feminist activists have been loudly proclaiming the restoration of women who have been silenced by the male-dominated society. Theater, again, has become a bright spot for that restoration. This paper set out to prove that five 20th Century female playwrights successfully brought the domestic abuse and oppression of a patriarchal society to center stage; to be illuminated by stage lights, and expose the long hidden pain felt by the women who bear it on a daily basis. As such, each play represents a unique perspective on not only how male dominance in society is expressed in the lives of women, but also how it can lead to the extreme act of suicide.

In the play *Perfect Pie*, male dominance and abuse drove two young girls to attempt suicide. Naturally, the gang rape of Marie, aka Francesca, is far more brutal and deviant; nevertheless, Patsy’s subsequent life as housewife proves unfulfilling and stifling. Both women are broken in spirit, but Marie uses the suicide attempt as a means of escape. She changes her name and moves away; thus, “killing’ the Marie who was raped and belittled by her classmates. She frees herself through a fake suicide of sorts,
while Patsy hides in her home where one could argue she “died” hidden from the world, where justice was denied the two women.

In contrast, *Ripen Our Darkness*, the abuse outlined is far less pronounced. However, its effects are equally as tragic with the main character, Mary, killing herself to escape her male-dominated household. In this situation we are introduced to a woman forced by tradition to stay in an unhappy and abusive marriage. Her husband, a churchwarden, represents the ultimate oppression of the feminine spirit. Here, we witness the type of abuse that dampens the human spirit. We would be ready to kill her husband ourselves if Mary didn’t stick her head in her oven and leave us with a bit of humor in her suicide note. In the play, after Mary’s suicide, we rejoice with her in her newfound freedom in the all-female heaven, looking down on the pitifully stupid and ridiculous men playing Monopoly on earth.

In the play *The Day of the Swallows*, another example is offered of male domination squashing the human spirit as represented in the feminine. However, in this play it is unique to the Mexican culture and as such paints a picture of feminist oppression in other cultures. Our eyes are opened to the level of abuse Josefa, a closet lesbian, must endure in the male dominated society of a small Mexican town. Although it’s horrible and ugly, we feel for Josefa when she is pushed over the edge, cutting out a boy’s tongue to keep him from revealing her love affair with Alysea. For her own concealment is the irony of the whole play in that to protect this concealment she must perform such a brutal act that it forces Alysea into the arms of a man.

In short, this play suggests that men are threatened when women do not depend on them. Women must be forced like livestock into doing what (male) society wants.
them to do. By conforming to these systems, women are oppressed and must deny who they are, what they are, and above all, what they would like to do and be. When her secret is about to be revealed, Josefa sees suicide as her only way out. It is her freedom.

Another cultural example of male dominance and domestic violence is in the play And the Soul Shall Dance, where arranged marriages and patriarchal culture prove burdensome on the feminine spirit. Emiko, a Japanese woman living in America with her husband, Oka, incurs physical, emotional and psychological abuse in line with the culture of arranged marriage. The oppression of Emiko is worsened by her past life as a geisha. As in Perfect Pie, we see how one’s past helps direct one’s future; no matter how good or bad. Most of all, in this play, we are reminded of the parallels between racism and sexism.

Lastly, in ’night Mother, the problem of patriarchal hierarchy comes to a head. Here we are forced to endure the painful litany of grievances the protagonist of the play has endured throughout her life. The entire play is a slow eruption of failures – a failed marriage, poor parenting, health and emotional issues. Ultimately, Jessie believes she has no control over her destiny. Typical of many women in our society, without any rudder of direction or scepter to wield in one’s own kingdom, the random and unpredictable storms of life leave one lost. However, unlike the other plays mentioned, the abuse in ’night Mother is harder to detect, and so is the most prevalent; subtle and dangerous. Many women experience divorce, emotional shyness and a sense of powerlessness as a result of such abuse. Indeed, this is precisely the manner in which Jessie was abused. But the perpetrator here was not one person but a variety of people in her life, all puppets of the male dominated schematic of how one is to live a life. And tragically, she chose suicide
to end it all. Planning her suicide is her only opportunity, she believes, to be totally in control.

These plays reflect some of the most hurtful and despicable abuses that can occur in a patriarchal society, and while this paper does not exhaust all of the plays written in the 20th Century where the main female character is driven to the extreme act of suicide as a result of domestic violence, these plays nevertheless highlight and succinctly outline the problems of gender hierarchies that really do exist. These abuses can come in the form of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. No matter what form the abuse takes, these five plays prove domestic violence serves a deathblow to the feminine spirit. The women feel trapped, abused and powerless. They become depressed. They feel they have no escape and as their depression deepens, they decide suicide is the only way out.

While women who find themselves in this dire situation may not be able to go to counseling, they may be able to go to the theatre, or read a play by one of these five remarkable female playwrights, as well as many others, who cared enough for their sisters to reach out. For women who are victims of domestic violence, the stage opened up in the late 20th Century as a healing room of sorts, where the bruised and beaten could find catharsis, understanding and help.
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