



Exploration of Femininity in Motherhood

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Abstract:

In this study the author be analysing the plays, a tragedy, Desire Under the Elms (1924) by American playwright Eugene O'Neill and a drama, The House of Bernarda Alba (1936) by Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca . The author will be analysing the characters of the mothers, Abbie (Desire Under the Elms) and Bernarda Alba (The House of Bernarda Alba) and how their dysfunctional characters and behaviours are because of the influence and impact of

patriarchy. A typical feminine quality assigned to a mother is of a nurturer who protects her children. But what are the consequences when she does otherwise? These plays depict the actions taken by the women that the society doesn't associate to their role as a mother and doesn't approve of them. The author will be looking at several tragedies and analyse the characters of the mothers. The author will be looking at the act of maternal filicide. So, this comes to us as a shock because we are not ready to accept this aspect of her character. Abbie kills her own son to prove her love for Eben and Bernarda Alba, a matriarch who controls the lives of the women around her, doesn't shed a tear at the suicide of her daughter and exempts anyone from doing so. By the means of this study, The author wants to show that a mother is a human and she functions according to her desires and passions and they are allowed to diverge from their so-called perfect roles. They have been trying to break away from the stigma of being perfect and their stereotypical role of a selfless being. They want to place the individual above the society's image of a mother. The author will compare and contrast the motherly and the un-motherly characteristics.

Keywords: Femininity in motherhood, Desire Under the Elms, Eugene O'Neill, The House of Bernarda Alba, Ederico Garcia Lorca.

Also looking at the history, in Greek play 'Medea', Medea, is the embodiment of a mother. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude openly defies the role of an ideal wife and mother and places her desires first. In Lorca's Yerma, Yerma, kills her husband because she can't bear a barren womb. Brecht's Mother Courage, who is making profit from the war that is killing her children. And Maurya, who is praying for the death of her son so that she can be at peace. Over the years a mother has been idealised to such an extent that she has lost her individuality. Though these actions look very anti feminist at the face value these are but feminist arguments, where these women are rebelling against the

society, resisting the patriarchy and redefining the roles of their gender.

Whom do we refer to as a woman? Normally an answer will include, 'Well, a woman is a mother, wife, lover, daughter or sister etcetera'. But these are the roles she performs within the societal structure and we tend to take the human aspect for granted and define her by the roles she plays. She's just not a mother or a wife, she is way beyond the role she is placed in the society at large and women have rebelled throughout the history and literature to break free from the obligations that come along with being a woman. As per societal norms a woman should be obedient, kind, submissive, polite and should be capable of displaying affection and if required, she must sacrifice her desires or herself, mostly for her husband or children. This is the image our society looks forward to and has been worshipping for ages now. If a woman diverts from these traits, she is contradicting social expectations and becomes a character that must never be talked about and which goes against the idea of an 'ideal woman'. She faces the Anxiety of Motherhood. She becomes the 'other' within her own gender. Her actions stir a lot of controversy and we readers and society at large don't know what to do with her. We might like her yet disregard her. Such a woman doesn't get a very respectable rank in the history of literature or minds of the readers but she is there, talked about and looked up to as a symbol of rebellion and change. She is the one who can change the dynamics of her gender; internally and within the society.

There are many aspects to a woman's character, especially a mother's. Our society has been structured in such a way that she is bound and has to behave in a particular way i.e according to the patriarchal norms that have been established and nurtured by men folk at large. When she does act otherwise it creates a lot of problems for themselves, family and people around them and society at large. These actions might not be morally justified but then morality is subjective. It also raises a question that who is to be blamed? The one who does the act or the circumstances which force

that particular person to act. Who will take the responsibility of the instability and horror created within the minds of the people?

From the times of the Greeks, one woman who lived her life on her own terms was Medea. According to the Greek myth, she is an enchantress, clever and cruel who helped Jason, leader of the Argonauts, to obtain the Golden Fleece from her father, King Aeëtes of Colchis. She was of the divine descent and had the gift of prophecy. She married Jason and used her magic and advice to help him. In the process, she kills her own brother and goes against her father to give Jason the Golden Fleece. This results in her banishment from her father's kingdom and she moves to Greece with Jason. Jason is denied the throne promised to him by his uncle, Pelias. Medea then finds a way to kill him as well. After all these acts of societal rebellion Jason and Medea are then forced to flee together to the Greek City of Corinth. Here, Jason seeking to inherit the Corinthian throne abandons Medea and marries Corinthian Princess. And then Medea, blind with rage and due to dishonesty and abandonment by her husband for whom she left no stone unturned, decides to seek revenge. Medea being a powerful sorceress, uses her witchcraft and kills Jason's to be wife and father-in-law. And the most melodramatic move she made was to kill her own children from Jason just to see Jason suffer and didn't let him even touch their corpses and left him shocked and dumbfounded. Though she was in a lot of pain herself but to add to the intensity of the revenge and betrayal, she did it. This story has been passed by Greeks from generation to generation, how Medea fiercely loved and then fiercely hated the ambitious Jason. Euripides, a playwright who lived in the fifth century BCE, saw in Medea's hatred for Jason and desire for cruel revenge, a tragic drama in 431 BCE.

In Euripides' Medea, we come across a very unique female perspective. This perspective was written by a man, and is not absent of the female mythological archetypes common throughout the Greek Literature. Most females hold the archetypal roles to move the story forward. However, Medea defies a simple archetypal prescription. She fits in between the lines of a good character and a

bad character, plays many different roles for her own ends but remains sympathetic. Taking on different roles to accomplish her goals, she doesn't fit into one female archetype submissive and docile character. She plays the greater role as a tragic hero, magnifying her manipulations and her reasons. Her struggles are of a powerful woman trying to find a place in the society and higher up the echelons where she thinks she belongs.

The reader thus finds Medea evil, who cannot accept 'No' for an answer and goes on committing murders and doesn't spare her own children to accomplish her desire for an intense revenge on her husband. But here also arises the question of moral responsibility, who is to be blamed for the tragic ending? Is Medea herself to blame for plotting the death of those she once loved? Or is Jason more to blame for betraying Medea's love and thereby causing her such torment that she can only think to kill and plot her revenge and downfall of Jason? The Athenian society was a man's world in which women were expected to run the household and stay out of sight. Medea is a foreigner, who is a barbarian and a woman in the Greek society and subject to a very low status yet she is in control of everything around her but uses extreme means and violence to achieve that. The society expected Medea to accept her fate but she refused to be a mute spectator and refused to bear the injustice meted out to her and went forward with her revenge to plot and seek the downfall of her husband Jason. This is a feminist piece and Euripides himself believed to be a misogynist, turns out to be quite opposite in describing and elucidating the character of Medea.

The melodramatic move of killing her own children appears way too extreme as many tend to believe that this act of mindless violence outweighed the damage done by Jason, as he had just married another woman for the Corinthian throne leaving Medea. But I think, the killing of the children has been used as a metaphor not as an act of revenge. This metaphor represents not only Greek women but all the women of the world who have been facing injustice since the very inception of the modern society at the hands of patriarchy. This is their answer to the ordeals they face day in and day out, a cry

for help and resistance against all the wrongs and injustices heaped on them. Medea shouldn't be judged on moral grounds because morality was a far reality in the Greek society of those days, and morality as always is ambiguous. Women held the status equal to that of the slaves in the Greek society. By facing the injustices all along the inception of society and being at the mercy of men the souls of these women were dead and they could hardly differentiate between right and wrong, which in turn was also decided by men. Medea's act also justifies her helplessness, a daughter banished by her father and a single mother in exile, abandoned by her husband, raising hers and Jason's children on her own without any means to sustain as women couldn't own property in the Greek society. So she felt it is better to kill her children instead of letting them face the hardships they'll experience in the future, they being a barbarian woman's children who were abandoned by their Greek father.

Medea's actions are the answers on behalf of all the daughters, lovers and wives who are taken for granted and expected to be docile and obedient and produce children for their husbands and be ever sacrificing for their needs. She questions the responsibility of her husband towards her and their children. The murder of the children shows the reader what a woman is capable of when she is wronged and betrayed. Her silence shouldn't be taken as her agreement to the treatment she is subjected to. Medea would be disliked by most but it was Jason who started all the betrayal and for his greed he was ready to send his family into exile for the throne. No one was there to question him, to stop him for the actions he was about to undertake until Medea decided to be the judge of her own fate and their family. This was also Euripides' statement to the Greek men that they have to stop treating their women the way they were treated as slaves and doormats. Medea is not only a mother or a wife but a woman who wasn't ready to accept the treatment she didn't deserve. We can't claim Medea as a revenge seeking cruel sorceress who misused her power. Contradicting this statement, she was a woman with power who stood up against injustice and rose above the status she was entitled to. Her response against Jason was

a tough one, who was lamenting for the children he was ready to send into exile which shows hypocrisy on his part. A normal woman couldn't raise her voice because she was suppressed but Medea being the woman and power she is, made a strong remark, 'If Greek men continue doing what they are doing to their wives- such tragedies won't stop'. This will continue to happen over and over again irrespective of the time and society and homes shall fall apart. It is a warning that the oppressed half of the society will rise against the oppressors and create havoc by following Medea's example.

A household cannot be just run by a woman as a wife and a mother. The presence of man as a husband and a father is equally needed. Women must not be pushed to do something to this extreme, which Medea does because this is the least, they desire. They don't refuse to face the ordeals and want to live their life on their terms, even if this means sorrow and hunger and poverty but won't accept the fate of a downtrodden being. Horrors and tragedies happen due to the imbalance between men and women in the homes and the society which produces and gives acceptability to such imbalances and injustices. A man and a woman run the home and society together. This is how Euripides depicted the empowerment of the Greek women by showing how Medea performs all the acts to balance the injustices meted out to her, she who is an outsider amongst the Greeks.

In his most interpreted tragedy, 'Hamlet', William Shakespeare created the character of Gertrude who has been much maligned. We never get to know what goes on in her mind while she betrays her husband and gets married to his brother. Gertrude has a very slight presence in Hamlet but the entire action of the play revolves around her incestuous act of marrying her deceased husband's brother, Claudius, who is the killer of her husband and his brother, 'Hamlet Senior'. The play depicts the resentment of her son, Hamlet towards this very deed. Gertrude is constantly torn between Claudius and Hamlet in the entire play. She never takes a firm stand for any one of them which is because of her love for both of them. She is not unaware of her circumstances or her surroundings as she is made out

to be in the play by the writer. She tries to please both of them. She is shown to be an ignorant character who is not taking the intensity of the situation seriously but for me she is trying to be a good mother and a wife. Such behaviour may be diplomatic for some but it is an attempt to bring peace between the rivals. She is protecting the men she loves. Gertrude always saves Hamlet's life consciously or otherwise and even though she was unaware of the poison given to Hamlet, she drinks it and saves her son's life. She always acts as a shield and till the time she is around and alive, Hamlet and Claudius can never harm each other. Tragedy only happens after her death. In my opinion, she is neither a stupid character nor a bad mother. She is rather a smart one who is trying to avoid the mis happenings that are bound to happen as direct consequences of the hatred Hamlet and Claudius have for each other. She is condemned for getting married to her dead husband's brother and killer, even before her mourning is over. Gertrude is unaware that Claudius had killed Hamlet Sr. which makes her a traitor but not guilty as acknowledged by the ghost of Hamlet Sr. In fact, Gertrude's mind is a place we never get to explore both as a wife and a lover and as a mother. Her reasons for getting married to Claudius and betraying her husband are not specified. We assume it is love and lust for power or she is just another dumb woman, who can see everything around her but can't comprehend the situations and circumstances. Her motherly instincts and affections are subject to our interpretation.

Putting herself first, getting married to someone she is fond of and rejecting to live the life of a widow does not make her a bad woman or a bad mother. Gertrude is a strong woman because it takes up a lot of courage to stand up for her son from another marriage in front of her current husband, who hates him. We never witness her trauma and label it as ignorance on her part. She is struggling constantly between those men who despise each other and are equally loved by her. She chooses to live differently than living the life of a widow and function within the patriarchal norms. She tried to bring peace between the estranged men but her efforts went in vain and the tragedy happened. She never chose one side but this was the choice

she made. Gertrude might not be very strong in her opinions and actions but she represents a very different aspect of the feminine quality of a woman during the Renaissance.

In Irish playwright, John Millington Synge's, *Riders to the Sea* (1904) we experience a very unusual mother in Maurya, whose struggle is against the sea, a non-living entity which has drowned her husband and five sons before the action of the play begins. After this loss, Maurya grieves every minute of her wretched life and her tears never stop. She is sure that her youngest son, Bartley will also meet the same fate. Thus, fearing that she tries to stop him from going to the sea by cursing and threatening him and lamenting the circumstances and his dead father and brothers. Nevertheless, he goes, utterly to Maurya's dismay. Maurya believes that now nobody can save him and he is a dead man. On being persuaded by her daughters, she goes to give food and blessings to Bartley near the port before he disembarks on his journey but sees a horrific premonition on the way and comes back home without meeting him. She then waits for his body to come as per the dreaded premonition and it happens within no time.

We expect Maurya to lose herself completely but on the arrival of the body of her son her temperament is totally unbelievable. She stops crying and acknowledges the presence of the white coffin in her home, which was for Michael her elder son who is lost at sea and now will be used for Bartley. Instead of cursing in despair, she is calm and makes a remark, that now everyone is dead and she has nothing to cry for or worry about. She is in a different trance which is shocking. Her struggle against the sea and persuading her male family members not to venture into the sea bore no fruit and she has now, after all her male family is deceased, finally made peace with the sea and the destiny it has written for her family. There is a slight hint that Maurya wanted Bartley to die in the sea, so that she doesn't have to experience the pain of losing again and again her husband or her sons or having sleepless nights again.

A mother prays for her family's and children's goodwill but Maurya prayed for the death of her last living son to end her anguish against

the sea, which is mightier and will always win. This is against the motherly characteristics, as we have seen or have come to understand and believe as per the societal norms. Maurya loved her family, her husband and children but demanding and waiting for the death of her last surviving son is something unimaginable. And what we understand from her behaviour is that she is now so broken from the death of her six male family members that she literally prays and visualises her last surviving son's death. This is because she no longer has the strength and courage to grieve for ever and ever. She doesn't want her pain to prolong. She wants to end it at the earliest and thus wants her son to die at the earliest. She comprehends intelligibly her fate and the all-encompassing winning sea which has taken away her family from her. Though the society at large may think of her as cruel or without motherly love but she knows she has already lost and losing her last surviving son shall end her pain sooner than later.

Anne Fierling, better known as Mother Courage from Bertolt Brecht's drama 'Mother Courage and Her Children' (1939) is a mother who is busy earning her profits by pulling her cart along with her children; Eilif, Swiss Cheese and dumb daughter, Katrin, in the Thirty Years' War. Mother Courage owns a cart and does business in the battlefield. She makes profit from the war and hopes people keep on fighting so that her business moves on. The irony is, she wants to keep her children away from the war. She is constantly warned that she cannot just gain from the war without losing something of hers. In the course of the events of the play, Mother Courage loses all her children in the war but never disapproves of the war and continues her business.

Her sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese want to become soldiers and serve the Protestants but she prevents them. When Eilif manages to join the army, Mother Courage helps Swiss Cheese and he becomes the paymaster, to avert the consequences of the war but he manages to die somehow. She also changes her side in the war with the Protestants and the Catholics, as per the benefits her business receives. Mother Courage is an outspoken and shrewd woman. She

is not at all submissive and all men are scared of her. In the times, when people are fighting a war for religion and morals, Mother Courage steps into it for her profit, she is least bothered by anything else. She refuses to recognise Swiss Cheeses' body in fear of losing her cart and doesn't cry after Kattrin's death. Eilif is already dead but Mother Courage has no idea about that and hopes to find him to pull the cart for her. This dysfunctional mother clings to her children but is concerned about her business all the time. At one instance, she refused Cook's offer for the joint ownership of an inn which offered only her a place to sustain and this was not due to that it denied Kattrin refuge but she could not part from her cart. She runs her business normally after the deaths of her children and never utters a word against the war. She only seeks profit and we are forced to believe that she can only function in this manner. Mother Courage is a bold woman and an untypical mother who loves her children dearly but the cause of their death is her source of livelihood and she openly acknowledges it. Also, unaware of Eilif's death she goes in his search believing he is still alive. At the end she is hopeful that one of her children is alive and this makes her go on with her cart and business and dismiss the sorrow which is brought by the death of her other two children. Maybe she is not as strong as she shows but her belief that Eilif is alive helps her cope up with her distress.

These were a few dysfunctional and untypical mothers in literature who have left a huge impact on the readers and we are always in a dilemma to place them at a good or a bad position.

The disputes and issues in the plays, *Desire Under the Elms* by O'Neill and *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca, arise and revolve around marriage, property and children. These three symbols connect the fate of both rural household tragedies set in two different parts of the world, America and Spain respectively.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, marriage is a subject of tension in the Cabot farm. Ephraim married thrice and all his marriages were unhappy and even his wives never felt loved. Ephraim's third marriage with Abbie Putnam who is forty years younger to him, further widens the gap between the father, Ephraim and his three

sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben. The incestuous relationship between Abbie and her step son, Eben complicates the matters further.

Similarly, in Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Bernarda's daughters are in a constant feud with their mother because she prohibits them from marriage or relationships. Bernarda's mother, Maria Josefa's desire to get married to a handsome young man makes her eccentric in the eyes of her daughter and others. The problems between the sisters further increases when Angustias is engaged to Pepe el Romano who has a secret affair with the youngest sister, Adela. Martirio, the second youngest sister's broken engagement with Enrique Humanes and strong infatuation with Pepe creates resentment in her heart for her sister Adela which ultimately leads to the latter's death.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the inheritance of the farm is the central issue. Everyone is after its ownership. Simeon and Peter want it for the years of labour they have given to this farm, Eben wants it because he thinks he is the rightful heir as the farm belongs to his maw and Abbie wants to claim it as she is Ephraim's wife and wants a comfortable living, post his death. Ephraim the current owner of the farm doesn't want to pass it on to anyone not even his sons. So everyone is trying to have their own way to claim the inheritance of the property.

In, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Bernarda shows concern about how the will made by her deceased husband is unfair, as it provides more money to his step daughter Angustias and very less to the other daughters. Angustias has already inherited money from her own father, Bernarda's first husband. This uneven distribution makes Angustias the richest and the envy of all other household members and she catches the eye of Pepe who is fourteen years younger than her. This makes the other sisters despise Angustias. Bernarda also is proud of her money and believes she is at the top of the hierarchy in the village with the largest stable and finest furniture. This money aids a lot of power to her and she controls her daughters and others around her. Property also becomes the reason behind marriage and envy.

Children are the ones who suffer in both the plays one way or the other way, which results in one or more deaths in the households. The trauma is caused by their parents. The children are procreated and raised to secure the money and inheritance in the family or to help their parents. Their dreams are subjugated and they lack a will of their own. They meet tragic ends which they suffered even though they were innocent and unable to rebel against the prevalent norms.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, Ephraim has always been harsh on his sons and has used them to provide labour on his farm. These boys don't have a secure future and inheritance of the farm is far from reality. Abbie has to promise Ephraim a son because he won't give her a share in the property even though she is his wife. He is ready to leave everything to a new born son who will be like him. But this baby is born out of Abbie and Eben. This innocent child first becomes a security for the farm's ownership and then a way to prove Abbie's love for Eben. In the end Abbie kills this baby to prove her love to Eben.

In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Bernarda mistreats and controls the lives of her adult daughters. They have lived in isolation their entire lives. They face Bernarda's wrath every day and can't find a way out of oppression. Adela, the only daughter who could free herself from the claws of her mother could do so only after she hung herself. Even after Adela's death her mother was worried about the honour of her household.

The imbalance and over ambition for either marriage, property or children led to these above tragedies. Abbie wanted security of a home and for that she was keen on having a child and it was okay if the father was her step son; her purpose was to have a child. Her wedding with Ephraim too was a result of her ambition for a home. Bernarda was trying to safeguard her children and household. In its pursuit she overdid her strict behaviour and instead of creating a united home she weakened the previous foundation.

Abbie and Bernarda must not be seen as bad mothers because there is no guide to perfect motherhood. They can be seen as oppressed women who wanted to hold themselves in the society they were living in, the consequence of the time and circumstances. There were multiple insecurities present in the home and society which engulfed them.

Abbie still manages to exalt herself by the end of the play and the reader sympathises with her. Abbie's motive for murder of her own child is her love for Eben. In Bernarda's case, the reasons for her behaviour with her daughters are left to the imagination of the reader. We can't understand her or sympathize with her. There occurs no change in her personality. She is still the same as she was in the beginning of the play. Bernarda was heartless and ruthless and she still remains so even after the tragedy. On the other hand, Abbie, a wicked woman with ambition becomes weak and helpless. Abbie is torn between her step son, Eben and the son born from Eben. She chooses the former. She states she loved the baby but she loved Eben more. Abbie even finds redemption in Eben's love. Bernarda can only be understood via her actions. The reader never witnesses her line of thought nor she clears her motives. Abbie is vulnerable but Bernarda is headstrong. No tragedy can move her. These mothers had a hand in ruining the lives of their children. Abbie is remorseful and Bernarda is in denial. Abbie knows that she can't handle her loneliness and she can't stay in a house with a man like Ephraim, so she needs Eben. Bernarda is surrounded by people yet she is lonely inside and oblivious to her surroundings. One of the underlying reasons that Bernarda doesn't want her daughters to marry can be her loneliness. She is a widow herself and if all her daughters leave, she'll be alone. She abstains from giving them their freedom. She vows to call them back by hurling stones at them if required but she will never give them the freedom.

Abbie and Bernarda are similar yet different in many ways. They were rebels of their times. They existed in a period where women were fighting for their rights. The influence on them of their surroundings was natural. Most of these women demanded a right to

property because they couldn't work nor inherit. Daughters could receive gifts from their fathers but wives had no rights to their husband's wealth. Only their children could inherit. So, these women produced children so that they could secure the uncertain future that lies ahead post their husband's death.

But efforts were bearing some fruit for the women in New York state. As the government in 1848 passed a law known as the Married Woman's Property Act but this would be adapted in all the states of the U.S. only by 1900. Till then women like Abbie sort ways of their own to secure a livelihood and a roof over one's head.

In Spain, before the extremist and orthodox regime of General Franco which confined all the women to their homes, the unmarried women in the country had some powers. They could make their own decisions about their inheritance. But married women were at mercy of their husbands. As catholicism was vastly practised a female was given a lower status than a male. Thus, ninety five percent women were uneducated and subject to exploitation. The rise of fascists made the conditions worse. Women could either be housewives or prostitutes. Thus, Bernarda stopping her daughters from getting married is a cry to save them. The little liberty they possessed that allowed them to sign papers for themselves or have a business would be snatched away in the husband's home. But her oppression was so strong that her daughters thought that becoming someone's mistress would provide them more liberty. There is an attempt to escape one form of repression for the other in belief of freedom. Religion had a strong influence on Bernarda and her ideas. Bernarda was dominated by religion thus she imposed it harshly on her fellow females. She wanted to maintain her honour in the society. She thought it was okay to be locked up in the house and be a good christian woman. She always had an impression that men were superior and women have to submit to their will.

Abbie's New England had a puritan atmosphere but the influence of religion cannot be seen in the play. They are all corrupted and according to O'Neill this is the real society. The play was obscene for the audience but the characters are not afraid of God. They mock

the incestuous relationship between Abbie and Eben. The Cabot household is the butt of the jokes and especially Ephraim for his overconfidence. Child murder makes Abbie a sinner but Eben's love gives her redemption.

Bernarda is scared of the religious society. She doesn't want the people to doubt the chastity of her daughters or raise questions on the dynamics of the household. She emphasises again and again that her daughter, Adela died a 'virgin' and everyone must know it. She does this so that no one dishonours the memory of her daughter and badmouth about her upbringing.

Abbie and Bernarda were oppressed and they searched for refuge around them. These mothers chose to look after themselves, their needs and securities and principles.

Abbie couldn't live in a house with the hard and harsh Ephraim and her stepson and lover Eben's memories. She had to stop Eben at any cost from going to California. So, she murdered the baby. This was the best possible way she could think of at that moment. Ephraim was a very harsh man thus it was necessary to have someone soft like Eben to protect her. Eben's presence in her life will save her from the uncertain future as well.

Bernarda couldn't let the unity of her home shatter because it was a house full of women. A man like Pepe was enough to break it. Without a united family she couldn't survive in a village dominated by patriarchy. It was utterly necessary to save her home from becoming a topic of gossip among neighbours.

Abbie and Bernarda were trying to carve a place for themselves in the society. They wanted to live a normal and comfortable life. But their actions were desperate and they ignored the consequences they might cause. This led to the tragedies and that too within their own household.

They were ahead of their times and thus were not accepted in the society. Abbie demanded a home and her rights as a wife. When they were denied to her she decided to have them anyway. For this

she bore a son and later killed the child when it threatened her love. Bernarda was a matriarch in a patriarchal society where married women were usually at the mercy of their husbands but this woman controlled everyone and made her household flourish. She wants a clear image in the society so that no one dares to challenge her authority. To maintain her status, she doesn't shed a drop of tear on her daughter's suicide.

Detailed Analysis of Desire Under the Elms and The House of Bernarda Alba

Both plays are modern rural household tragedies written by authors residing on two tips of the Atlantic. Eugene O'Neill an American and Federico Garcia Lorca a Spaniard.

Desire Under the Elms is set in 1850 on a New England farm whose owner is old Ephraim Cabot who is rigid as his hostile acres. He is bringing home his third bride, Abbie Putnam who is forty years younger than him. He has two sons, Simeon and Peter by his first wife, both of whom move for the gold fields of California forsaking their inheritance knowing fully that their father shall not leave his inheritance to them or their step brother Eben who is now twenty-five years of age and is from their father, Ephraim's second wife who is now no more. They leave their father's home and Eben all alone to face their new step mother, Abbie, third wife of their father. Abbie, the wife is a clever New Englander, a combination of hot blood and cold heart, who seeks security and love at the same time from two men ; Ephraim, her husband and Eben , her step son. Aided by Eben's hate for his father, she seduces him and has a child by him, portraying it as Ephraim's, to seek the inheritance of the farm. The main tragedy strikes, when Abbie genuinely falls in love with Eben but still moves forward to execute her plan to inherit the farms for herself. She is confronted by both father and son on her cruel, cold and calculated plan, knowing Ephraim shall die sooner or later and then Eben will be there to provide her everyday needs. To prove her love for Eben, she goes to the extreme of murdering their baby, thinking this will please Eben. The action at first horrifies him

and he gives her up to the constables. Eben later realising his love for Abbie, tags his name to the crime and goes with her to the prison.

From the beginning, there is a feminine aura about the play. The two elms, on each side of the house bending over it, represent the two women who had already lived there. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue the house and its inhabitants. The maternal instinct that surrounds the house has a sinister quality that has developed from their intimate contact with the lives of the men in the house.

'They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.'

- (Introduction, *Desire Under The Elms*)

This gives us an idea about the different roles enacted by the women of the house and their transformation of the house. It is safe to assume they were unpleasant. The women who ever lived in this house and continued to live will never be happy. They are tired yet loving towards their children but not so for Ephraim. There is this ominous air that hung in the house which constantly reminds about their spirited presence. They were unhappy because of the master of the house, who must be their man, yet they could never leave the place completely because of the sentiments attached. The elms also warn any woman who might enter this house will meet the same fate. All women who had lived here are now dead; Simeon and Peter's mother, Eben's mother and Simeon's wife.

Abbie enters this farm to secure her future. Initially her wit and cleverness help her to secure for herself her future but she also falls victim to the presence of the ominous spirits around the house, kills her only child and goes to the prison along with Eben.

Characters

Ephraim Cabot: Ephraim is seventy five and father to Simeon, Peter and Eben. Abbie is his third wife. He is very possessive about his farm, and gets comfort only in the barn. He was never happy with any of his wives because he feels they could never understand him. Same goes for Abbie whom he married for companionship to curb his loneliness. He doesn't get along with any of his sons who in turn hate him for being too tough on them. Abbie also fails his expectations like others. The only hope he has left is in the son that will be born to him and Abbie. Ephraim is passionate about making his yet to be born as tough as himself, unlike his other sons. Ephraim's only concern is his farm. He doesn't want any of his sons to inherit it and plans to burn the entire place before he dies. He made this farm with his 'sweat and blood' and it must be gone when he is no more. He loves his farm more than his wives or sons and is completely possessive about it.

Simeon and Peter: Sons of Ephraim , they are thirty nine and thirty seven year old respectively and from Ephraim's first marriage. They have been working on the farm all their lives for Ephraim but dislike their father as he won't leave the farm to them. They want to go to California and earn money. They leave after Eben gives them money for their share of the farm.

Eben Cabot: He is Ephraim's highly sensitive, twenty-five year old son from his second marriage. He believes the farm belongs to his mother and Ephraim has snatched it and believes his mother has died of grief and sadness given by Ephraim. He is a 'dead n' spit' image of Ephraim, according to Simeon and Peter. Eben finds solace in his mother's spirit which lingers in the house. He is seduced by Abbie, his father's third wife and his step mother but later falls in love with her and has a child with her. He wants the farm so that his dead mother can rest in peace. After learning about Abbie's trick to get the farm, he asks her to kill the baby in anger. When she does that he is horrified and hands her to the constables. Later, realising his love for Abbie, he goes to the prison along with her.

Eben's deceased mother and Min, the prostitute, are the only female characters in the play other than Abbie. They don't have any dialogues but they are talked about in the action of the play.

Eben's Maw: Eben's deceased mother is Ephraim's second wife and believed to be his most unhappy wife. She was gentle and she cared for everyone, but got torture in return. Her spirit lives in the parlour of the house, where she died. Her sinister maternal aura can be felt everywhere. The bending elms which protect the house and at the same time look sad are her embodiments. Her death has a huge impact on Eben. He hates his father and believes once he inherits the farm which rightfully belongs to his 'maw' then she'll go back to her grave. Her spirit protects Eben and he takes guidance from her. She leaves the house when she feels that Eben has found his new mother in Abbie. Abbie feels she has Eben's Maw's consent in being Eben's lover and Ephraim's wife at the same time.

Min: Prostitutes or harlots appear in many of O'Neill's plays like *The Web*, *The Great God Brown* or *The Iceman Cometh*. This play doesn't have a prostitute as a central character but puts a light on the way the outside world thinks of them. Harlots were women who earned by selling their bodies and were more independent than other women. Somewhere this made the women at home jealous, as men were attracted to them because they were different and had the experience of the world to offer. So, hanging out with them brought disgrace to the family as these women were the 'other' in feminine gender and they had their secrets and their ways.

Min is the harlot in this play. We never hear from her but we know she had an affair with Ephraim, Simeon, Peter and Eben. The men of the house never stop the youngest man, Eben from visiting her but Abbie stops him. This hints towards jealousy in her mind though she hides it under 'honour of the family'. The play showcases that Abbie was beautiful and appealing and the only 'good looking man' of the house and Eben must not visit a harlot if Abbie is living with him.

Min is an independent woman and she has made unconventional choices, which makes her talk of the town and a subject to scrutiny and disgust.

Abbie Putnam: Numerous bad mothers in O'Neill's universe fail their offspring and their spouses.¹ Abbie was one of those mother's and she killed her baby to prove her love for her husband and betrayed her husband for her security.

O'Neill describes Abbie's character, the third wife of Ephraim Cabot, as 'thirty-five year old, buxom, full of vitality. Her round face is pretty, but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is strength and obstinacy in her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes, and her whole personality has the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben.'

Abbie became an orphan at an early age. She worked as a housemaid. She had married a man who was an alcoholic and a child was born unto them. Her husband and child died and she was on the road again. She married old Ephraim for the security of his farm and a comfortable living post his death as his wife.

When Abbie is introduced in Part One, Scene Four, she has lust in her eyes for the farm and the house and she desperately wants a house of her own.

"Abbie- (with lust for the word) um! (her eyes gloating on the house without seeming to see the two stiff figures at the gate) It's purty- purty! I can't believe it's r'ally mine!"

(Part One, Scene Four)

Throughout the play she refers to Cabot Farm as 'My house' or 'My farm' and she argues for a woman's place in the house. She emphasises that a woman needs a home and no one can deny that to her. If she can't earn it, as she is not allowed to work outside her home, the house she stays in must be her home and she must have

¹ Mambrol, Nasrullah. 'Female Characters in Eugene O'Neill's Plays'. November 19, 2017. literainess.org.

control over it because she happily works there for a lifetime and deserves the security it provides. Abbie becomes grim and vile when Ephraim tells her otherwise.

“Abbie- (her voice taking possession) A woman’s got t’hev a hum!”

(Part One, Scene Four)

According to the critic Clifford Leech, ‘The most striking quality in the character of Abbie lies in the complexity of her inner life, in the three stranded web of desire(security, love, motherhood) that seizes her. She wishes to establish good relations with Eben, her step son, for she wants to dominate the household and not risk losing the farm when Ephraim dies. But soon she has a further motive for attempting to cure Eben of his resentment that now she has taken his mother’s place.’

Abbie wants to be the woman of the house. She wishes to possess it and possess Eben as well. She can’t resist Eben and his youthfulness. It is very hard for her to take him only as a son. Thus, this desire marks the beginning of the complex relation that will alter the course of everything happening in the Cabot Farm. According to O’Neill, when Abbie looks at Eben for the first time, ‘Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers. But under this her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks..’ and then Abbie uses her charm to seduce him,

“Abbie-.....I don’t want t’ pretend playin’ Maw t’ye, Eben(admiringly) Ye’re too big an’ too strong fur that. I want t’ be frens with ye....”

(Part One, Scene Four)

Abbie loves Eben like a mother and a lover. She fills the void in his life left by his dead mother. Her love for Eben is so much that she sacrifices their baby for this step son of hers. The love scene between Abbie and Eben is one of the most astonishing and complex scenes in American drama. It shows Abbie wooing her step son Eben with a horribly frank mixture of lust and motherly love.

Abbie's character is very shrewd and is in need of a home. So she will go to any extent to own and possess it and even if this means betraying Epharim to have a child from Eben and using Eben emotionally to keep the farm with her always. She confesses to Eben that she married Epharim only for the farm.

"Abbie- Waal- what if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?"

(Part One, Scene Four)

"Abbie- This be my farm- this be my hum- this be my kitchen-!"

(Part One, Scene Four)

Abbie is different from other women who previously lived on the Cabot Farm because she is not ready to submit to the will of Ephraim. She doesn't want to die working for him. She wants some part of the farm to live her life comfortably. She is a challenge to Ephraim and Eben because she also demands her share, which is her right. Abbie makes sure the farm is left to her by both Ephraim and Eben. She knows where to make the exact remark that will widen the feud between the estranged father and the son.

In Part two, Scene one she makes it evident that she knows Eben inside out within a couple of days of living in the Cabot farm.

"Abbie(savagely seizing on his weak point)- your'n? Yew mean my farm?"

(Part Two, Scene One)

Abbie is the perfect step mother. She is playing her role with perfection. She is not polite and wants her way with things and is capable of using her beauty, body and intelligence to achieve her goal. She strengthened the brawl between Ephraim and Eben as per her plan when she accuses Eben of lustfully staring at her and asks Ephraim what he will do about this as she is his lawful wedded wife. She triggers them, but doesn't let them confront each other and this escalated the misunderstandings.

Abbie married for the security of a home but Ephraim has his own plans. He married Abbie for companionship and he has planned as such that just before his death he'll burn the farm and let Abbie and the cattle free. A woman is equivalent to an animal in his eyes. She can live her own life post his death and he has no responsibility for her. Abbie thus feels betrayed. She doesn't want to live on the road again so she comes up with the plan of giving Ephraim a son. If this becomes possible, Ephraim will give her anything she wants.

A dialogue between Ephraim and Abbie over the possession of the farm post his death, tells us that a man never considers his wife as his own or trusts her with anything. This woman as a wife tends to him day and night but she has no right over anything that belongs to the man. Her children can inherit it but not her.

“Abbie- They’s me.

Cabot- ye’re only a woman.

Abbie- I’m yewr wife.

Cabot- That hain’t me. A son is me- my blood- mine. Might ought t’git mine....”

(Part Two, Scene One)

Then Abbie decides to have a son. Old Ephraim expects her to understand him and his loneliness and to redeem herself for her ignorance she must give him a son. The irony is Ephraim has failed his two wives and three sons already.

Leech further states about Abbie’s character, ‘ Ephraim will leave the farm to her, only if she gives him a son. So she is determined to have a son but Eben must be the father. But the pursuit for Eben that she engages in, is not simply caused by her desire for security. She has strong sexual feelings and the young Eben arouses them. Not only is she ten years older than him, she has taken his mother’s place in the house. There is in her attitude towards him, a manifestation of the maternal element in her which was thwarted when her first born child died.’

Abbie finds solace and fulfilment of her purpose in Eben's arms. She uses him as a companion for herself and for her purpose of having a child, for Ephraim to hand over the farm.

"Thus with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth and kisses. At first, he submits dumbly; then he puts his arms about her neck and returns her kisses...."

Abbie - (at last painfully) ye shouldn't, Eben- ye shouldn't- I'd make ye happy!

.....

Abbie- Can't I? Did ye think I was in love with ye- a weak thin' like yew? Not much! I on'y wanted ye fur it yet 'cause I'm stronger 'n yew be!"

(Part Two, Scene Two)

She uses her power of seduction to cast a charm over Eben to make him fall for her. Abbie does all of this to take care of herself. She puts her priorities first. She had been homeless before and didn't want this to occur again. Having a son was only a means to secure a home for herself. Ephraim was incapable of giving one, so Eben must do that. Having an affair with Eben will further ensure that he never goes against Abbie or kicks her out post Ephraim's death. This is a battle for a roof over one's head.

Applying Michel Foucault's concept of Power/Knowledge on Abbie: According to the concept, 'Knowledge and Power are not independent entities but are inextricably related. Knowledge is always an exercise of power and power is always a function of knowledge.' Abbie had the knowledge about her attractiveness and of the spite between Ephraim and Eben. She used it as a power to establish her control over the men and the house. And her power made it possible for her to apply that knowledge to bend the situation according to her means.

This three stranded web of desire (security, love, motherhood) is further complicated by the slow development in her of a normal love between a woman and a man. Slowly she breaks down Eben's

resistance, and they become lovers in the parlour which was Eben's mother's special room and which has not been used since her death. In this setting Eben thinks of and sorrows for his mother ; Abbie asserts that his mother blesses their union and this is no pretence. In his mother's room, this 'new Maw' can identify herself with the dead woman, can love this lost son as a mother would, can love him too as a lover.

To claim herself in the house and on Eben she enters his dead mother's parlour. She feels the spirit. This act of entering his mother's space can be used as a metaphor which means that Abbie is trying to take full control as Eben's mother over him. She enters his mind space with her motherly affections to make him believe in her. And then this motherly love is capable of loving him as a lover as well and they unite in the parlour. This parlour is a place where two women who have faced Ephraim's hardness meet and seek refuge in Eben.

A change comes over Abbie once she gives birth to Eben's child. She has now fallen for Eben and nothing else excites her. She is living a comfortable life but the tragedy strikes when both father and son come to know of her plan and devious ways. Now Abbie desperately has to prove her love for Eben. She doesn't desire the farm anymore and this can be done if she kills the source which was going to lead her to the farm, that is, the baby from Eben. She murders the baby in the most dramatic fashion.

"Abbie is bending over the cradle, listening, her face full of terror yet with an undercurrent of desperate triumph. And suddenly she breaks down and sobs, appears about to throw herself on her knees beside the cradle...and she controls herself, and shrinking away from the cradle with a gesture of horror, walks swiftly towards the door in the rear and goes out..."

(Part Three, Scene Three)

She has a sense of power from the beginning of the play over the male characters but she loses it by the end but when her emotions

are questioned and attacked she becomes desperate and in her desperation she kills her baby.

For the sake of her love for Eben, Abbie is prepared to sacrifice her child and this action shocks our susceptibilities, but in the play it has its own importance. In this way the knot is untied, all secrecy is banished and all comfort goes. Abbie's complex character is suddenly resolved into that of a woman who loves Eben. Perhaps, O'Neill intended to keep the natural element in this love strongly evident. Abbie must give her grown son and lover anything he wants, even his own child's death. But this does not sufficiently emerge in dialogue, and in the end of the play they are simply two lovers sharing a desperate plight. In her love, Abbie forgets to be a mother, forgets her wish for the secure mistress-ship of the farmhouse and sacrifices everything she possesses for her love. Such sacrifice ennobles and exalts her love, which would otherwise have been mere lust.

She failed her child and her spouse for her love for Eben. When the farm was her priority she gave all of herself to it but now when Eben became her priority, nothing must stop her from losing him. She adopted a desperate means because her love was threatened. Women become desperate in such situations when they feel they are losing it all.

“Abbie- (slowly and brokenly) I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was so purty- dead spit n' image o' yew. But I loved yew more- an' yew was goin' away- far off. Whar I'd never see ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye prressed agin me agen- an' ye said ye hated me fur havin' him - ye said ye hated him an' wished he was dead- ye said if it hadn't been fur him comin' it'd be the same's afore between us. “

(Part Three, Scene Three)

Abbie is one of those rounded figures who grow under the stress of circumstances. As the action proceeds, her character undergoes a profound change. She begins with lust, greed and intrigue and ends in love and sacrifice. Even though we knew she has suffered a lot in

life and that the desire for home and security is natural for her, we are inclined to condemn her as lustful, greedy and intriguing. But there is gradually a change in her character which by the end of the play, the grosser elements have been purged away and she emerges as a woman in love who would sacrifice anything to gain her love. The grandeur and intensity of her passion exalts and uplifts her, even though she is guilty of the crime of child murder.

The House of Bernarda Alba or Le Casa de Bernarda Alba, in Spanish, was Lorca's last play which was completed in 1936, two months before his death in the Spanish Civil War. It has been grouped by commentators with Blood Wedding and Yerma as a 'rural trilogy'. Lorca didn't include this play in his plan for a 'trilogy of the Spanish land' which remained incomplete at the time of his murder.

Lorca was born into a period of Spanish history known as The Restoration. He was a supporter of futurism which emphasises speed, youth, technology and objects like cars and planes and industrial cities. Rural trilogy is a critic of Spanish rural society which is orthodox and backward. It is concerned only with social elements like honour, property, rules and is very harsh on the women. The subtitle of the play, 'A drama of women in the villages of Spain' is used by Lorca to describe the contents of the play. He wants to show that not only men but women also play an equal role in pulling their fellow women down and performing ordeals on them. How the women in Spain and elsewhere are unable to rise and have a liberal life away from the toxicity of the feminine and the masculine is one of the major themes of the play. There is no male character in the play yet the tension built by patriarchy is evident. A house full of women can't escape it or grow beyond the norms of patriarchy. To maintain their position in the society they have to surrender to the patriarchy and go as per the expectations of masculinity.

Bernarda Alba is the result and victim of the patriarchal norms of the society. She is under constant pressure to maintain her status and

confirm to the standards of the society. Such an attitude always brings unwanted consequences.

The play is set in a village in Andalusia in the early 1900s. The tragedy revolves around the life of Bernarda Alba, a matriarch and her five daughters. Bernarda's elderly mother Maria Josefa, who is a little insane, lives with them but she is locked up by Bernarda. La Poncia is a servant and Bernarda's confidant who speaks up to her. The house they live in belongs to Bernarda's father.

When the play begins, Bernarda Alba is returning from the church along with her five daughters after the funeral of her second husband. Only Magdalena is grief stricken as she was really close to her father, the rest of the daughters look fine. Bernarda had one daughter Angustias, from her first marriage. She is weak and ugly and can be seen nowhere. She is engaged to Pepe el Romano who is fourteen years younger to her. Everyone in the village knows that he is marrying her for the money. Angustias has more wealth than her half sisters as her father and step father left her money. This stirs jealousy among siblings.

Bernarda keeps a strict control over the lives of her daughters and doesn't let them get married or meet anyone. Her daughters, between the age of twenty one and forty have spent their lives being controlled by Bernarda. The youngest daughter, Adela appears wearing a green dress, in spite of the rules for mourning and appears happy and lighthearted. She reacts with disbelief at the news of Angustias and Pepe's marriage. It's discovered that Adela, the youngest daughter, has an affair with Pepe el Romano and other daughters too have feelings for him, especially Martirio. She is madly in love with him and steals his picture from Angustias' room.

To escalate the agony Bernarda declares a ritual mourning of eight years and everyone has to remain inside and do needlework. This creates a lot of tension. Even though La Poncia warns Bernarda that her callous and suffocating behaviour will create problems with her daughters, she refuses to listen.

This play also has a scene where a crowd drags a woman, who is known as Librada's daughter and she is an unmarried mother. They pull her by her hair for killing her newborn baby and are ready to kill her. Bernarda also supports this murder in spite of having five daughters and being a woman. Adela, the youngest daughter is horrified and holds her stomach, hinting that she might also be pregnant.

Martirio later catches Adela with Pepe and wakes up the whole house. Bernarda takes a gun and shoots Pepe but misses the shot. Martirio lies to Adela and tells her that he is dead. On listening to this, Adela rushes to her room and hangs herself. Instead of being sad over the death of her daughter, Bernarda prevents everyone from crying and tells them to dress Adela as a virgin and declare in the entire village that, 'the youngest of Bernarda Alba's daughters died a virgin.'

This play has all female characters but the source of their tension is their mother's view about patriarchy. She is a female who has all the qualities of a patriarch. She doesn't consider her daughter's gender the same as hers and beats them regularly in spite of their age. She doesn't spare her own mother as well. She is trying to protect her daughters but her obsession has become so much that she can't see that she is harming the relationship not only with herself but also among the sisters as they are jealous of one another.

She will do anything for her honour and status in the society and will join hands with the patriarchy which she defied herself by becoming the matriarch of her house and one of the biggest owners of the lands in the region. The imagination of most of the women in this household is dead. They don't dream and never want to look beyond the four walls of their house. They are least concerned with what is outside the four walls of the house and above their roof. They don't pay attention to the things that don't bother them like the sky or stars or meteors. Adela and Maria Josefa are the only women who dream and want to look at things which other women shut their eyes to. They long for a better world which is out there in the open - the fields, sky and sea. Being a woman is a crime, this is how they

are made to feel while men can do everything and all women can do is to watch them and feel remorse. They want to go outside and embrace the discomforts of the world instead of remaining trapped in their comfortable homes where they don't have any say.

'Chorus: The reapers are leaving

They're off to the reaping

And with them the hearts

Of all the girls watching.'

(Act II)

This play describes the situation of the women in Spanish society but it can be used to study the situation of the country at that point in history, when the civil war had started between the Republicans and Nationalists.

The Restoration was a difficult time in Spanish history with several groups attempting to share control of the government. Throughout this time, anarchy and fascism grew powerful. During World War 1, Spain managed to remain neutral, allowing the country to supply goods to both sides of the war and promoting economic prosperity. During an uprising over the treatment of the people of Spanish Morocco, Spain lost control over much of the area. It was recovered but the instability caused the country to become bankrupt and the then Prime Minister to be ousted. Disgusted by the poor economic situation, the Conservative Party known as the Fascists, were able to gain power and the King fled the country in 1931. While the more secular party known as the Loyalists ruled the country, the conservative parties were gaining strength and number. The insecure financial situation increased the instability of the government. The cities tended to support the Loyalists, also known as the Republicans, because they were more liberal and secular. The Fascists or Nationalists had more support in rural, wealthy areas where Roman Catholicism was practised widely. This division eventually erupted into the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The Fascists

would take over the government entirely in 1939, with the dictator General Francisco Franco in power until his death in 1975.²

It was a class struggle, struggle between dictatorship and republican democracy, revolution and counter revolution and between fascism and communism and catholics and protestants. Spaniards were fighting a war amongst themselves, which can be represented by Bernarda's house and the two warring factions and people with different mindsets under one roof. There is a constant struggle to establish one's viewpoint as superior and change the scenario of the house. On one hand, Adela and Maria Josefa are trying to break free from the clutches of Bernarda. And on the other hand Bernarda is trying to captivate them. Her other daughters give her aid out of jealousy for Adela. At the end, Bernarda and her strict principles win and Adela dies, this can be symbolic of the rise of General Franco. And also predicts the grim future lying ahead of the world in general and Spain in particular. Lorca himself was executed by the Nationalists for his liberal views.

Characters

Bernarda Alba: Bernarda is a very unusual mother, wife and daughter. She has a very indifferent attitude post her husband's funeral. She was more concerned with the cleanliness of the house and also if the mourners were served food and lemonade on time. The servants of the house were sadder than her on the death of Bernarda's husband. Bernarda was paying attention to the conduct of people, cleanliness of the house and criticising the people, she had no grief for her dead husband and it seems as if she looked down upon him as well. She also stops others from expressing their sadness over the man's demise. She doesn't care much about her dead husbands. She is detested by the family of her deceased second husband.

² The Classic Theatre of San Antonio. *'The House of Bernarda Alba Study Guide'*. October, 2011.

'Bernarda: less wailing and more work. You should have made sure this house was clean for the mourners. Go. This isn't your place (The servant exits sobbing) The poor are like animals. It's as if they're made of some other substance.'

(Act I)

'Bernarda: (To Magdalena who is starting to cry) Shhh!'

(Act I)

Bernarda's views about patriarchy and code of conduct for an ideal woman are really strong. She insists that the job division of labour among men and women is justified and this is their destiny.

'Bernarda: Women shouldn't look at any man in church except the priest, and only because he wears a skirt. Gazing around is for those seeking the warmth of a pair of trousers.'

(Act I)

'Magdalena:...I know I'll never be married. I'd rather hump sacks to the mill. Anything but sit here day after day in this dark room.'

Bernarda: That's what it is to be a woman.

Magdalena: Then curses on all women.

Bernarda: ...A needle and thread for women. A whip and mule for men..'

(Act I)

She lacks the normal motherly affection for her daughters. She is very strict and harsh on them and becomes blind regarding their feelings and sentiments. She is always concerned about her image in the society and is always worried that events and happenings occurring inside her house will go out and accuses the neighbours multiple times of keeping a watch on her house. At all costs she wants to prevent the judgemental gaze of the people and wants to

keep them impressed. Her widowhood must be proper and she must look like a widow even if she doesn't feel the loss.

'Bernarda:...Child, pass me the fan.

Amelia: Take this one. (she hands her a circular fan decorated with flowers in red and green)

Bernarda: (Throwing the fan on the ground) Is this the fan to hand to a widow? Give me a black one and learn to respect your father's memory.'

(Act I)

'Bernarda: Is it proper for a woman of your class to be trying to attract a man on the day of your father's funeral?(pause)

(advancing with her stick) Spineless, sickly creature! (she hits her)'

(Act I)

'Bernarda: (advancing and striking her with her stick) May you be cut to pieces, you good for nothing! You sower of discord.'

(Act II)

She is harsh on her daughters' face but protects them when someone tries to say ill about them and defends them. She is incapable of seeing the resentment in Martirio's eyes.

'Bernarda: (protective of her daughter) After all she says it was just a joke. What else could it be?'

(Act II)

She declares a mourning period of eight years which no one is happy about but this will please the people around and show their grief to the society.

'Bernarda:Through the eight years of mourning not a breeze shall enter this house. Consider the doors and windows as sealed with bricks. That's how it was in my father's house and grandfather's..'

(Act I)

At different points in the play she seems to be protecting her daughters from the harmful outside world and at the same time suffocating them herself. Her daughters are all grown up. According to Bernarda, her daughters don't need suitors not because they are self sufficient and have inherited money but because the people of their village have lower social status than that of Bernarda and her family.

'La Poncia: Imagine. And she's never had a suitor.

Bernarda: No, none of them has and they don't need them! They're fine as they are.

Bernarda: There's no one who can compare to them for miles around. The men here are not of their class, would you have me give them up to any beggar who asks?

La Poncia: You should have moved to some other village.

Bernarda: Indeed, to sell them off!

(Act I)

She at one point empowers them as she states her daughters don't need men and by following her example they can become independent and earn for themselves but at the same time tells her daughter, Angustias never to question her future husband and she must submit to his will.

'Angustias:...we men have our own worries.

Bernarda: You shouldn't ask him; that's even more true when you're married. Speak if he speaks, and look at him when he looks at you. You'll be better off that way.

Bernarda: Don't try and find out what it is, don't question him and above all don't let him ever see you cry.'

(Act III)

She is oblivious to the fact that Pepe is marrying her daughter, Angustias, for money but she wants to get her married for her own image in the society. She establishes her status in a society dominated by men but she stops her daughters from becoming independent and imposes her will upon them. She is more concerned about her self honour. Bernarda's concern is her social status and

she likes to maintain a proper code of conduct of her own which she emphasises on now and then. She has set rules for the life of an honourable woman. She looks down upon her servants and other people in the neighbourhood. She is very proud of the wealth she has accumulated. She has the finest furniture and the largest stable in the region.

She thrashes her daughters when they don't obey her and keeps her old mother locked. Angustias, thirty nine, received a thrashing from her for wearing makeup and Martirio for stealing Pepe's photo.

She desires a united family and has a low opinion of a child who rebels against one's elders.

'Bernarda: A disobedient daughter ceases to be your daughter and instead becomes your enemy.'

(Act III)

'Bernarda: Each sees into their own heart. I never pry into hearts, but I desire a united front and family harmony.'

(Act III)

Her maintenance of her honour in society has become an obsession to such an extent that she has forgotten about all her relationships. She asserts that everyone must function according to her thinking and directions which is a very strong quality about her character. Being a woman she was able to control and dominate everyone around her and become the richest landowner. But the patriarchy she defied has enslaved her because such a strong woman couldn't empower her own daughters. She locked them up the way patriarchal norms lock the women.

She often disregards La Poncia's advice. She has been blinded by the pursuit of her honour and turns blind to the problems faced by her family due to her suffocating and harsh behaviour. She is oblivious about the consequences her actions are capable of causing.

'La Poncia:...open your eyes and see.'

Bernarda: What is there to see?

La Poncia: You've always been sharp. You can see the evil in people a hundred miles off...It's different with your daughters. Now you're blind.'

'Bernarda:...I don't think there is 'something serious' going on here. It's only what you'd like to be happening! And if anything does, be sure it won't escape these walls.'

(Act II)

Bernarda is the only link between her daughters and the outside world. Bernarda also manipulates her authority to control the lives of the people around her. No one can breathe without her permission. Her harshness also symbolises the harsh world outside which will always treat women badly and never let them meet their desires.

Though her daughters have inherited a fortune yet Bernarda has all the control of the money and on them.

'Bernarda: (banging on the floor with her stick) Don't think it will give you any power over me! Till I leave this house, feet first, I'll manage your business and mine!'

(Act I)

There is a hierarchy in Bernarda's head: Men, Bernarda and Women. She links the genders. The masculine is superior to her and Bernarda in turn is superior to the women. She has to make sure that the men of the society are never denied anything and she works in a way to impress them and insists that other women do the same. There is a lot of difference in what she says and what she does herself. She is a hypocrite as she tells La Poncia she doesn't want her daughters to marry because they don't need men in their lives. But she is marrying Angustias to Pepe to secure her position in the community dominated by men.

She is a powerful woman yet she says that women must do what men desire and they can never be as strong as men. The job of a woman is to stay at home and only men work outside. She also categorises women and says they are poor shots as they are not men. Women always lack something and can never be as good as men.

'Bernarda: It wasn't for want of trying. But we women are poor shots.'

(Act III)

Bernarda is oblivious to the happenings around her. She chooses not to see what's going on with her daughters despite warnings. She is overconfident that everything going on in the house is fine and there is nothing to worry about. She ignores the warnings given by La Poncia that something in the house is not right. She remains certain that her hold on all the matters concerning the house is really strong.

'Bernarda: because they can't; because there's nothing for them to sink their teeth into. My vigilance will have seen to that.'

La Poncia: ..But don't be so certain.

Bernarda: I'm utterly certain.'

(Act III)

'Servant: She thinks no one can match her. But she doesn't know the effect a man can have on a house full of single women.'

(Act III)

Bernarda had a strong hold on everyone and controlled her family and fields, being a widowed woman. She had an unusual approach as a mother. Her harsh behaviour was never to let her daughters come under the scrutinous eye of the world. She wanted them to be proper women according to her model but in the process she forgot to let them be themselves.

On Adela's suicide she didn't let anyone cry. She ordered them to dress her up as a virgin and declare the same in the village.

'Bernarda: My daughter died a virgin! Bring her to her room and dress her as a maiden. No one will dare say a word! She died a virgin!'

(Act III)

Bernarda: and no tears. Death must be stared straight in the face. Silence! Silence, I say! You can shed tears when you're alone. We'll drown ourselves in a sea of mourning! She, the youngest of Bernarda Alba's daughters, died a virgin. Do you hear? Silence, Silence, I say! Silence.'

(Act III)

Nevertheless, Bernarda shows us that it is possible for a woman to take authority and manage everything around her. She doesn't have to be weak all the time. She can get back to work even when sorrow haunts her. She can control all the people around her whether men or women. Even men are scared of such women and respect her word and authority. She might be an unsuccessful mother but she ran a household full of women which could've shattered if she wasn't this strong and determined. A woman can manage her family and land without the help of a man and that too efficiently and make it prosper.

Maria Josefa: She is Bernarda's mother in her eighties. She has been locked in a room by Bernarda and struggles to escape the room and the house. She appears senile and longs to leave the house and get married again and have children. In spite of her dementia her words are full of truth and wisdom. Women dream to step out. But their dreams are locked up and they are said to be crazy to even think of freedom because women won't ever receive it. They cry for help and their voices are always unheard. Maria Josefa nearly escapes the house to see the fields but is stopped by Martirio and locked again.

'Maria Josefa: Bernarda, where's my shawl? You don't need anything of mine, not my rings, and not my black moire dress, because none of you will ever be married. Not one! Bernarda, give me my pearl necklace!....

Maria Josefa: I escaped her because I want to get married, because I wish to marry a handsome young man from the seashore. Here the men run away from women.

Bernarda: Be quiet, Mother!

Maria Josefa: No, I won't be quiet. I don't want to see these single women, foaming at the mouth for marriage, their hearts turning to dust, and I want to go back to my village. Bernarda, I want a man to marry and be happy with!

Bernarda: Lock her up!

Maria Josefa: Let me go out Bernarda....

Maria Josefa: I want to go! Bernarda! I want to be married by the seashore, by the seashore!

(Act I)

Maria Josefa carries a lamb with her. Lamb signifies baby Jesus and the baby which this household can never have. The lamb also stands for softness, peace and liberty. She is an embodiment of freedom and liberty in Bernarda's home. The people who demand and dream about freedom are locked up by the orthodox society so that they don't come out and spread the message of love. They are labelled as insane. She also represents the freedom which is absent in Bernarda's house that everyone longs for. She wants to inspire her granddaughters to rebel against Bernarda. Only Adela manages to understand her grandmother's perspective. Bernarda tries to shut her mother up but she can never get rid of this voice for freedom because no society however orthodox can suppress the desire for a free life. It will always arise out of rebellion and will be passed from generation to generation. She also represents helplessness. Though humans are born to be free the system wants to hold them tight and won't let humans lose or raise their voice because if they are let loose the word of rebellion will spread and the change will be inevitable.

La Poncia: She is Bernarda's sixty year old maid who has been working for thirty years. She feels trapped as if in a convent and feels sad about the destiny of Bernarda's daughters. She is also her confidant and friend. But Bernarda treats her more like an outsider. LaPoncia calls herself a 'good bitch' who barks when Bernarda tells her to do so. She is the only one who challenges Bernarda's authority on her face when Bernarda disrespects La Poncia's dead mother. She keeps an eye on the household for Bernarda and also

informs Bernarda that she is mistreating her family members and will suffer for this along with other members. She tells Bernarda that she is a sharp woman but turns blind when it comes to her daughters. She warns and guides Bernarda now and then. She has been with Bernarda in her sorrow and happiness. Her sons work in Bernarda's fields. She is also aware of Adela's affair with Pepe.

Angustias: She is thirty-nine and the eldest of all Bernarda's daughters. She is the only daughter from Bernarda's first marriage. She is the ugliest of all daughters. She is also very weak and La Poncia is sure that Angustias won't make it after the birth of her first child. She has inherited more money than her sisters, both from her own father and step father. She poses no affection towards her step father who left her more money than his own daughters. Her name means 'anguishes' or 'torments'. She is desperate to leave the household and agrees to marry Pepe in spite of the fact that she knows he is only interested in her money. She knows that her sisters are jealous of her fortune and impending marriage to Pepe as on getting married she'll get her freedom and a husband which are forbidden desires in Bernarda's home.

Magdalena: She is thirty and Bernarda's eldest daughter from her second marriage. She is very sad about the death of her father and the only one who is genuinely bothered. She faints at the funeral and cries more than her sisters. Her name comes from the Spanish idiom, 'llorar como una Magdalena', which means 'no one weeps like Magdalena'.

She is an expert at needlework. Magdalena is fond of her youngest sister Adela. Magdalena has the purest heart of all the sisters. She is a very sensible woman. She is aware about the unhappiness of her sisters on the news of Angustias' engagement to Pepe. She knows of Pepe's intentions of marrying her sister for her money. She never hesitates from criticizing her younger sisters Amelia and Martirio, especially Martirio whom she calls a 'she-devil' for lying to Adela about Pepe's death.

Amelia: She is twenty-seven and younger to Magdalena. She loves to gossip. She is the most submissive daughter towards her mother. We are not clear about her feelings for Pepe. She is attracted to his good looks but not madly in love like Martirio.

Martirio: She is another daughter to Bernarda and the second youngest. She is twenty-four. Her name means ‘martyrdom’. She is also unhappy and sickly. She had a relationship with Enrique Humanes which was called off by Bernarda. She mentions in the play that the attitude of men towards women is limited to their property.

‘Martirio: ...what matters are land, oxen and a submissive bitch to fetch them their food.’

(Act I)

‘Martirio: it’s preferable never to see a man. Since childhood they make me afraid.....I was always afraid of growing older and finding myself in their arms. God has made me feeble and ugly and has always kept them away from me.’

(Act I)

She states that she stays away from men but secretly loves Pepe el Romano. She is the one who steals his picture from Angustias' room. Martirio fiercely supports the murder of Librada's unmarried daughter and insists her family to go out and watch the show of the woman's death.

She keeps a close watch on Adela's movements in the house. She disguises her threats as ‘love’ for her sister. None can have Pepe if Martirio can't. Her lie about Pepe's death and manipulation caused Adela's suicide. Post Adela's death she calls her ‘a thousand times fortunate’ as she had Pepe.

Adela: She is twenty and the youngest of Bernarda's daughters. She is the most beautiful and passionate of all. She is the only one who openly disobeys her mother's rigid rules. She refuses to wear the mourning dress. Instead she wears a green dress and hops about the house.

'Adela:(bursting into angry tears) No, no I won't get used to it! I don't want to be shut in. I don't want my skin to become like yours. I don't want to lose my bloom in these rooms! Tomorrow I'll put on my green dress and I'll go for a walk in the street! I want to go out.'

(Act I)

She also has a secret affair with Pepe el Romano. She shows disbelief on the news of the engagement of Pepe and Angustias. She becomes really restless post listening to this news.

'Angustias: Envy is eating her. I can see it in her eyes. She's beginning to like a madwoman.'

(Act II)

She despises her sister Martirio who has made Adela's life suffocating.

'Martirio: Didn't you sleep well last night?

Adela: Leave me alone! Sleeping or waking, it's nobody's affair but mine! I'll do as I want with my own body!'

(Act II)

'Adela: She follows me everywhere. She even looks into my room to see if I'm asleep. She doesn't let me breathe.and always it's: what a shame about that pretty face! What a shame about that body, no one will ever see! It's not so! My body will be for whomever I want!'

(Act II)

Martirio eventually becomes the cause of Adela's suicide as her lie about Pepe's death prompts Adela to take this drastic step.

She also tells her family that she is Pepe's woman and no one must stop her from marrying Pepe. Her name comes from the Spanish verb, 'adelante' which means 'ahead'. She is described as 'a girl full of illusions'. She is the only one who could break free of the clutches of her mother's unfair and rigid house rules. She met her freedom in death.

Pepe el Romano: He is twenty-five and the handsomest man in the town. He is not physically present in the play but the action revolves around him. His masculinity creates a tension among the sisters. He is marrying Angustias who is fourteen years older to him. He is marrying her for her property. At the same time he has a secret affair with the youngest daughter, Adela. He escapes Bernarda's shot narrowly. But Martirio lies to Adela about his death and the latter hangs herself.

Conclusion

These women rejected to work within a social construct, unperforming their typical role as a woman. The actions these women undertook, no justification can get them through but nevertheless they did. Their desires and principles led to tragedies but these women did not accept functioning within patriarchy and tried to break away from the stereotypical gender roles. These women in the above plays are trying to find a way in the world through their horrendous actions that have made them a subject to criticism and hatred.

A mother is not always soft and submissive. She can be firm and selfish. Our society expects women to give up their dreams and be the perfect daughter, wife or mother. When a woman chooses to think of herself first and breaks free from the shackles, she creates a turmoil because the society which has controlled her is shaken by this audacity. This creates tensions and clashes between morals and desires which often leads to tragedies. These tragedies are forms of rebellion where thousands shall be staked for a chance to uplift each and every member of humankind.

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