

DOCTORAL THESIS

Self in community: twentieth-century American drama by women

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Doctor of Philosophy

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**Self in Community:
Twentieth-century American Drama by Women**

LI Jing

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

Principal Supervisor: Prof. Terry Siu-Han Yip

HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

August 2016

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signature: LI Jing

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Abstract

This thesis argues that twentieth-century American women playwrights spearhead the drama of transformation, and their plays become resistance discourses that protest, subvert, or change the representation of the female self in community. Many create antisocial, deviant, and self-reflexive characters who become misfits, criminals, or activists in order to lay bare women's moral-psychological crises in community. This thesis highlights how selected women playwrights engage with, and question various dominant, regional, racial, or ethnic female communities in order to redefine themselves.

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* are representative texts that explore how the dominant culture can pose a barrier for radical women who long for self-fulfillment. To cultivate their personhood, working class Caucasian women are forced to go against their existing community so as to seek sexual freedom and reproductive rights, which are regarded as new forms of resistance or transgression. While they struggle hard to conform to the traditional, gendered notion of female altruism, self-sacrifice and care ethics, they cannot hide their discontent with the gendered division of labor. They are troubled doubly by the fact that they have to work in the public sphere, but conform to their gender roles in the private sphere. Different female protagonists resort to extreme homicidal or suicidal measures in order to assert their radical, contingent subjectivities, and become autonomous beings. By becoming antisocial or deviant characters, they reject their traditional conformity, and emphasize the arbitrariness and performativity of all gender roles. Treadwell and Norman both envision how the dominant Caucasian female community must experience radical changes in order to give rise to a new womanhood.

Using Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as examples, this thesis demonstrates the difficulties women may face when living in disparate communities. The selected texts show that Southern women and African-American women desperately crave for their distinct identities, while they long to be accepted by others. Their subjectivity is a constant source of anxiety, but some women can form strong psychological bonds with women from the same community, empowering them to make new life choices. To these women, their re-fashioned self becomes a means to reexamine the dominant white culture and their racial identity. African-American women resist the discourse of assimilation, and re-identify with their African ancestry, or pan-Africanism. In the relatively traditional southern community, women can subvert the conventional southern belle stereotypes. They assert their selfhood by means of upward mobility, sexual freedom, or the rejection of woman's reproductive imperative. The present study shows these women succeed in establishing

their personhood when they refuse to compromise with the dominant ways, as well as the regional, racial communal consciousness.

Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* are analyzed to show how women struggle to claim their dialogic selfhood in minoritarian communities (New England Community and Jewish Community). Female protagonists maintain dialogues with other women in the same community, while they choose their own modes of existence, such as single parenthood or political activism. The process of transformation shows that women are often disturbed by their moral consciousness, a result of their acceptance of gender roles and their submission to patriarchal authority. Their transgressive behaviors enable them to claim their body and mind, and strive for a new source of personhood. Both playwrights also advocate women's ability to self-critique, to differentiate the self from the Other, to allow the rise of an emergent self in the dialectical flux of inter-personal and intra-personal relations.

The present study reveals that twentieth-century American female dramatists emphasize relationality in their pursuit of self. However, the transformation of the self can only be completed by going beyond, while remaining in dialogue with the dominant, residual, or emergent communities. For American women playwrights, the emerging female selves come with a strong sense of "in-betweenness," for it foregrounds the individualistic and communal dimensions of women, celebrating the rise of inclusive, mutable, and dialogic subjectivities.

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Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction Self in Community: An Overview of Twentieth-century American Drama by Women.....	1
Chapter One Women and the Communal Moral Ideal: Sophie Treadwell’s <i>Machinal</i> and Marsha Norman’s <i>’Night, Mother</i>	49
Chapter Two The Configuration of the Self through Communal Cultural Bonding: Lorraine Hansberry’s <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> and Beth Henley’s <i>Crimes of the Heart</i>	107
Chapter Three Be One’s Own Subject: Maria Irene Fornes’ <i>Fefu and Her Friends</i> and Wendy Wasserstein’s <i>The Heidi Chronicles</i>	165
Conclusion A Volatile Self in a Changing World.....	212
Works Cited	233
Curriculum Vitae	265

Introduction

Self in Community: An Overview of

Twentieth-century American Drama by Women

Twentieth-century female playwrights in America are often disadvantaged due to the predominant attention given to fiction and male playwrights. As Susan Harris Smith observes, American drama was once treated as a “bastard art” (xiv), but it has gradually gained importance in the past century. With the rise of distinguished dramatists and their internationally famous plays, American drama has become an established field of literary study in recent years (Murphy and Cella 3). However, internationally renowned American dramatists are mostly male. For example, Eugene O’Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee dominated the American stage. Eugene O’Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1936, showing that his works have received global recognition.

American women playwrights, however, remain neglected for decades. As Brenda Murphy points out in *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* (1999), Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, Rachel Crothers, Lillian Hellman, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anelina Weld Grimké, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Adrienne Kennedy, Megan Terry, Maria Irene Fornes, Ntozake Shange, Wendy Wasserstein, Tina Howe, Marsha Norman, and Beth

Henley have made significant contributions to drama and should be considered as major American playwrights of the twentieth century (xiii-xvi). Murphy also lists other playwrights from earlier decades who deserve scholarly attention. Good examples include Clare Boothe, Zoë Akins, Lula Vollmer, Clare Kummer, May Miller, Edna Verber, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Djuna Barnes, and Carson McCullers (xvi). Critics agree that Susan Glaspell, Gertrude Stein, Megan Terry, Rachel Crothers, Wendy Wasserstein, and Maria Irene Fornes are particularly important for they are often regarded as milestones in the history of American drama.

The achievements of these women playwrights deserve worldwide recognition. Some of them did a lot to popularize American drama. Susan Glaspell established the theatre group The Provincetown Players in 1915. The troupe produced many important plays, such as Eugene O’Neil’s *Bound East to Cardiff* (1914) and Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1917). American women dramatists have also helped to reshape conventional dramaturgy. For example, Gertrude Stein experimented with the avant-garde theatre, while Megan Terry developed transformative practices to train performers’ body, voice, and imagination as the decisive means of dramatic expression (Keyssar 56). Her play *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* (1965) is a good example. And Maria Irene Fornes’ magical-realist dramas are concrete examples that show women’s outstanding creativity and contributions to the American stage.

Most important of all, women playwrights have enriched the repertoire of twentieth-century drama by capturing modern American women's experience on stage. Their increasing importance is evidenced by the numerous awards and prizes they received. The Pulitzer Prize for Drama, for instance, has been awarded to three women dramatists in the 1980s, namely, Beth Henley (1981), Marsha Norman (1983), and Wendy Wasserstein (1989). This is a significant change: for half a century, only five women—Zona Gale (1921), Susan Glaspell (1931), Zoë Atkins (1935), Mary Coyle Chase (1945), and Ketti Frings (1958)—have won the award. In the 1990s, there were two more women dramatists awarded this prize and they were Paula Vogel (1998) and Margaret Edson (1999).

The history of American drama has been enriched and rewritten because of the discovery and re-discovery of women playwrights. As Yvonne Shafer states in her introduction to *American Women Playwrights 1900-1950* (1995), “[f]ortunately, in recent years attention has been drawn to the absence of plays by women playwrights of the past in anthologies, on stage, and in theatre histories” (2). Furthermore, as Christy Gavin has observed, the research on women playwrights has developed, and “the scholarship on women playwrights and feminist theatre has gained momentum in the last few years” (18). The plays of women dramatists have been anthologized, or have been included in research guides, or historical-social studies in recent years.

Literature Review

At the early stage, publications about American women playwrights come in the form of anthologies. There are few (moral, philosophical, political) readings of the plays themselves, and literary scholars do not provide in-depth studies on the theme, subject matters, or character of women's plays. Of all the anthologies about women dramatists, Yvonne Shafer's *American Women Playwrights, 1900-1950* (1995), Christy Gavin's *American Women Playwrights, 1964-1989: A Research Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (1993), and Frances Diodato Bzowski's *American Women Playwrights, 1900-1930: A Checklist* (1992) are noted for their comprehensive coverage of American women playwrights in the twentieth century. Shafer puts forward a brief analysis of many plays written in the first half of the century. Owing to her effort, formerly popular and successful women playwrights, such as Rachel Crothers and Susan Glaspell, become known to the public again. Bzowski's book covers hundreds of literary collections and out-of-print anthologies. She has discussed over 12,000 plays by perhaps 2,000 American women. This genealogical work paves the way for further research and study. Unlike Bzowski, Gavin focuses on contemporary women playwrights who are active from 1964 to 1989.

Other than anthologies, there are also research guides or sourcebooks. Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch's book *Plays by and about Women: An Anthology* (1974) lays

the groundwork for future research on women playwrights and feminist aesthetics. June Schlueter's *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* (1990), Jane T. Peterson's *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook* (1997), Sally Burkes' *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* (1996) aim at classifying and grouping women playwrights chronologically. June Schlueter differentiates female aesthetics in American drama from male aesthetics and the male-dominated canon. Schlueter's edited volume maps out women's dramatic tradition. Most of the essays are devoted to the study of new dramatic forms, space, and gender issues. Sally Burke is particularly interested in feminist dramatists. She singles out the history of feminist plays and feminist politics. Carolyn Casey Craig's *Women Pulitzer Playwrights: Biographical Profiles and Analyses of the Plays* (2004) not only provides biographical information of women playwrights but also comments on specific plays.

The study of the self in community is an important theme, but critical focus has always been on male playwrights not women dramatists. Many studies centre on analyzing the plays of Walt Whitman, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. Ervin F. Carlisle, for example, explores Whitman's representation of "the uncertain self" in his book *The Uncertain Self: Whitman's Drama of Identity* (1973). He argues that Whitman's poetic drama "dramatizes different versions of the isolated self" (77), and "the essential relation of the self with empirical reality, valued for itself,

because Whitman's 'first step' concentrates on that relation" (98). In *Realms of The Self: Variations on a Theme in Modern Drama* (1980), Arthur Ganz analyses Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller's characters, and their inner journey of self- discovery. Ganz points out that, "Arthur Miller has looked outward on the politics and economics of our times, his most striking utterances are voiced from within a personal family world of a father, mother, and two rival brothers that recurs throughout his work" (xiv). In Tennessee Williams' plays, "the self struggles to maintain a belief in its innocence against the encroachments of a judgment of guilt" (xiv). In these studies, rarely do they mention women issues, nor do they highlight women playwrights' growing importance.

Even in the few studies about American women playwrights and their dramaturgy, the focus is always on feminism or socio-historical situations. Women playwrights are noted for their response to issues such as racial segregation, capitalism, the Great Depression, the World Wars, the Vietnam War, and second wave feminism. Brenda Murphy, Yvonne Shafer, and June Schlueter have done pioneering and groundbreaking research in these areas. Murphy's *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* (1999) included critical essays that contextualize the rise of women playwrights, tracing their development to the eighteenth century. In her view, Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, Rachel Crothers, Lillian Hellman, and Wendy Wasserstein are representative women dramatists of the last century. Shafer's *American Women*

Playwrights, 1900-1950 (1995) offers a social-cultural analysis of the dramatic production of minority groups in the first half of the twentieth century.

There are also a number of studies on the feminist theatre in the 1980s. In *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* (1996), Sally Burke provides a social-historical study of feminist playwrights, highlighting feminism in all the plays. It covers the works of Mercy Otis Warren in colonial America to Emily Mann in the 1990s. The period from 1930s to 1960s was noted for the emergence of African-American women playwrights and the retreat of feminist concern in women's dramas. From the 1960s to the mid-1990s, feminist playwrights were active in experimental theatres, even though some of them still adopted domestic realism to show their concerns about women's oppressed state in a patriarchal system. Helene Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (1985) is a comparative study of the British and American feminist theatres. Keyssar argues that, "the essential characteristics of feminist drama seemed to be the creation of significant stage roles for women, a concern with gender roles in society, exploration of the texture of women's worlds and urge towards the politicization of sexuality" (xi). Keyssar not only defines feminist drama but also notes the difference between American and British feminist dramas. Janet Brown, in *Feminist Drama: Definition & Critical Analysis* (1979), puts forward "a definition of feminist

drama and a method...by which that definition can be applied.” The method “is then employed in the analysis of varied contemporary plays, including drama produced by feminist theatre groups and by individuals who are not a part of the feminist movement” (18). Sheila Stowell’s *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (1992) mainly covers feminist drama in the 1920s.

There are also several studies that dwell on women’s self-formation, but women playwrights are often juxtaposed against their male counterparts. In *Creating the Self in the Contemporary American Theatre* (1998), Robert J. Andreach discusses Wendy Wasserstein and Beth Henley’s dramatization of a new self. He discusses the plays of Sam Sheppard, William Inge, Clifford Oates, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Eugene O’Neill. His research demonstrates that contemporary American drama shows a strong interest in modern men’s inner struggles. Women dramatists are distinctive for their concerns about women’s issues.

Cultural studies have received more and more attention in recent years. In her PhD dissertation “The Multiracial American Women Playwrights of Trans-cultural Consciousness: Adrienne Kennedy, Velina H. Houston, and Diane Glancy,” Rida Anis investigates crucial political and cultural factors, as well as the influence of ethnicity, race, and gender on shaping the identity of multicultural women playwrights. In *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism* (2002),

Robert L. McDonald and Linda Rohrer Paige collect articles about regional women dramatists. The collection singles out writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Lillian Hellman, Carson McCullers, Alice Childress, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Paula Vogel, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

Features of the Twentieth-century American Drama by Women

American women dramatists use the stage as an arena where they explore issues such as the tension between the self and the community, female pathos in their struggles for independence and autonomy, and women's entrapment between personal development, motherhood and childbearing. Women characters often yearn for the construction of a newer self and a break from their conventional gender roles. This desire reveals women's ardent interest in independence and freedom as individuals. To depict women's predicaments and bafflements, dramatists highlight a feminine mode of communication or adopt a feminine language in their works. As Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe argue, women dramatists--feminist or not--tend to employ a female expressive mode, specific organic verbs, run-on syntax, and a "discursive conjunctive" style (126). For example, Maria Irene Fornes utilizes a series of fragmentary scenes, elliptical forms, indirect dialogue, interrupted action, and ambiguity in *The Conduct of Life*. The women characters' language in the play is a conjunction of different discourses, which are featured as run-on sentences.

American women dramatists are acutely aware of the tension between the self and the community they live in. Women are confined to the domestic sphere. Leaving men aside, women can be other women's greatest friends or foes; the domestic community showcases the predominance of the mother, sisters, or relatives. The mother, however, can be a phallic character. The daughter can be a tolerant character who either goes mad, or suffers greatly, and later reconciles with her mother. For example, Clare Boothe Luce in her one-act play *The Women* (1936) portrays a group of women who despise, torment, and hate each other through gossip regardless of their friendship. Sophie Treadwell, Susan Glaspell, Beth Henley, and Marsha Norman are wrought with the same concern. In *The Verge* (1921), Susan Glaspell presents the tensions between mother and daughter or sisters, demonstrating the catastrophe of what kin relations can do to the self. In Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), the female protagonist suffers from loneliness in her self-formation. In the name of love, the mother just coerces the daughter to conform to dominant gender norms, ignoring the daughter's psychological and moral yearnings for recognition. In *Miss Firecracker's Contest* (1980), Beth Henley shows how self-formation can suffer due to the estrangement between mother and daughter, or when the mother tries to control the daughter. In *Getting Out* (1979), Marsha Norman dramatizes how domestic relations can give rise to a psychotic self, as shown in Arlene/Arlie's split personalities. In *'night, Mother* (1983), Norman presents

how the relationship between the mother and daughter can destroy the latter's psyche or personality. Paula Vogel (1951-), in her Pulitzer Prize winning play *How I Learned to Drive* (1998), also presents a distant and cold women's community that hampers growth.

Kin relations can also be trying. Carson McCullers (1917-1967) presents a disturbing picture in her play *The Member of the Wedding* (1950), for she emphasizes the difficulty in establishing rapport with sisters or sisters-in-law. Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) also depicts problematic kin relationship in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and the story is set against the social background of racial segregation. In the face of triple oppression—racism, sexism, and class inequality, the Younger daughters only see their drastic differences. Viewing women from the American Southern belle perspective, Beth Henley (1952-) highlights the difficulty in establishing a bond between sisters in *Crimes of the Heart* (1981).

Women may not fare well in a social community of women. The nature of a social community is that members enter into a relationship by choice; and women are classmates, workmates, or friends to each other. In *How the Vote was Won* (1909), Cicely Hamilton (1872-1952) and Christopher St. John's (Christabel Marshall, 1871-1960) portray a group of women who are united, fighting for women's public interest. Communal influence is not adequate in allowing women to pursue their goals,

either political or personal. In the meantime, the community's political situation also prevents women from achieving their individual desires. Edith Ellis (1861-1916) notes that the friendship between two housewives can help them understand infidelity in marriage in *The Mothers* (1910). Yet these two housewives live in a community that does not support women's pursuit of selfhood. In *Trifles* (1916), Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) also demonstrates the importance and fragility of female solidarity.

The tension between the self and the female community is a common motif. Beth Henley explains in the interview with Mary Dellasega why she often portrayed women in abusive relations with other women:

I think there are all aspects of human connections that I try to show in my plays. But I do very much believe that men and women have a hard row to hoe, connecting with each other, as do women and women and men and men. But I think because of the sexual thing, there's something a lot more volatile. (257)

In *The Children's Hour* (1934), Lillian Hellman deals with the problem of social hostility toward lesbian love. Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977) dramatizes a group of female college graduates who are loosely related to each other, while they fight individually for their personhood. In *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), Wasserstein highlights the protagonist's internal suffering as a solitary seeker. She is a loner; all other women who surround her do not appreciate her pursuit for self-actualization. Rewriting William Shakespeare's major work *Othello: The Moor of*

Venice, Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (1994) hints that a women's community might work against a female who seeks self-actualization.

Many women playwrights emphasize women's predicament. On the one hand, women often have to fight against the internalized codes of behavior. They may question the ways of traditional women in the community. On the other hand, women may also form new bonds with other women in order to refashion their female selves. Characters such as Jessie Cates, Helen Jones, Ruth, Beneatha, Lenny Magrath, Fefu, and Heidi all try to assert their selves, but they also feel the moral burden characterized by their traditional selves. Any challenge to gendered performance such as the refusal of motherhood means that they may risk communal rejection. In such a case, women often oppress their own kind, for women may exercise (symbolic or real) violence upon those women who welcome differences in traditional communities. Many women characters are presented as morally and psychologically disturbed as a result, and these playwrights invite their audience to question the prevailing social-moral forces that shape women's lives and self perception.

Women dramatists also question the politics of emancipation and empowerment in a patriarchal society. Many women want to change the way things are, and there is always the choice between the love of solitude or the need for solidarity. An asocial woman can be a secondary being, and she can also become a powerless outcast. Iris

Marion Young and Seyla Benhabib argue that solidarity between women is like a rainbow (“Beyond the Politics of Gender” 12), because it is predicated on the essentialist universality of the category “women”; it is fascinating but intangible. Sometimes same-sex solidarity can encourage women to assume a different female self, since there is no need for women to perform or demonstrate womanliness before other women. On such an occasion, women can then think critically, communicate freely with each other, and the sharing (of inner suffering or everyday experiences) can empower them to become autonomous *and* relational subjects.

The distinctive styles of female communication can be found in the characters’ dialogues. For example, in *Trifles*, Glaspell makes reference to women’s stitch work of knotting or quilting to emphasize women’s common experience and the collage-like mode of feminine communication. In *The Verge*, she employs a botanical vocabulary and relates this to her protagonist Claire Archer to express the latter’s effort to construct her individuality. Gertrude Stein goes further in her reformulation of the dramatic language in *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928). It is a play on wordplay and word games, foretelling the postmodernist deconstruction of the certainty and innocence of the human language (Puchner 105). These are just a few examples to show women dramatists’ efforts in developing a tradition of feminine sensitivity and aesthetics in American drama. As Rita Felski states, the women-specific experience of some women

dramatists “presupposes a distinctive female consciousness which manifests itself both as a psychological constant within women and as an identifiable recurring characteristics in women’s writing” (26).

Women communicate in stylized ways in order to deliver messages. Bill Huddleston notices that during conversations with other women, women demonstrate lower levels of dominance with high rate of verbal back-channel cues, discussing more personal matters and focusing on family, relationship problems, and men (252-254). Deborah Tannen further elaborates in *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (1993) that women tend to be more cooperative and polite than men in conversation, since women’s mode of existence is oriented toward connection, care and acceptance. When they are performing their gendered selves, the language is often gender-specific.

This present study will analyze women characters’ dialogues, and explore how women assert their personhood through observing or violating gender-based communication rules among women. Differences between women in their groups are eventually negotiated and resolved through sharing similar experiences in their feminine way of communication. As Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) states in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953), literary works can capture and represent the so-called reality and real life by way of mimesis (8). Characters’ dialogues show how men and women talk differently, and how women are prone to

have deep and intimate conversations. This is what Mary Field Belenky and his colleagues call “real talk.”

“Really talking” requires careful listening; it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow... “Real talk” [is] a way of connecting to others. (144-145)

When men talk about careers, money, sports, or politics, women share their personal stories and experiences at home. These real talks show how women are subjectified by others, but they can also genuinely become interested in others, and in dialogues they can get connected to others and themselves.

It must be emphasized that woman-woman conversation may not guarantee the establishment of rapport. Owing to women’s fragile subjectivities, they may or may not break away from their performative selves, their sexist language or thinking. As Judith Butler points out, “To speak within the system is to be deprived of the possibility of speech; hence, to speak at all in that context is a performative contradiction, the linguistic assertion of a self that cannot ‘be’ within the language that asserts it” (*Gender Trouble* 158). On some occasions, women do violate the rules of womanly communication in order to express their suppressed personalities and individualities. This is what makes women playwrights different: they note the affinity among women, while acknowledging at the same time the peculiarities of each woman.

Women dramatists are not only interested in exploring the aesthetics of communication but also in reshaping the conventional dramatic forms and subject matters. For instance, Susan Glaspell always connects the linear plot of her play “with suppression and with social institutions which have become rigid and confining” (Ben-Zvi 153). She often disrupts the chronological order of time in her plays. Maria Irene Fornes shares Glaspell’s concern by associating linearity with patriarchal oppression, and arranges several scenes to be performed simultaneously on the stage in *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977). In doing so, Fornes challenges the authority of linear structure, and accentuates the complexity of human existence.

Furthermore, women dramatists have also been pioneers in their choices of subject matter. For instance, Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell might be the first women playwrights who have presented female characters engaged in homicide in *Trifles* and *Machinal* respectively. In *A Children’s Hour* (1934), Lillian Hellman is also a pioneer in her discussion of lesbianism/homosexuality against the social backdrop of rigid heterosexual gender norms. In *The Baltimore Waltz* (1990), combining farce with Hitchcock-like dramatic style, Paula Vogel brings freshness to American drama by tackling the psychological trauma caused by AIDS in the patients’ family. In *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), Carson McCullers focuses on the growing pain of an adolescent girl in a grotesque community. In *Getting Out* (1979), Marsha Norman

reexamines the meaning of justice in the legal system. In this play, Norman also examines the influence of the existing legal system on a person's psychological state, such as forcing a person to become a person with divided personalities. In *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977), Maria Irene Fornes presents the paralyzing effect of patriarchal ideology not only on women but also on dramatic art itself as the latter serves as the medium of such an ideology. In this play, women characters have heated discussions on the function of drama and education as the facilitator of patriarchal ideology.

In dealing with these innovative subject matters, female playwrights are very attuned to socio-political issues in the US. For example, against the social backdrop of the first wave of women's movement, Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) attacks the patriarchal double moral standards for men and women in *A Man's World* (1910). She also questions the institutionalization of motherhood and women's reproductive priority in *He and She* (1911). Megan Terry (1932-) violently denounces American's involvement in the Vietnam War in her musical *Viet Rock* (1966). Alice Childress (1916-1994) brings the theme of anti-lynching into Broadway through her play *Trouble in the Mind* (1955), in which she criticizes racism and advocates ethnic equality. Ntozake Shange (1948-), in her play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1977), creates seven nameless women to deal with abortion,

rape, domestic violence, sexism, and racism, relating these issues to African-American women's oppressed status.

In addition to their socio-political concerns, women playwrights also capture individual woman's psychological journey or the cultivation of personhood at the expense of women communities. That is to say, women playwrights often address women's issues from the personal level instead of the social or historical level. Women's issues are usually caused by women's inferior social status in the patriarchal society. These issues pertain to almost all aspects of women's lives. For instance, Dorothy V. Stickle lists the economic, social, and personal issues that concern modern American women. And these issues range from women's oppression, unpaid labor, domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual abuse in the domestic sphere to sex discrimination at work or in schools, and violence against women in the social sphere. Women dramatists often examine these problems from women's perspective and with critical awareness. That is to say, they adopt the engaging approach rather than the confrontational approach to highlight women's psychological problems. Furthermore, women playwrights are more interested in women's predicaments in personal life than in the public domain. Recurrent topics include marital relationships, extra-marital affairs, motherhood, sisterhood and childbearing. Most important of all, they care most about how women are doubly victimized by their false consciousness and their

self-consciousness. Women characters always internalize the moral values indoctrinated by the patriarchal culture. Their false consciousness has much to do with their normalization and legitimization of these values or ideologies. As a result, they are often trapped in this engendering process and are unconscious of their deceived state and their plight. They further add to their suffering by giving themselves vigorous moral tasks or ideals to live up to. To address these issues, many women playwrights focus on the portrayal of disoriented female characters in quest of a new selfhood in their plays. Very often they approach the problem not by placing women in conflicting relationships with men but by situating female characters in the context of “women groups”, and these groups serve as contesting sites where women struggle to construct their selves.

The Portrayal of Women in the Twentieth-Century American Drama

Before we study how American women dramatists envision the transformation of the female self, I want to contextualize how their male counterparts understand women. Male playwrights preserve the tradition of the European dramatists, and often tackle women’s issues from the economic and social angles but not from the personal level. In *Three Sisters* (1901), Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) relates women’s sufferings to self-delusion, the inevitable result of chaotic social changes. Chekhov also sees Ranyevskaya’s financial bankruptcy as the cause of her predicaments in *The Cherry*

Orchard (1904). These examples show that women in Chekhov's plays suffer greatly because of external or environmental factors. Similarly, in *The Heartbreak House* (1920), Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) depicts a group of "new women" who are tired of the rigid moral ethos that cannot address their urgent need for a new way of existence. August Strindberg (1849-1912) deals with women's pathos by relating it to their class consciousness and conformity to the patriarchal ideology in *Miss Julie* (1888).

A look at the European dramatic repertoire also shows that women are often presented as self-loathing beings who loathe others because they compete for men's favor. Although many women suffer and feel miserable because they do not possess an individual self that they can call their own, such suffering and frustration do not necessarily bring them closer together. They are distant from one another or see each other as rivals in society. In Bernard Shaw's *The Heartbreak House* (1919), the three sisters fight for their father Captain Shotover's approval. When women are united to challenge patriarchy, they are considered as immoral. For instance, in *The Father* (1887), Strindberg portrays a group of united women who manipulate the father to believe that his daughter is not his real daughter. And this group of women makes the doctor diagnose the father as insane because of such a belief. The secret is that this group of women would gain their right in choosing the daughter's education. Strindberg

portrays the father as trustworthy and reliable, while women are malicious and annoying just because they would not accept the patriarch's arrangement.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is one of few male dramatists who pay attention to women's psyche in self development. However, he presents women's inner turmoil as an effect produced by patriarchal ideology that tends to confine women to gendered selves. Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879) can only seek self-development by leaving her domestic setting. The female character in *Hedda Gabler* (1890) commits suicide as an expression and assertion of her self by rebelling against the social, moral, and psychological constraints imposed on her by gender norms.

Similar to their European counterparts, American male dramatists often present women as witches, hags, or angels in marginalized and subordinated positions. As Tami Cowden observes, traditionally female characters fall into eight heroine archetypes: the Sapphira as villain, the boss, the temptress, the damsel in distress, the free spirit, the crusader, the spunky kid, and the nurturer (2). For instance, Arthur Miller (1915-2005) presents Linda Lowman as a silent and pointless nurturer in *Death of a Salesman* (1948). He also presents Abigail and Elizabeth as watchful morally-degenerated hags in *The Crucible* (1953). Clifford Oates (1906-1963) treats Edna in *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) as the social-cultural product of the Great Depression. The play is set against the backdrop of proletarian movement against capitalism. Like Ibsen's Nora, Edna

denounces her marriage for her political pursuit. Robert Brustein argues that the female characters in William Inge's plays are "men-taming" women who are castrative to their husbands (53).

The "father" of American drama, Eugene O'Neill, does not break from such dramatic traditions. In *Desire under the Elms* (1958), O'Neill treats women as victims and objects of men's desires. What's more, O'Neill characterizes Mary Tyrone as a drug-addict, a resentful wife and an impotent mother who does not know how to love her children in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). Judith E. Barlow thus argues that female characters in O'Neill's plays are often trapped in his "equation of womanhood and motherhood" (*Female Characters* 169). The O'Neillian dramatic closure often shows the female plight of unexplainable self-loss, and these sufferings are the result of stereotypical gender-based social roles assigned to women. Compared with men, women are more institutionally oppressed because of their horrible conformity.

Besides, American male dramatists very often deal with women's issues in a philosophical and abstract manner. Thornton Wilder's (1897-1975) major work *Our Town* (1938) illustrates this point well. In this play, women's situations are secondary to Wilder's exploration of existential meaning of life. In Wilder's dramatic world, women are always defined by their family roles as daughter, wife, and mother. They are not

considered as individual beings. Women are deprived of the right to develop their selfhood.

Whenever women's psychological sufferings are foregrounded, women are treated as misfits who cannot deal with the external environment. Tennessee Williams (1911-1986), for example, depicts women's loneliness as a trauma inflicted by conventional ideologies in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Williams treats Blanche as a pathetic victim of her personal isolation and outdated morality in a modern world in *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947). Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is also portrayed as a woman who is too fragile to face the brutal reality of life. Furthermore, in *The Night of Iguana* (1961), Williams provides a heartbreaking drama of a group of unmarried women, who are presented as Southern belles. They "are aware of acutely being watched and heard because they have been reared in a culture with a strict decorum for the accepted behavior of its women" (Hovis 171). These women suffer from the internal pains of having nowhere to escape.

In dealing with groups of women, American playwrights also regard women's communities as hostile environment for women to seek self-development. Tennessee Williams treats familial settings as a complex contesting site of love and hatred in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Furthermore, the traditional community of family is also portrayed as an arena filled with jealousy and distrust in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

(1947). In these female-dominated communities that are presented to be hostile, women's personal development is often prevented. The feelings of estrangement, misunderstanding, and distance among women are dramatized and emphasized in these plays. Dramatists present women as victims of their society: they seldom challenge or rebel against the patriarchal system defended by the older women in their group. Peer group support is also missing. Women may not be close to one another because they compete for patriarchal approval.

Theoretical Framework

It is against such dramatic tradition that female dramatists explore the psychological nuances, and the possible transformation of the female self in women's communities. My approach is to read their plays through a feminist lens, with special reference to various theories put forward by Judith Butler, Nancy Chodorow, and Carol Gilligan. Their theories are used to analyze women's contingent subjectivities in their attempts to break from their performative selves and their moral and psychological "innate" tendencies to cling to the women-women bond.

The feminist approach is quite different from the male-dominated notion of selfhood. As observed by Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Western culture construes the self as philosophically pivotal—a point of intersection for metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics" (1). Scholars such as René Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704),

and David Hume (1711-1776), as well as the Enlightenment rationalists Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831) all share the belief that there exists a self that is rational, reliable, stable, and integrated. Such a general belief that the self is capable of making choices and largely in control of his own actions and destiny is also found in Daniel Walker Howe's *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (5).

It is also widely known that the concept of the self has always been a sexist one. That is to say, the self is acknowledged as exclusively male. As observed by Hegel, personhood comes with the right of property ownership. In that regard, a woman has no self. She is the mere sexual other to man. As Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) observes, "He is the Subject, he is the absolute—she is the other" (xix). Women are treated only as sex objects, or objects of male gaze, or gifts to be exchanged between family clans or tribes, as Gayle Rubin notes in "The Traffic in Women." They are deprived of the (legal) right to live as independent individuals.

Things begin to change because the existence of a transcendental and unitary self is now deemed to be an illusion, for it can be the effect produced by phallogocentrism. In *On Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida coins the term phallogocentrism, using it to refer to the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning, being, and existence

(145). He argues that the essence of the (stable, unitary, free-willed) self never exists, and there is no clear-cut division between mind and body, internal and external.

Taking on Derrida's ideas, Judith Butler states that the self has no stability, essence, and interiority in *Gender Trouble* (1990):

When the subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the "inner world" no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect. (134)

The self is an effect produced by repeated performance and behavior. He/She is the doer formed through the deeds, and, conversely, what he/she does constitutes the person. Human beings are constructed and chained to their gendered identities defined by patriarchal ideology. Out of habit they internalize existing gender norms, and complete the process of gendering without their knowing. To quote Butler again, "the gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'" (*Gender Trouble* 141). The person's variation and deviance from dominant gender norms illustrate the contingency of the self.

Butler also suggests that the inner disposition of the self is only a kind of phantasmal psychic myth. The self is produced by a combination of power, social

construction, and public surveillance. As Butler states in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,”

this self is not only irretrievably ‘outside,’ constituted social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication. (528)

Viewed in this light, enlightened humans can adopt whatever gender requisites, and perform new gendered identities as their “internal” features. The new, non-essentialistic self has no need of a cause, or a centre to guide and monitor his/her behavior. As Judith Butler elaborates, “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed...precisely the discursively variable construction of each [the self and its acts] in and through the other” (*Gender Trouble* 142). As new gender and social roles evolve and develop, the subject has only a performative self, a fantasized “internal” core, and a set of discursive codes that guide or direct his/her gender performance.

Furthermore, Butler sees that gender comes before being. The deconstruction of a stable self shows that a person’s being is always changing. A person is always anticipating, incorporating, and negotiating with confluent factors to form a psychological perception of who the person is. This process of self-fashioning actually comes with the process of gendering. Everybody is gendered in accordance with the heterosexual matrix in a sexist society. Judith Butler cogently explains that a “person

only become[s] intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble* 16). That is to say, human beings are accepted in a patriarchal society only when they adhere to their gendered positions. According to Judith Butler, there is no self before or outside a gendered person. A person does not have a so-called internal disposition, the self. She notes that,

... if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an “I” or a “We” who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of “before.” Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an “I” or a “We” who had not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects came into being ... the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves. (*Bodies that Matter* 7)

When it comes to the question of who, or what causes these gender norms, Butler closes a loop by arguing that gender rules bring out certain human behaviors, and human beings reinforce gender norms and performativity. She sees that

gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body, and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (*Gender Trouble* 140)

Through repeated imitations of the dominant cultural conventions, people learn to stylize their bodies, gestures, dress, walk, and talk, and deem these conventions

appropriate for women or men in that community. This gives rise to stereotyped traits of masculinity and femininity. The so-called inner disposition of self is externalized by the stylized repetition of conventional, gendered behaviors.

Nancy Chodorow (1944-), however, is less interested in the origin of the gendered self. She focuses on the impact of gender role differences. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she sees that men are inclined toward independence, while women are inclined toward attachment to each other (169). Men fashion their existence by means of their distinctive individuality, while women often tend to associate with other people. Chodorow puts it this way,

our own senses of differentiation, of separateness from others, as well as our psychological and cultural experience and interpretation of gender or sexual difference, are created through psychological, social, and cultural processes, and through relational experiences. (48)

That is to say, women often realize themselves through their relational experience and attachment to other people. “Only connect” seems to offer women a good gateway to mediate with others, shape the changing self, and perform in relationships. In this study, only female bonds will be scrutinized because women tend to “[emphasize] [women’s] connectedness with, rather than [women’s] separation from, one another” (Chodorow 44). As Chodorow rightly observes, women have potential to support each other on the basis of their gendered experience of performing as women:

Growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible and permeable ego boundaries. ... The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world ... feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship. *(The Reproduction of Mothering 169)*

The link between the unstable self and other women in a community can mean a blessing or a curse. Women very often express a strong love of connections and affiliation to stabilize their existence, but they may also risk being victimized by other women in the process. It is this focus on relationality that affects a woman's perception of who she should be in a community that tends to confine or define her. As Judith Butler argues,

At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a "you"; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that conditions us fundamentally. *(Precarious Life 45)*

Such a relationship between a woman and her intimate circle or community becomes stressful when she gradually feels the discrepancy between the communal expectations or consciousness and her individual desires, especially when the communal consciousness has been interiorized as a moral *and* natural ideal on the woman's part.

This is one of the focal points of the present study, and the power of the community is formative, if not deterministic. As Judith Butler explains, the internal features of the self are produced by defining communities:

Certain features of the world, including people we know and love, do become “internal” features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world...is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorizations that a psyche performs.

(*Gender Trouble* xvi)

That is to say, people may help shape or define one’s personality and psyche by expecting one to perform according to the norms of that group or community. A community thus plays an important role in the process of forming, and engendering the self. In light of this, women’s repetitive performances according to social norms will result in the reinforcement of their gendered identities and the patriarchal communities, while their notion or presence of an individual self may become dubious. Carol Gilligan sees that women are so other-oriented and caring that they often value other people’s feelings, and are ready to sacrifice their own interest for other people. As she explains in *In a Different Voice* (1982), women often develop an ethics of care, often at the expense of fairness, justice, and rights. Women may easily become attached to others and care about others, showing “sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view” (8). While they perform their gendered roles, women find themselves suffering from moral and psychological dilemmas when their own desires clash with the needs of others, and their sense of responsibility toward those within their web of connections. In this sense,

in the attempt to understand or shape their selves, “the ideal of care is thus an activity of relationships, of seeing and responding to need, [to] take care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (Gilligan 73). In the repeated acts of such care-oriented daily performances, women are used to taking care-oriented ethics in their inner configuration of their selves.

Nel Noddings further elaborates the “ethics of care” in this way: the care for others has three elements, motivational engrossment or displacement in another, a regard or inclination to the other, and an action of care-taking, such as protection or maintenance (*Caring* 9). As (in)voluntary caregivers, women barely have the abilities, resources, or consciousnesses to care for their own existence. In Noddings’ paradigm, when women’s actions promote pain, separation, or helplessness in others, they are judged as evil (*Women and Evil* 96). The ethics of care has done women a great service and a disservice. It elevates the status of women as carers or mothers in the past, but it also ties women to certain performative acts, perpetuating gender norms in society.

Women turn out to be defenders of the socio-cultural moral rituals imposed on women. The desire is to be recognized as “intelligible,” rather than unthinkable or unlivable, creatures in a patriarchal society leads many women to internalize patriarchal values and accept their gendered roles as natural (*Undoing Gender* xi). Those who fail to perform according to the restrictive gender codes are often punished and become

outcasts, while the submissive ones celebrate their abject bodies and their self-imposed gendered selves (*Bodies that Matter* xv). Guided by these gendered norms, women favor connectedness rather than separation as Gilligan and Noddings have argued in their research. Under such circumstances, women face serious difficulties when they try to understand who they are. At the surface level, they are functioning, gendered subjects who can perform their roles according to the group's norms. At the psychological level, some women may want to fashion themselves just like privileged males, and yearn for the right to live independently with free will.

Since men and women are constructed to play different roles, women abhor deviation or variation from the dominant gender dictums. This is justified by the discrepancy between the privileges given to women and men, the freedom enjoyed by the so-called natural, moral and relational women and by the free-willed, rational, and individualistic men. At the same time, women are fully aware that they have to submit to dominant gender norms in order to be accepted as women in their communities. They have to fashion their feminine selves for the sake of acceptance and survival. However, some women are also lured to quest for an autonomous life that allows free exploration and expression. The desire for an alternative mode of life, a new sense of being can be transient and yet such women may feel themselves left in a sense of loss or confusion.

In addition, in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis argues that the instability of female identity has much to do with the ever-changing gender discourses, which always respond to political and social pressure:

Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions....The search for identity may be, in fact, a “rewriting” of self in “relation to shifting interpersonal and political contexts. (8-9)

The above quotation shows that the self is never static, since the dialectic of gender compels women to legitimize communal norms, build relations with others, only to note the changing faces of desires and identifications (Jones 3). Thus, women’s selves are always in the state of becoming. Women are often caught in the constant negotiation between the self and the other, the internalization of and the discontent with the social, cultural, and moral configurations of the self. As Judith Butler states,

For I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “We” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you”, by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this discrimination and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (Precarious Life 49)

Inclined toward a relational existence, women endorse the collective noun (“We”) instead of their distinct individuality (“I”). This “We” can be self-empowering, inviting

the shaping of the self, the re-examination of the relationship between the self and others in the community, and the birth of new subjectivities that welcome interdependence, inter-subjectivity, responsibility for others, and caring for oneself.

The present study will thus examine how women function in communities, how they negotiate with, and define themselves in their intimate “we” communities. As Butler states in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, “the self is dependent not just on the existence of the Other ... but also on the possibility that the normative horizon within which the Other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical opening” (22). Therefore, women’s performativity, be it in roles or in relations, becomes the reference point for the subject to rethink her life in relation to community-imposed or internalized gender norms. Through the act of repeated performativity, women may arrive at “new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification” (*Bodies that Matter* 188). In this sense, performativity may facilitate women’s re-subjectification of themselves as well as their understanding of their selves and of their relationships with others in their intimate circles.

At the basic level, women’s gender performativity means that they often perform their gender or social roles dutifully. The theories of Carol Gilligan and Neil Noddings are illuminating. The drive to repeat and follow the patriarchal practices is so pervasive that women may not be conscious of the oppressive nature of these norms, nor do they

question the validity of such practices. The rise of such a fragile subjectivity has much to do with the fact that women often emphasize care and attachment, while they inwardly yearn for freedom and an independent life. They may deviate from the dominant gender norms from time to time. Such moments of deviance are occasions when they become aware of their personal voice or choice. On such occasions, women may challenge or rebel the hegemonic heterosexual relationships, and yearn for a freer existence.

At the higher level, women perform different roles to seek freedom and autonomy. This is different from individualism by way of materialistic success—the dominant culture in the US. Women often look for self-fulfillment and personal growth in relationships. In the past, Nora's abandonment of the family has led some critics to link female individualism to self-centeredness or "narcissism," fearing its corrosive effects on society. However, women playwrights do not highlight the separateness of the self, even though women are doomed to experience an ambivalence towards, or the tension with social institutions or communities. It is this in-betweenness that enables women to reshape the existing communities and their gendered selves, emphasizing both individuality and relationality. Women must remain in dialogue with various familial, social, cultural, religious, or political groups in order to make good sense of themselves or to seek meaning in life.

Instead of depicting the war between the sexes, female playwrights are more concerned with the war within or between women. Women may live in the same community, but they have to choose whether to side with those who uphold gender norms, or develop new attachment to those who fight against them. In the context of feminist politics, attachment to women is the initial step to women's empowerment and collective political movement. For example, bell hooks contends in *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* that women groups are supportive of a woman's quest for independence even though the process might be a complex one:

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity. (65)

bell hooks' notion of sisterhood celebrates the "bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources" instead of victimization (hooks 45). This is especially true when women find common interests, beliefs or shared experiences. Positive may this seem, women also acknowledge the negative group dynamics, which can come with issues such as dominance, exclusiveness, and uneven power distribution. They know how groups may not always guarantee solidarity or sisterhood, or live up to the goals of equality, mutual reciprocity, support, and recognition. Yet Iris Marion Young

argues that the vision of an ideal community can be “an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort” (*Inclusion and Democracy* 300).

It is this discussion on the relational politics of the self in an inclusive community that prompted me to study how a community can mollify women’s wishes for radical self-expressions. Community is a place where one’s positionality (the meaning of being female) can be discovered (de Lauretis 159). A woman’s performative self may thus be seen as “a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled” (de Lauretis 15). Women can strive for a delicate balance between self-awakening, cultivating her own consciousness and negotiations with other women, and the patriarchal Other. As de Lauretis contends,

[A woman] is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by [her] personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, affect) to the events of the world. (159)

It is under such circumstances that women can maintain “intelligible” positions in a patriarchal society.

Women in Communities

A community can allow women to cultivate their multi-dimensional selves because it offers interactive inter-personal relationships with other women, leading to intra-personal dialogues. Traditionally, community has been regarded as a kind of attachment to place, or the powers of locality. As John Cater and Trevor Jones state in *Social Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Issues*:

A socially interactive space inhabited by a close network of households, most of whom are known to one another and who, to a high degree, participate in common social activities, exchange information, engage in mutual aid and support and are conscious of a common identity, a belonging together. (169)

My concern is with people-based, not location-based, communities. In the present study, a community refers to the convergence of diverse individuals who are related genetically or socially. They may or may not share the same ideas about women's liberation, oppression, or gender norms. This is quite different from other communities, such as a socialist community, in which a group of cooperative, non-acquisitive proletarians devote themselves to the collective task of producing and distributing goods to meet social needs. The use of the notion of community has its emphasis on relationships. It is understood as the site of contestation where the individual meets the collective, the personal confronts the social-moral, the intelligent and thinking being faces her own performative self or relational self.

This thesis also emphasizes the physical and psychological togetherness of women in a community rather than the political or democratic communities in themselves. The focus is on how particular communities can be maintained, how women work out their interpersonal and intra-personal relationships, and how personal commitment and motivation can be strengthened and renewed, all the while acknowledging the self's unstable state and contingent agencies, as well as questioning those forces that tend to burden self-fashioning or actualization.

In *Keywords: A Vocabulary and Culture*, Raymond Williams highlights the community of interests, of goods, of relationships (“*communitas*”). He mentions how “the complexity of community thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on the one hand the sense of direct common concerns; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express this” (76) . His ideas dovetail nicely with the feminist concern that there is always a precarious imbalance between personal concerns or quests and social-moral obligations and common interests. The focus is on the engaging ways of negotiation and re-subjectification.

In addition, Williams's ideas of “dominant,” “residual” and “emergent” discourses are powerful conceptual tools to analyze the changing relationship between

the self and the community. The dominant white American women community dwells on the importance of family, work, morality, and religion. Communal consciousness can be conservative. In the name of love, women usually accept the gendering of the self through modeling, coercion, and moral reasoning. Women also actively practise self-discipline to comply with the dominant gender norms, regardless of their innate drives for freedom. When the cost of conformity becomes too high, the emerging self may use radical measures to find a way out.

The common problem of regional and marginal communities is that they are torn between accepting the dominant culture and returning to the legacy of (“residual”) Southernism or Africanism. Women are trapped in gender dilemmas as the old stereotypes and the dominant gender roles become too restrictive and stifling. To go beyond the confines of stereotypical roles and traditional femininity, women often engage in rethinking the part they play in the community, how they negotiate with various forces, and define their existence. Members “attempt to redefine their gender, racial, ethnic, or sexual identities so as to eliminate the negative implications hitherto associated with them—for example, to adopt an identity as Black and proud, gay and proud, or as a woman-identified woman” (Ferguson 372).

In the case of small ethnic communities, women can develop very close bonds with other women. Through open, inclusive, and dialogic exchanges, women advocate

an emergent culture that seeks re-subjectification and emancipation. The emergent community of women promotes what Cornel West calls the “new cultural politics of difference.” It purports

To trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing. (65)

That is to say, women are sensitized to diverse communities in which “women rather than men establish the community or the roles and projects of women within it, and when it is dedicated to overcoming specifically gender-based obstacles to women’s survival and flourishing—as understood first and foremost by the women in the community” (Weiss and Friedman xii).

Significance of This Study

This thesis argues that twentieth-century American women dramatists have made important contributions to American drama, noting the fashioning of contingent female selves in women’s communities. Different types of communities challenge women in different ways. They are presented as testing grounds where women deal with their moral dilemmas. The ethics of care is important, but women have to go beyond their traditional relationality and gender roles, to transcend the moral ideal of care for others before they can come to have a better understanding of themselves. Since many women

are not aware of the fact that they are under patriarchal subjugation and gender oppression, women characters in the selected plays struggle hard to maintain a harmonious relationship with themselves, and within their communities of women. Some women try to assert their selves through separation. They mimic the male way, leave the dominant communities (such as family) because they regard the modern American family as a dysfunctional, patriarchal institution. In regional or marginal communities, women may uphold their residual cultures, and rebuild their fragile selves and communities. Sisterly or peer support can be an important element in African-American community or Southern Community. Women tend to rely on sisters and sisters-in-law to foster their own development. In New England community and Jewish Community, women may have a detached relationship with traditionalism in order to cultivate their emerging selves.

There are numerous anthologies or publications about women playwrights in the twentieth-century. However, not many studies focus on the functioning of the female self in community. The plays of Sophie Treadwell, Marsha Norman, Lorraine Hansberry, Beth Henley, Maria Irene Fornes, and Wendy Wasserstein are selected in order to demonstrate the multi-faceted dimension of American society, as well as the complexity of women's selves in American drama.

The present study aims at:

1) reassessing women dramatists' contribution to twentieth-century American drama by exploring the intricacies of women's relations, the politics of self-(re)fashioning, and the influence of women's communities on the shaping of the psychological/moral aspects of the self;

2) examining these playwrights' specific writing strategies in addressing the problematics and polemics of inter and intra-relationships among women;

3) evaluating how such relationships function in the women characters' fashioning of their female selves and forming a bond between/among women;

4) analyzing the women's discourse and exploring how feminine language features such as interrupting, silencing, omission, and overlapping help to strengthen or weaken women's cultivation of their selves;

5) analyzing these women playwrights' agendas by noting how the representation of female characters can politicize gender performance and heterosexual relationships;

6) examining the social, historical, and ethnic-cultural factors that help to frame American women playwrights' politics of the self; and

7) highlighting the difficulties and problems faced by individual women in specific communities.

With such aims in mind, I have selected Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beth Henley's

Crimes of the Heart, Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends*, and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* for this study. The protagonists of these plays are neither "Madonnas" nor "Whores". They often go beyond their moral and psychological underpinnings or ideological and social constraints to look for self-actualization. They try to be true to themselves even at the cost of their lives.

Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Nancy Chodorow's theory of self-in-relation, and Carol Gilligan's *Ethics of Care*, I revisit the literary achievements of selected American women playwrights, noting their contribution to the development of the twentieth-century American drama. Representative texts are selected because they are milestones in the history of American women drama in the twentieth century. The plays of Sophie Treadwell, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Lorraine Hansberry, Wendy Wasserstein, and Maria Irene Fornes selected for this study mark important phases and different historical periods in the development of American drama. They are also ground-breaking in their treatment of women's issues in the context of America's multi-cultural settings (Afro-American, Jewish American, Latino American, and White Anglo-Saxon). Most important of all, the selected women playwrights address in their own ways different aspects of women's struggle for recognition in the last century. These texts register American women playwrights' road to liberation and their advocacy for women's rights. That is to say, they all succeed in

bringing their dramas of women's personal suffering and choices to the public, unfolding for their audience the multi-layered treatments of women's issues.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter one examines how women suffer in a community where the dominant, white discourse reigns. In Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, the absent father produces great pain. The dysfunctional family, patriarchal ideologies, together with tarnished feminine mode of communication all account for the problematics of female self-formation. Women playwrights engage with issues such as sexual liberation, the choice of life, women's rights of reproduction, and love in patriarchal marriage. They intentionally suppress the socio-historical background of their plays to bring out the universality of women's issues.

Chapter two examines how women characters' strike a balance of caring for themselves and caring about others. Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* lay bear the influence of a Southern community and Afro-American community respectively. These communities enable the rise of mutual empathy and reciprocity among women. By returning to their (residual) cultural legacy, women in the community can achieve psychological bonding, and become capable of making their own life choices.

Chapter Three examines the rise of an emergent self in marginalized, minoritarian communities such as the New England and Jewish societies. Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* and Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and her Friends* show how women can be disillusioned by other women in their community. These characters reduce themselves to be solitary self-searchers. In the process of retreating themselves from the public, female playwrights deal with such issues as single motherhood, the solidarity of sisterhood, women's art movement, and the education of women. This chapter addresses the paradoxical relationship between the emergent self and the ethnic community, and how space can be found for each female individual to grow in relationships and achieve self-actualization.

Chapter One

Women and the Communal Moral Ideal: Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* and

Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*

Twentieth-century American female playwrights are especially interested in exploring women's identity by way of their psychological journey, noting the tension between individuality and community, self-interest and responsibility to others. As C. W. E. Bigsby notes in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, "as the most public of arts, [drama] offers the opportunity of acting out anxieties and fears which are born in the conflict between private needs and public values" (1). Public moral values are passed on to female individuals through the process of enculturation. Disguised in the form of love, patriarchal values are transmitted through modeling, gendering, and regulating. In addressing women's internal struggles to break from gender-biased moral and psychological requirements, female playwrights emphasize their women characters' deviant, individualistic behaviors as a transgression of their gendered selves, while simultaneously embracing the notion of a precarious, inclusive and contingent self. Very often women long for transformation and self-identification in political, religious, regional or nationalistic contexts. The problem they encounter in shaping their selves in specific communities, especially in predominant women's communities, becomes an important topic in twentieth-century

American drama.

As mentioned in the Introduction, women's domestic communities can be defined or constructed in various ways. The dominant domestic community usually demonstrates these characteristics: it is patrilineal, patrilocal, hierarchical, white, and traditional. Men are the center and breadwinners, but they are often absent figures in the domestic community. Married women bear their husbands' names and move away from their maternal family to stay in their husbands' houses. As they become mothers, they are next in the pecking order in the domestic sphere. The son is often preferred to the daughter or the daughter-in-law and discourses of love, blood, duty, and morality often dominate such type of community, reinforcing male domination and stigmatizing all gestures of protest or resistance from the opposite sex. Feminists increasingly view such a community as a cradle for perpetuating not only gender norms but also social prejudices against women, for the division of labor and exploitation at home reflect women's exploited conditions in the domestic setting. Owing to women's rising self-awareness, this domestic community often becomes the site for women's struggle for recognition and rights.

The selected plays by Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970) and Marsha Norman (1947-) typify the problems encountered by working-class Anglo-Saxon white women when they seek self-fulfillment. Due to the dysfunctional modern families in the

twentieth-century America, female playwrights tackle women's issues, such as women's right and capability of life choice, single-motherhood, divorce, arranged marriage, and women's right of reproduction. For example, Sophie Treadwell creates Myra Light in *Gringo* (1922) as a woman who deserts her husband as a way to escape the entrapment of marriage. And in *Lone Valley* (1933), Treadwell stresses that "the isolation of a western community offers the destitute a place of new and perhaps final opportunity" (Dickey 12) to seek autonomy. The female protagonist refuses to accommodate the communal norms and chooses to live an independent life in seclusion. Marsha Norman presents Ginger's painful process of self searching not only because she has to fight her illness alone but also because she has to deal with her loneliness in *Trudy Blue* (1999). Even though Ginger's husband and daughter are around, they are unable to help solve Ginger's problem.

In Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928) and Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983), both playwrights present how women characters want to transform their gendered selves, redefine their roles, subvert communal moral ideals, and make their authentic choices. Treadwell and Norman show how women characters struggle desperately against the dominant values that emphasize their conformity to designated gender roles, their submission and obedience. Treadwell and Norman stress on their women characters' moral pathos and psychological predicaments in their attempt to challenge the

pervasive forces that hinder personal development. Women characters in the plays very often take the ethical violence forced on them and redirect it in violence. Through such violent acts, these characters redefine themselves as active seekers of self.

The Relational Self and the Ethics of Care in a Dominant Community

In the dominant domestic community, mothers are devoted child-bearers and child-carers, relying on the emotional bond, which is love, to control or influence their children. As Nancy Chodorow (1944-) argues in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*,

Images of felt good and bad aspects of the mother or primary caretaker, caretaking experiences, and the mothering relationship become part of the self, of a relational ego structure, through unconscious mental processes that appropriate and incorporate these images. With maturation, these early images and fragments of perceived experience become put together into a self. As externality and internality are established, therefore, what comes to be internal includes what originally were aspects of the other and the relation to the other. (105)

In the process of engendering the self, mothers pass on the ethics of care to their daughters and cultivate the importance of a relational self. The moral ideal of care is transmitted to their daughters through modeling, their action is often done in the guise of love. What's more, the family monitors the behavior of its members. The community, likewise, sees to the enforcement of morals. As Daniel Moynihan reports in 1965,

The role of the family in shaping character and ability is so pervasive as to be easily overlooked. The family is the basic social unit of American life; it is the basic socializing unit. By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child. (131)

Also Adrienne Rich explains the moral education mothers pass on to their children:

“The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother” (*Of Woman Born* 219). Out of love, the daughters submit themselves to their mothers’ dictums in exchange for recognition and support. What is more important, the communal recognition stands for a kind of moral complimentary, which is a legitimate label for gender identity. In this way, women develop their gendered selves characterized by a performative conformity and incorporate those patriarchal dictums that are deemed appropriate gender role selves “because they have internalized an image of themselves as passive objects, framed by the classic structure of the myth, removed from the very symbols and activities quest traditionally evokes” (Heller 6). In other words, women perform their gendered roles dutifully, with just a very vague sense about themselves. As Nancy Chodorow states in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), “through relation to their mothers, women develop a self-in-relation” (15). They demonstrate their performative selves as self-in-relation through the connection with their mothers.

The Young Woman, who is revealed in Episode Six as Helen Jones, in Treadwell’s *Machinal*, is endowed with great potential for she has a faint awareness of her desire for self fulfillment. She seeks self-validation despite her internalized social obstructions. Helen tries very hard to accommodate and adhere to the patriarchal expectations upheld by her mother. In such a way, Helen fashions a self-in-relation.

That is to say, Helen tends to define herself in relation with others. In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Chodorow explains, “by virtue of their gender... women feel intuitively connected to others, able to empathize” and “are embedded in and dependent upon relationships” (viii). These are the dialectics of gender performativity. But Treadwell is quick in pointing out the implication: that women are socially constructed as attentive, considerate, and reciprocal. Meanwhile, women suffer from such cultivation and nurturing, since their individualities are undermined by such sociocultural constructs.

Pressed by financial crisis, Helen has to work and put aside her desire for personal fulfillment. In order to support her aging mother, Helen surrenders to the dominant gender norm and expectation by working as a secretary and marrying her former boss. Carol Gilligan explains this repression of a woman’s “internal” voice and the moral responsibility of caring for others:

That internal or internalized voice told a woman that it would be “selfish” to bring her voice into relationships, that perhaps she did not know what she really wanted, or that her experience was not a reliable guide in thinking about what to do. Women often sensed that it was dangerous to say or even to know what they wanted or thought –upsetting to others and therefore carrying with it the threat of abandonment or retaliation.

(In a Different Voice iv)

This is the case of Helen, who suppresses her “inner” voices and shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her widowed mother. However, she cannot help

complaining,

I'll kill you—Maybe I am crazy—I don't know. Sometimes I think I am—the thoughts that go on in my mind-sometimes I think I am—I can't help it if I am—I do the best I can—I do the best I can and I'm nearly crazy! (MOTHER rises and sits.) Go away! Go away! You don't know anything about anything! And you haven't got any pity—no pity—you just take it for granted that I go to work every day-and come home every night and bring my money every week—you just take it for granted—and you let me go on forever-and never feel any pity— (Treadwell 19)

In a sense, Helen takes the typing work only for the sake of survival, but it alienates her in the technological and materialistic world. As David Krasner points out in *A History of Modern Drama*, “the typing machine is impersonal, making the Young Woman nothing more than an extended coping instrument for her boss... [its] noise, compounded by other secretaries, creates a machine-gun auralty: dissonance and disturbance envelop the protagonist” (401). Conflated with her “typewriter” (Treadwell 1), Helen suppresses her personal desire and shoulders the financial responsibility of the family. In doing this, she fulfills her moral responsibility of caring for her mother and achieves the psychological harmony and tranquility for not violating the dominant moral ethos at that time. Furthermore, to trade for financial security, she also accepts a loveless marriage. As Julia Walker argues, Helen worries “about the horrid prospect of entering into a loveless marriage when it is clear she has no other choice. With no means of self-authorization before her, it is as if she has no self” (224). In Episode Seven, her husband's mention of her mother going to the company to get her allowance

makes the daughter postpone her leaving her husband (Treadwell 56). Helen is often ready to sacrifice her own interest, especially in terms of her psychological satisfaction and desire for personal development, in order to maintain her relationship with her mother.

Treadwell's Helen allows her internalized, relational self to supersede her yearning for individuation. When members of the dominant community are mutually dependent, Treadwell highlights the daughter's vulnerability in cultivating her selfhood owing to her acceptance of the ethical responsibility of caring for others. Such inter-dependence reinforces communal influences on individuals and stifles their yearning for individual freedom. Helen in Treadwell's *Machinal* is caught in such a dilemma. Helen and her mother are separated from the general public as Helen suffers from a psychological trauma apparently caused by modern mechanization. She feels suffocated when she is confined to restrictive space. She describes how she feels in the metro car, "I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air" (Treadwell 6). Such psychological disorder reveals Helen's stifling confinement in a mechanized society where people are dehumanized. As Judith E. Barlow writes in her "Introduction" to the 1993 edition of *Machinal*,

Treadwell shows her protagonist confronting a phalanx of male characters with the power to determine her life. Again and again Helen complains of claustrophobia, a motif of entrapment that runs as a common thread. (viii)

Such a stifling feeling is caused by oppression from the invisible ideological system represented by her mother and her mechanical typing job that constantly forces Helen into conventional womanhood. As Mary Ellen Snodgrass observes in *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* (2005), “claustrophobic elements reflect the circumscribed world of women...Protagonists tend to be trapped by patriarchy and forced into social roles that give no outlet for unfettered friendships, curiosity, adventure, or artistic expression”(59). Furthermore, as Lynda Hart argues, women dramatists use the theatrical space as a metaphor “to disclose and critique women’s confinement while suggesting liberating strategies from the patriarchal order” (8-9). Helen’s claustrophobia, in this view, is the metaphor that concretizes her psychological, social, and gender constraints.

Helen is trapped by her inferior position as a female in the 1920s: a woman is under great pressure to wed, to meet the social expectations of being a dutiful daughter, a caring wife, and a loving mother. Helen feels trapped in her circumstances. She agrees to a loveless marriage for financial security. She is forced to work and earn money since she has a widowed mother to support: “I can’t [lose my job]...Rent-bills-installments-miscellaneous” (Treadwell 5). As she confesses to her mother, “sometimes I feel like I’m stifling!-You don’t know-stifling” (Treadwell 19). In this sense, her physical suffering from restricted space reflects her psychological and

spiritual confinement. She yearns for freedom and space and refuses to be among people: “All those bodies pressing...Like I’m dying” (Treadwell 6). Helen hates to be connected with other people as she is suffocated by the social pressure to comply. Seeing other people as social regulating forces, Helen’s refusal to connect with other women reveals her desire to be herself as well as her rejection of patriarchal influences.

Treadwell treats Helen’s claustrophobia as a woman’s strong reaction against the dark side of ethical goodness. As Annette J. Saddik observes in *Contemporary American Drama*, American dramatists at the beginning of the twentieth century “sought to invert the conventional moral code of good and evil, and, therefore, what was deemed ‘good’ in traditional society (culture, repression, self-control, obedience to the law) became universally evil, and what was considered ‘evil’ (nature, sexuality, violence, power) was encouraged as good” (27). In this sense, Helen’s retreat from the general public shows her fear of communal pressure and her wish to escape from or transcend the morality of the dominant community.

Treadwell also treats Helen’s marginalization in society, to some degree, as the result of the society’s mechanization. The intellectual and religious climate of early twentieth-century America was characterized by the love of Reason, Science, Industrialism, Utilitarianism, Positivism, Enlightenment, Socialism and Nihilism. Writers at that time often took such thoughts as lenses to look at social issues dealt with

in their dramatic works. In Helen's case, together with her colleagues, she is alienated as a consequence of industrialization. Workers, either men or women, are often regarded as soulless working "unit" in society. As Wendy Lee-Lampshire writes, "The alienation described here is the result of the expropriation of praxis activity leaving the proletarian propertyless (and, therefore, selfless)" (193). As revealed in Episode One, the Adding clerk, the Filing clerk, the Stenographer, and the Telephone Girl are repeating their work routines mechanically. Helen's workmates can only communicate with her shortly between calls. The Telephone Girl answers the phone and chats with Helen during the break of her work (Treadwell 7). In such a mechanized work environment, people are alienated and disoriented. They feel estranged as a result. This explains why Helen does not have any friends for she has no time for friendship. Alienated from the general public, Helen has to seek solace domestically from her mother, her only available companion. From the beginning of the play, the mother and daughter are presented as mutually dependent on each other. Helen's father has long passed away. Besides, only Helen's colleagues the Telephone Girl and a Nurse in the hospital appear on stage.

Through the Telephone Girl, Treadwell also reveals women's general view on marriage and personal development in the 1920s. As Treadwell indicates, "the TELEPHONE GIRL, young, cheap, and amorous" (1), is different from her mother's

generation. In the 1920s, young women began to embrace their sexuality. These women, known as flappers, began to change their ways of thinking and began to seek personal fulfillment. The Telephone Girl is presented as a typical flapper, who takes sexual fulfillment as the expression of her personhood. As Sylvia D. Hoffert states in *A History of Gender in America*, “In the 1920s the flapper rejected many traditional, middle-class definitions of womanhood...She rejected the Victorian idea that women were morally superior to men...asserted her right to express herself sexually” (361-362). When the workmates discuss enviously Helen’s lateness for work, the Telephone Girl believes that Helen is “Out with her sweetie last night, huh?” (Treadwell 3). When she is informed of the boss’s marriage proposal to Helen, she reacts in a defensive way by saying, “I’d hate to get into bed with him” (Treadwell 7). Such remarks reveal her openness in expressing her views and making reference to her sexuality. The Young Woman’s open discussions and open attitude towards sex such as single motherhood and abortion can also be found in the her repeated requests for a conversation with her mother in the first scene. In the play, it is clear that Helen initially refuses to identify herself with the flappers who take sexual liberation as an expression of their freedom. They are eager to be “masters” of their own body and refuse to succumb. This radical form of self-assertion is met with Helen’s disapproval. She distances herself from the rebellious flappers on the one hand and from other

conventional women such as the Nurse and her mother who blindly perform their feminine roles and expect Helen to follow suit on the other. At this stage, Helen observes “conventional” moral judgment in dealing with her personal issues (to borrow Carol Gilligan’s term). That is to say, she values her care for and connection to others prior to her own interest.

The Relational Self in Dilemma: Care for Others versus Care for One’s Self

In *'night, Mother*, Jessie is also a relational subject characterized by love and care. As Sir Thomas Elyot puts it, “the good nature of a woman is to be mild, timorous, tractable, benign, of sure remembrance, and shamefast” (93). Aiming for the fulfillment of such a moral ideal, Jessie demonstrates her performative role as a caretaker. After her divorce, Jessie moves back to live with her widowed mother Thelma, partaking of all the family chores. Isolated from the general public, Jessie’s life is void of meaning except her daily domestic rituals. On the night of her planned suicide, she looks into every possible detail of her mother’s life. She meticulously puts the house in order: she re-arranges the refrigerator, re-fills the candy bottle, cancels the newspaper, and teaches the mother how to order groceries (Norman 27). Jessie even attends to details such as which suit Thelma should wear to her own funeral, or how to behave during a funeral ceremony. In this respect, Jessie performs as a dutiful daughter. Besides, Jessie also tries to benefit her son Ricky by leaving him her watch. When her mother Thelma

warns that he will just sell it, Jessie rationalizes his choice on the ground of his showing some initiatives. He can get a good meal, or do something on his own:

MAMA: He'll sell it!

JESSIE: That's the idea. I appreciate him not stealing it already. I'd like to buy him a good meal.

MAMA: He'll buy dope with it!

JESSIE: Well, then, I hope he gets some good dope with it. (Norman 85)

Through such action of care taking, to borrow Neil Noddings' term, Jessie is a considerate daughter and a loving mother, performing all the familial and cultural rituals that her social and gender roles required of her. And yet, her performative conformity cannot hide her yearning for a carefree life. As revealed in her exchange with her mother quoted above, Jessie wants to give her son the freedom of choice, the chance of enjoying something good in life, something that he really wants, be it food or dope.

Similar to Treadwell's presentation of Helen's situation, Norman characterizes Jessie as an introvert and an epileptic woman who suffers from mental and physical paralysis from time to time. To be exact, Jessie suffers from epilepsy, the physical abnormality which singles her out from others. Her "illness" or physical condition is "still something intransigently familiar in the conflation of neurological process, visible loss of bodily control and the potential for mythic violence, as well as social and sexual excess" (Stirling 33). The metaphors associated with such illness stress on a person's

helplessness and inability to control the mind and body. Susan Sontag argues that illness is often discussed with social discriminations in *Illness as Metaphor* (1979) and cites cancer and AIDS as examples that are caused by the patient's misbehavior (47). In Jessie's case, epilepsy not only brings her humiliation, embarrassment, and shame, but also reinforces the mother-daughter bonding, since her epilepsy may allow her mother's control of her mind and body, thus making her dependent on her mother.

Because of her epilepsy and her socio-psychological deficiency (refusal to socialize with other people), Jessie is alienated from society and is regarded as a misfit. One should note that her father abandoned her at birth not because of her physical condition but because of her sex. As her mother Thelma reveals, "He said you were a runt and he said it from the day you were born and he said you didn't have a chance" (Norman 48). Besides her father's rejection, Jessie is also treated with disdain by her brother Dawson, who is patronizing and bossy. And Jessie feels offended by his invasion into her privacy and by his rudeness:

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 19)

Dawson has even opened Jessie's postal package of bras without asking her for permission (Norman 19). What is more, her failure to develop a good relationship with her husband and son also brings social prejudices against Jessie, and further causes her

withdrawal from society. Jessie's husband Cecil leaves her for another woman, one of Agnes' girls (Norman 78). Jessie's son Ricky is a juvenile delinquent, who steals, takes drugs, and may conceivably commit murder. And he walks out of Jessie's life (Norman 11). As a result of the failure in her connection with men, Jessie is what Butler calls a "illegitimate" character, since a person "only becomes intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (*Gender Trouble* 22). In other words, Jessie is "abandoned" by her defining community because of her failure to meet communal moral expectations.

Like an outcast, Jessie cannot relate to other ordinary women. As an epileptic introvert, Jessie cannot work as a telephone sales or at the hospital gift shop because she feels uncomfortable with facing and communicating with other people (Norman 35). Jessie believes that she is useless: "You know I couldn't work...I can't do anything" (Norman 22). With the internalization of the dominant communal values, Jessie undervalues her domestic work. She regards her time and energy-consuming family chores, such as house cleaning, ordering groceries, or arranging her father's book shelves, as insignificant. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James assert in "Women and the Subversion of the Community," the exploitation of the working-class woman in America should be considered both in domestic and public setting:

It is not to imply that only working-class women are exploited. Rather it is to confirm that the role of the working-class housewife, which we believe

has been indispensable to capitalist production, is the determinant for the position of all other women. Every analysis of women as a caste, then, must proceed from the analysis of the position of hard-working housewives. (40)

Jessie's unnamable pain or loss has much to do with her marginalization either in the social community or familial community, or the dominant moral/ethical community in the feminist sense. That is to say, Jessie does not get any help from women's organization or institution. Jessie has to live an isolated life with her mother. When Jessie returns home because of her marital problems, she reduces herself to a childlike state because of her mother's overprotection. Thelma comments on Jessie's reclusive character: "you don't like going out and you don't like staying in and you never talk on the phone and you don't watch TV" (Norman 34). It is clear that Jessie's isolation is partly self-inflicted. The society and family place Jessie in the secondary place, thus forcing her to retreat from social activities and to choose a life of emotional and social seclusion. Jessie dislikes other women such as her sister-in-law Loretta and their neighbor Agnes because Loretta "thinks she's better than we are. She's not" (Norman 22). Thelma's friend Agnes also holds a superior attitude towards Jessie and she does not visit them because of her fear of Jessie. As Thelma remarks, Agnes thinks Jessie's "hands are cold" (Norman 43), which indicates Jessie's refusal to be social and indifference to people. Jessie's failure to build good relationships with other women in any community shows her choice to remain aloof to others, and treat with contempt

women who perpetuate patriarchal or communal values. The dislike is mutual: many women naturalize their gendered selves and regard challengers, such as Jessie, as abnormal.

Tension between the Domineering Mothers and the Marginalized Daughters

Though family members live together, there is no mutual support or communication between them. As evidenced in the selected plays, mothers are domineering, while daughters are dominated and marginalized at home or at work. Though their mothers are the only available companion to the daughters, they do not facilitate the daughters' incessant quest for personal fulfillment. On the contrary, they act as patriarchal coercive agencies to the young self-seeking women. To examine these daughters' psychological and moral pathos in seeking their personhood, it is inevitable to explore the mother-daughter relationship in the context of the dominant community of women. As Marianne Hirsch states, it is necessary to take note of the mothers when one examines the daughters' struggle for autonomy and recognition:

To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the relationship between two separate differential individuals, but to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their own boundaries. It is to find continuity and relationship where one expects to find difference and autonomy. *(Discourse 73)*

Treadwell and Norman present the dominant community of women as dialectical to

women's cultivation of individuality since the mothers are not only represented as mediators and upholders of patriarchal ideology but also as victims of such an institution. While they blindly observe existing gender norms and expect their daughters to follow suit, the daughters come to feel the confining and restrictive nature of gendering. Although they cherish their relationship with their mothers, they find it hard to give up their quest for selfhood and to conform and perform the gender roles expected by their mothers.

Treadwell portrays Helen's mother as a supporter of patriarchal ideology. She forces her daughter to yield to prevailing gender norms. In *Machinal*, the old and young generation of women argue against mercenary marriage and women's rights of reproduction. For example, the Mother approaches her daughter because of Helen's hesitation toward her former boss's proposal of marriage:

I'll tell you what you can count on! You can count that you've got to eat and sleep and get up and put clothes on your back and take 'em off again—that you got to get old—and that you got to die. That's what you can count on! All the rest is in your head! (Treadwell 17)

According to the Mother, survival is more important than one's quest for individuality. Her mother's pragmatism and assertive view force Helen to surrender out of her love and financial pressure. At the time, Helen finds no reason to defy her mother's practical advice which seems to be based on good will and sound judgement. As a result, Helen agrees to marry for financial security and represses her desire for autonomy. This

arranged marriage, however, leaves Helen in a void. Such inner or intra-personal conflict prompts her to seek freedom more desperately:

The confusion of her own inner thoughts, emotions, desires, and dreams that cut her off from any actual adjustment to the routine of work. She gets through this routine with a very small surface of her consciousness. She is not homely and she is not pretty. She is preoccupied with herself—with her person. (1)

Helen finds it difficult to accommodate the familial demands on her when her self remain unrecognized (Treadwell 21). And she eventually comes to see how her love for her mother together with her agreement to the proposed marriage, has left her feeling suffocated and unfulfilled. She comes to see that her mother has taken her as her possession, “you’re the flesh of my flesh” (Treadwell 20). She is never regarded by her Mother as an independent individual. She realizes that if she were to develop her selfhood she has to break from her mother’s emotional and moral influences.

In a comparable way, Norman also treats the dominant community of women as confining to those women, who seek for selfhood in her play. As elucidated in the play, women have developed bonds to endure the drudgery of life. But such social and moral connection is stifling to the enlightened subjects, who see domestic harmony as communal coercion and the reinforcement of patriarchal ideology. For example, Jessie resents Thelma’s maternal love because it is not enough to support her in her quest for self-realization. Jessie complains that maternal love suffocates her. As Suzanna Danuta

Walters observes, such dialectical relationship between mother and daughter can be framed

within the dichotomous boundaries of “bonding” and “separation” and thus actively constructing a relationship to be inherently conflictual, forcing women apart, and rendering this prophesy self-fulfilling. (16)

In Jessie’s case, the boundary between love and hate can be blurred. She knows that it is her dependence and love for her mother that demand her self-denial, thus causing her frustration and despair. As Sally Browder states,

The daughter resists her mother’s attempts to control her life, yet at the same time resents the mother for what the mother has not been able to provide for her. The mother, on the other hand, simultaneously pushes her daughter away, in an effort to teach her not to expect nurturance but to give it and yet strives to protect and cling to her daughter, to claim her as an extension or possession. (111-112)

Thelma tries her best to protect Jessie by concealing Jessie’s physical condition, finding her a husband, and taking her in after Jessie’s divorce. But Thelma’s act is seen as her domination over Jessie. And the mother, as the spokeswoman of the dominant community that defines and sets boundaries for its members, fails to understand the daughter’s fervent wishes for a newer self. As Thelma complains, “How can I get up everyday knowing you had to kill yourself to make it stop hurting and I was here all the time and I never even saw it” (Norman 73). Thelma only comes to realize her fault when Jessie pulls the trigger of the gun, “Forgive me. I thought you were mine” (Norman 89). Even with the knowledge of Jessie’s imminent suicide, Thelma cannot

acknowledge the fact that Jessie is an independent entity: “Everything you have to do has to do with me, Jessie. You can’t do anything... without doing it to me” (Norman 72). Thelma’s inability to recognize Jessie’s selfhood shows the nature of this dominant community. In Jessie’s case, the dominant community confines her to endorse stereotypical gender roles and all the corresponding moral responsibility, preventing her from living a free and independent life.

Jessie’s unresolved conflict has much to do with her love of freedom and autonomy on the one hand and her awareness of existing gender norms on the other. She suffers because she fails to free herself, or separate herself from her care-based social and familial duties. This explains why she has to commit suicide for she sees that as the only way to free herself from the binding/bonding relationship that prevents her from living an independent life. Situating Jessie in such a community, Norman shows the psychological complexity of Jessie who is presented as a self-in-relation but struggles to escape and go beyond her defining community.

The problems in the dominant community for self-questioning women are accentuated by the mother and daughter’s different views and attitudes toward love and marriage. For the traditional older women in the two selected plays, marriage is merely an obligation, an expected “performative act” on women’s part. Love or personal feeling is secondary or irrelevant. For the daughters, however, they cannot take

marriage as their sheer duty. For instance, both daughters ask their mothers questions about whether they love their fathers or not:

YOUNG WOMAN. but Ma –didn't you love Pa?

MOTHER. I suppose I did- I don't know- I've forgotten- what difference does it make-now?

YOUNG WOMAN. But then!-oh Ma, tell me!

MOTHER. Tell you what?

YOUNG WOMAN. About all that-love! (Treadwell 17)

Helen tries to figure out her mother's understanding about love and marriage, while her mother dodges the topic. Jessie also puts forward such a question to her mother:

JESSIE (As MAMA takes her first sip) Did you love Daddy?

MAMA: NO.

JESSIE (Pleased that MAMA understands the rules better now): I didn't think so. (Norman 44-45)

Both mothers refute the validity of love in marriage for they internalize patriarchal values and uphold their performative roles. Helen's mother thinks that whether she loves the man or not does not matter (Treadwell 17), and Jessie's mother Thelma admits that love is not important (Norman 50). This shows that mothers do not believe that marriage may bring happiness or fulfillment. They are only concerned about necessity and stability. Yet the daughters yearn for something more in such a relationship. Helen dreams of finding a lover with curls (Treadwell 30), while Jessie claims that she loves Cecil (Norman 17). As bell hooks argues,

Within patriarchy heterosexist bonds were formed on the basis that women being the gender in touch with caring emotions would give men love, and

in return men, being in touch with power and aggression, would provide and protect. Yet in many cases in heterosexual families men did not respond to care: instead they were tyrants who used their unjustly coerce and control. *(Feminism is for Everybody 101)*

It is clear from the two plays that mothers are victims of patriarchal institution of marriage, in which they have lost themselves, whereas daughters seek self-fulfillment in marriage and their marriages end in failure when fulfilment is absent. The daughters' vision of love and marriage demonstrates their rising needs for self-fulfillment, their heightened sense of self and their own existence in their relationship with men. They yearn for romantic love and for a soul mate in marriage rather than mere stability and security in the marital relationship. They refuse to follow the steps of their mothers as the latter carry out their performative roles and negate themselves in marriage.

With such different views about life and love, the dominant community of women is regarded as a reactionary force hindering its communal members' self-cultivation. As Blevin Shelnuttt observes, “*’night, Mother* depicts a female community’s reaction to patriarchal oppression” (1). Thelma passively accepts a trajectory established for her instead of actively pursuing her interest or rejecting any obstacle that would prevent such a pursuit. She endures her loveless marriage and life drudgery, not hoping for a change. And Thelma takes her gendering and passivity as a fact of life:

I never said I knew much. How was I supposed to learn anything living out

here? I didn't know enough to do half the things I did in my life. Things happen. You do what you can about them and you see what happens next.

(Norman 58)

Different from Thelma's unquestioned acceptance, Jessie wants to have control over her own life. She refuses to follow her mother's steps. Lynda Hart describes such a difference between mother and daughter as the conflict when "one woman who has passively integrated into a delimiting and oppressive society is pitted against another who wildly rebels, even at the risk of self-destruction, against the rigid system" (68). Thelma and Jessie thus stand for different attitudes towards patriarchal regulatory ideology that shapes women's performativity.

What complicates the matter is that, in the name of love and moral responsibility, the strong psychological bond and blood-tied relationship prevent the daughters from separating themselves from the dominant community. In order to maintain the connection with the community, the daughters have to fit themselves into the images their mothers have prepared for them. According to Betty Friedan, the root of modern American women's psychological suffering is the adjustment to "an image that does not permit them to become what they now can be" (311):

If women's needs for identity, for self-esteem, for achievement, and finally for expression of her unique human individuality are not recognized by herself or others in our culture, she is forced to seek identity and self-esteem in the only channels open to her: the pursuit of sexual fulfillment, motherhood, and the possession of material things. (315)

In Helen and Jessie's cases, they are tormented by their inner wish for freedom and forced moral consciousness of adherence to gender and social norms. To some degree, the daughters only see their mothers' "active participation" in the patriarchal cultural conspiracy without noticing their mothers' suffering as women. Treadwell and Norman emphasize their protagonists' conscious quests for their selves, and their determination to leave behind their traditional roles. The daughters suffer a lot from trying to fit themselves into the roles their mothers expect of them. They suffer because they find it hard to resist their mothers' demands made in the name of love. For the mothers, they have taken compliance and submission as the moral ideals for "normal" women in their community. To depart or break away from their dominant community is thus regarded as immoral and irresponsible.

The Precarious Self in the Dominant Community

Treadwell and Norman deal with their young protagonists' search for self as an effect produced by their negotiation between different sources of influences, such as communal regulation, maternal love and their own inner drives for freedom and autonomy. Helen usually observes dominant gender norms, but she refuses to do so after marriage, revealing her determination to explore her personhood: "She is preoccupied with herself—with her person" (Treadwell 1). Her forced marriage has prompted her to take a closer look at herself in relation to others. She has been obedient

and has tolerated the sexual advance of legalized “rape” with shock and reluctance. As Laura Mulvey explains, Helen is objectified in the scene of *The Honeymoon* in *Machinal*, deconstructing the whole discourse of the gazer and the gazed:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (11)

Helen’s husband George repeatedly requests that she should turn around to let him examine her. In this way, Helen is shocked by the fact that she is not the master of her own body. She is expected to present herself to her husband as an object. This bodily submissiveness and passiveness also shows Helen’s vulnerability in the face of patriarchal dominance. On her honeymoon night, Helen cries out for help, “Somebody-somebody-” (Treadwell 20). This cry for help can be interpreted as a woman’s desperate cry for “the possibility of a rescue, a revolution against a tradition that requires a woman to submit to a kind of ‘legalized rape’” (Bywaters 103). Treadwell invites her audience to re-examine marriage and motherhood in a way that may generate so much sadness and strength that they could eventually lead a woman to murder the oppressor.

Furthermore, Helen’s refusal to breast feed her baby daughter indicates her refusal of motherhood, which is often regarded as a woman’s natural “function” in the

community. This is the turning point in Helen's life, showing her emerging sense of her self, her determination to assert her own subjectivity and to react against the habitual forces of gender performativity. As Helen states in a long monologue, she wants her independence and freedom. She can no longer tolerate all kinds of demands on her:

Let me alone-let me alone-let me alone-I've submitted to enough- I won't submit to any more-crawl off-crawl off in the dark-Vixen crawled under the bed-way back in the corner under the bed-they were all drowned-puppies don't go to heaven-heaven-golden stairs-long stairs-long-too long-long golden stairs-climb those golden stairs-stairs-stairs-climb-tired-too tired-dead-no matter-nothing matters-dead-stairs-long stairs-all the dead going up-going up-to be in heaven-heaven-golden stairs-all the children coming down-coming down to be born-dead going up-children coming down-going up-coming down (Treadwell 31)

Through Helen's newly gained voice through which she tries to express her engaging sense of self, Treadwell expresses her stance that the dominant community of women defined by patriarchal norms does not offer space for self expansion and development. And through Helen's reluctance in accepting the arranged marriage, intolerance of the legalized rape within marriage, and her firm refusal to motherhood, Treadwell shows her concern about American women's predicament and frustrations in a community hostile to personal growth and women's assertion of self.

Transgression through Asserting the Right of Choice

Similarly, Norman dramatizes Jessie's transformation outside the dominant community, highlighting Jessie's assertion of her self. Jessie has always tried to gain

control of her own life. The failure in her relationship with the men in her family, to some extent, reveals Jessie's refusal to conform to her gender roles. Jessie refuses to submit to her brother Dawson's authority and to trade the control of her life for the security of marriage with Cecil. She stands firm on matters concerning her son's education too. Jessie manipulates Dawson so that he orders ammunition for her (Norman 15). Through such an act, one sees Jessie as the stronger and active agent, who is in control of her situations. Besides, Jessie chooses smoking rather than marriage because she associates it "with power and self-determination... smoking offers Jessie a sense of predictability and control—over her destiny" (Morrow 29). As Jessie explains, "Smoking is the only thing I know that's always just what you think it's going to be" (Norman 56). In this sense, Jessie shows her desire to claim her own self instead of the mistress in a stable marriage. By divorcing her husband, Jessie says no to the life defined by conventional womanhood. This can also be read as Jessie's determination to end the marriage arranged by her mother. In Jessie's opinion, her son Ricky's delinquency is the result of clashes between two different value systems: "Ricky is the two of us [Jessie and Cecil] together for all the time in too small a space... we're tearing each other apart, like always, inside that boy"(Norman 60). As Labrina Gerhardt argues, "Jessie may be accurate in believing that Ricky's actions result from a generic combination of her own maladies and Cecil's pattern of

abandonment and willful neglect” (43). In short, Jessie violates the gender norms associated with traditional femininity and asserts her individualistic views in her relationship with men within her domestic setting.

With the aid of modern treatment in neurology, Jessie finally gains control over her physical condition: “It is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body, and tonight she is determined to hold on to that control” (Norman 1). As Thelma observes, Jessie has not had a seizure for a year (Norman 66) as the phenobarb’s working in progress. With her gained capability, Jessie decides to end her suffering. She has contemplated suicide for a long time “Off and on, ten years. On all the time, since Christmas” (Norman 29). She considers she is now empowered to take action, to be a free agent totally responsible for her own decision and action. She is no longer a victim of circumstances, a mere product of gender performativity, passively and helplessly struggling in life. As Linda Ginter Brown points out, “the final gunshot” signals the moment “Jessie assumes control over her life” (73).

Through her death, Jessie declares her independence from her mother, refusing the complete determination by the familial discourse and claiming the self of her own. Her determination is reflected in Jessie’s action. As Louis Geriff comments, through such a final and creative act of separation, “for once an action of Jessie’s will not reflect clumsiness and probably failure but, instead, freedom, grace, and even a touch of

mystery” (226). I agree with Sally Browder who believes that,

When Jessie chooses suicide, she not only defines the boundaries of her existence, she draws the boundaries between mother and daughter as well... her suicide arms her with a power, a sense of control over her life. (110).

Raynette Halvorsen Smith also observes that Jessie’s suicide is “the agent for transformation ... to freedom, autonomy, and individualism” (279). Through suicide, “Jessie rejects her passive, solitary existence; she renounces the identity constructed for her by society and reasserts autonomy” (Shelnett 3). Through this self-destructive act, Jessie succeeds ironically in constructing her own selfhood.

As noted earlier, Jessie’s act of suicide, of claiming autonomy, is also the realization of her true connection with her mother. For her, death gives her ultimate freedom and she thus chooses to exercise her free will in such a way. Through her suicide, Jessie gains control of her fate and her mother gains rebirth. Through her death, they are truly connected. Gayle Austin sees the suicidal act as the ultimate severing of such a bond:

The need for a daughter both to detach her love and yet to identify herself with the mother in order to acquire a “normal” gendered identity, and the need for a mother to support the child’s project of autonomy despite mixed feelings regarding separation, is the drama that Jessie and Mama symbolically enact in the play. (79)

Katherine Burkman comments that such an act “reveals a bond between mother and daughter and a mythical sense of their oneness” (255). Linda Brown argues that Jessie

“and Thelma connect in a way they never could before” (73). Jessie understands that it is only through their separation can her mother be freed from the guilt and responsibility of her death:

MAMA: ... you gave me this chance to make it better, convince you to stay alive, and I couldn't do it. How can I live with myself after this, Jessie?
Jessie: I only told you so I could explain it, so you wouldn't blame yourself, so you wouldn't feel bad. There wasn't anything you could say to change my mind I didn't want you to save me. I just wanted you to know.

(Norman 74)

One may say that Jessie achieves selfhood through death. And her separation or death ironically gives her back a new life of her own. At the end, when Thelma takes up the pan and washes it, it indicates that she has taken Jessie's instruction before her death. It shows the mutual understanding achieved between mother and daughter. In this aspect, Jessie's death brings about her mother's rebirth. Through such an act, Jessie emerges as an autonomous self:

Mama's slow acceptance of Jessie's decision to die is a movement toward acceptance of her own mortality. That this is a life-giving experience becomes clear as Thelma begins to accept the impending separation and hence the death of her dependency... Mother and daughter merge as they separate, the death of one giving life to the other. (Burkman 260)

Through her death, Jessie transcends her performative gendered self and achieves spiritual freedom and autonomy. Also, in her death she returns to a true connection with her mother that enables the latter to start her life afresh with no moral burden. In a sense, Jessie takes care of herself as her ultimate care for her mother,

If women can be counted on to care for others, how are we to deal with self-interest, selfishness and meanness of spirit which women surely display as much as do men? If we let the circle of historical revisionism come full circle, are we not back once again in the world of the angel in the house? And if we permit that, how are we to deal with the occasions when women's supposed ethic of relationship and care does not seem to have been an adequate moral imperative for all men or all women?

(Kerber 106)

Jessie chooses suicide to realize her desire to be her own master. It should be noted that it is the hopelessness of self-realization that has driven Jessie to such an extreme action.

As Jessie says,

I am what became of your childI found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me That's who I started out and this is who is left ... I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Mewho might have made a difference to me ...I'm not going to. (Norman 76)

Jessie suffers most from the fact that she could do nothing to change her life except to end it,

I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. (Norman 36)

Out of despair, Jessie chooses to end her life as a means to assert her self and to show her control over her own life. The utter despair of fashioning her own individuality forces Jessie to commit suicide. In this sense, her death indicates metaphorically Jessie's rebirth as an independent individual. Furthermore, the right and ability to choose make Jessie unique among famous female protagonists, such as Ibsen's Hedda

Gabler, who impulsively ends her life. Jessie's suicide is methodical, calculated, and she acts with deliberate foresight. Without any option, Gabler ends her life to preserve her dignity; while Jessie chooses to die (the emphasis is the right and ability to choose). Jessie describes effectively the conditions that have led her to this dreadful act, which demonstrates her consciousness of such a deliberate choice. Through Jessie's final separation from her defining community, Norman presents the assertion of one's right of choice as a manifestation of a woman's selfhood. On the one hand, Jessie's suicidal act finally frees her from dominant communal influences, thus allowing her to be fully responsible for her action and life. On the other hand, it allows Jessie to relate better to her mother not as a dependent but as a person with integrity.

Transformation of the Self through Transgression

Another form of asserting one's personhood in the dominant community is evidenced in Treadwell's Helen. While Jessie kills herself to escape the confining moral and social systems, Helen chooses to realize her autonomy and newly gained power through an extramarital affair and committing murder. She exercises her autonomy and liberates her self by entertaining herself at the bar where she meets her exotic Mexican lover (Treadwell 42). The first half of the play depicts her soul-searching journey while adhering to gender norms and performing according to her gender roles. Against her own will she has agreed to get married and have a child. But as the play develops, one

notices a transformation in the protagonist, who is first referred to as the Young Woman with no distinct identity. It is only when the play reaches Episode Six that she is revealed as Helen Jones with individual traits. It is also from the time that she starts to focus on her existence rather than her survival that she lives as a person. Near the end of Episode Five, Helen states, “I never knew anything like this way! I never knew I could feel this! So,—so purified” (Treadwell 51). Despite the Mexican Man’s assertion that he understands what she means by purification, one gets the idea that he has not a clue to its real meaning. The Mexican Man considers Helen’s use of the word “purified” as a mere reference to her feeling after their sexual encounter. But in essence, Helen refers not to something physical but to something more spiritual and ideal. It is something as beautiful as the sound of her voice:

MAN: You’re awful still, honey. What you thinking about?

WOMAN: About sea shells. (The sound of her voice is beautiful.)

MAN: Seashells? Gee! I can’t say it!

WOMAN: When I was little my grandmother used to have a big pink sea shell on the mantle behind the stove. When we’d go to visit her they’d let me hold it, and listen. That’s what I was thinking about now.

(Treadwell 45)

This is an association with the memory of her good old carefree days when she could be her self. Jill Dolan also notices the exotic elements, which alludes to a carefree state in Helen’s affair:

In particular, the romance of the adultery scene, in which the Young Woman is seduced by a handsome Young Man, who offers her escape

fantasies of the west coast and Mexico, devolved into sentimentality that made their situation appear unique rather than structural. (97)

For a moment she is outside the norm, she feels free and “purified” from the confining system. In a sense, Helen’s refreshed views about herself are comparable to Edna Pontellier’s awakening through her extramarital fantasy in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899). Edna realizes her self-awakening through her sexual adventure. Helen also realizes her spiritual freedom through moral transgression as she expresses her fervent desire to be with her secret lover: “we belong together. And we’re going to stick together” (Treadwell 47). She realizes that she is not a passive object of man’s desire, but an active quester for connection and sexual gratification. This brief sexual encounter transforms Helen by offering her an alternative view of sexual relationships based not on domination and submission but mutual attraction and dynamic interaction as well as spontaneous expression of one’s feeling and self before another person who is equally supportive and responsive. In this sense, Helen resembles the type of New Woman created by Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Kate Chopin in their fiction. She takes sexual liberation not only to free herself from stereotypical gender roles but also to free herself from the community’s moral ideal.

Furthermore, Helen learns from her lover that she has to fight for her freedom and also pay the price. When the Mexican lover boasts that he has “killed a couple of spig down in Mexico...to get free” (Treadwell 39), Helen comes to realize that one has

to pay a price for freedom. After such an experience, Helen feels even more frustrated and “stifli[ed]” (Treadwell 54) when she returns to her husband. With an awakened self, Helen pays considerable attention to news report, finding ways to get free (Treadwell 53). The news about “Prisoner escapes—lifer breaks jail—shoots way to freedom—” (Treadwell 55) and the echoes of voices, “Free—free—free—” (Treadwell 58) all externalize Helen’s psychological workings and inner desires for liberation.

Recalling her Mexican lover’s method of killing a person by “fill[ing] an empty bottle with small stones” (Treadwell 58) to hit the person’s head, Helen imitates her secret lover and resorts to murdering her husband to seek her freedom. Through such an act of violence, Treadwell shows that Helen’s despair and bursting desire for self liberation. She also brings out the inadequacy and dysfunction of the dominant community in Helen’s quest for happiness and self. Helen murders to end her suffering and to free herself from oppressive circumstances. She murders her husband in order to escape from the confining system: “I’ll not submit any more—I’ll not submit—I’ll not submit —” (Treadwell 31). Viewed in this light, though Helen dies, she is regarded as a woman empowered with the freedom of choice. She chooses to murder her husband instead of divorcing him because she would not “hurt him like that” (Treadwell 75). At that time, divorce was out of the question, for it meant disgrace for the husband and his family. The murdering shows Helen’s determination to put an end to the patriarchal

order and her refutation of patriarchal authority. This is her self expression, her “no” to patriarchal oppression and showing her determination in seeking selfhood.

By presenting such a radical act and a dramatic scene, Treadwell criticizes how the American society of her time could deprive a woman of fulfillment in life and happiness as well. At the same time, she shows the price a woman is prepared to pay for her choice of spiritual freedom because she is fully responsible for what she does.

As Jill Dolan observes,

The Young Woman’s death by electrocution for her husband’s murder is meant as the final imposition of ideological discipline, but Treadwell carries her resistance to the end. The Young Woman is a tragic heroine, can’t change the structures that defeat her but dies protesting them. (97)

At all costs, even if it means the price of her life, Helen chooses to be true to her feelings and being. This reveals that the suffering of a self-less life is unbearable. It is worse than death. In this sense, Helen just “does away with” (Treadwell 71) George Jones to gain a moment of freedom and free herself from moral and psychological constraints. Her affair with the Mexican Man is a form of self-assertion too. Through Helen’s interactive and dynamic sexual relationship with the Mexican lover, Treadwell accentuates Helen’s passion and desire to seek happiness and fulfillment in life by abandoning all moral consideration in the form of marriage.

It is clear from the two plays that the two female protagonists’ problematic construction of their selves is caused by their awareness of their performativity in their

defining dominant communities. Those victimized mothers should not bear the responsibility of their daughters' spiritual bankruptcy. Their fathers also play a part. Helen and Jessie yearn for the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by their fathers. As patriarchs of their families, the fathers stand for power, order, and the right. As Luce Irigaray puts it:

As long as there aren't harmonious relationship[s] between daughters and mothers, mothers and daughters— between women—the father is the one who will impose “order”—no matter how repressive—into this dark and passionate relationship. (21)

Though fathers are absent in *Machinal* and *'Night, Mother*, paternal influence still prevail. As Paul Rosefeldt observes, the deceased fathers create “a romantic vision of life that leads [the daughters] toward self-destruction” (63). Both daughters dream of fashioning their selves with their fathers as their role models. Jessie openly expresses her attachment to the old man: “I liked him better than you did” (Norman 46). Influenced by her father, Helen dreams of freedom, which, according to her husband George Jones, is men's privilege: “All men are born free and entitled to the pursuit of happiness” (Treadwell 55).

But Jessie's incessant desire to identify with her father shows the “phantasmal” male self that Jessie aspires to (Norman 47). As Miller Jean Baker observes, “Women are quite validly seeking something more complete than autonomy as it is defined for men, a fuller not a lesser ability to encompass relationships to others, simultaneously

with the fullest development of oneself”(95). In cultivating her personhood, Jessie yearns for autonomy and freedom enjoyed by her father. That is to say, she sees her father as a role model in her quest for selfhood. For instance, Jessie prefers to converse with her father, though the topic might be trivial things such as “black socks are warmer than blue socks” (Norman 47). Such triviality shows Jessie’s feminine sensitivity and gender traits without her knowing. It is clear that she regards her father as a hero whom she admires and imitates. The fact that Jessie chooses to use her father’s gun but not Cecil’s to end her life shows her final attempt to connect with her father. As Paul Rosefeldt observes, the gun is a symbol for “a struggle to claim the father and his power” (68). Jessie also cogently expresses her wish to rejoin her father in death, since she wishes to “hang a sign around her neck, ‘Gone fishin,’ like her daddy’s” (Norman 48). Furthermore, Jessie instructs her mother Thelma that her funeral service should be handled by the same “preacher who did Daddy’s” (Norman 80). Jessie’s death, therefore, can be seen as her allegiance with her deceased father and her claim of the sovereignty of her own life.

It is clear that Jessie’s relationship with her father has tremendously influenced her relationship with her mother. As Nancy Chodorow explains, a daughter’s identification with her father can smother her relationship with her mother:

a girl usually turns from the exclusive relationship with her mother to her father as an object of primary libidinal interest. When we look at the kinds

of explanations put forth for this turning, however, we find that they testify to the strength of a girl's ongoing relationship to her mother as much as to the importance of her relationship to her father.

(The Reproduction of Mothering 115)

Jessie's closeness with her father shows Jessie's choice. She refuses to live a self-sacrificial life as her mother's but yearns for a life like her father's. In the construction of her selfhood, Jessie's father stands for freedom and autonomy, while her mother stands for warmth and connection. As Chodorow further explains in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, "A girl's father is likely to become a symbol of freedom from this dependence and merging. A girl is likely to turn to him, regardless of his gender or sexual orientation, as the most available person who can help her get away from her mother" (121). Juxtaposing the father's free spirit against the mother Thelma's passive womanliness—a result of patriarchal ideologies and gender performativity, Norman highlights Jessie's inner struggle for self and choice. As Jenny Spencer argues, "Mama is the image that Jessie must reject in order to gain an active and autonomous position in the world, and the image she must incorporate to be 'normal'" (370). Such a desire is the cause of Jessie's moral and psychological predicaments for it leads her nowhere.

Owing to their habitual, performative conformity to gender norms, women only have a vague consciousness of their subjectivity. Helen and Jessie take the connectedness with their mothers as mere moral responsibility. They cannot abandon

their connection with their mothers to pursue their personal lives. The care-oriented daughters find it hard to draw a dividing line between their mothers and themselves. They fail to see themselves or their mothers as independent entities. Nevertheless, as Jessica Benjamin notes in *The Bonds of Love*, it is important for the daughter to see the mother as an independent subject but not merely an invisible tie to the child:

...to think about the mother as a subject in her own right, principally because of contemporary feminism, which made us aware of the disastrous results for women being reduced to the mere extension of a two-months old. Psychology in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, too often partake of this distorted view of the mother, which is so deeply embedded in the culture as a whole. No psychological theory has adequately articulated the mother's independent existence. (23)

Nancy Chodorow also notes in her work *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* that to examine the relationship between mother and daughter “from a feminist perspective, [one should notice] the particularity of the mother [according to] the mother her own selfhood” (87). But in the two plays under discussion, both mothers fail to acknowledge their daughters' individuality. For these two daughters, they only see their mothers' misunderstanding of their quest for selfhood, and cannot identify with their mother's gendering and suffering. In *Machinal*, Treadwell highlights the Mother's repeated iteration and reiteration of gendered ethical norms. In *'night, Mother*, Norman focuses on Thelma's psychological dependence and controls over Jessie her daughter. In a sense, Thelma “is prone to ignore or deny her daughter's victimization in order to maintain a

thinly constructed sense of self-worth and the pretense of a tolerable reality” (Jacobs 27). That is to say, mothers often refuse to accept their daughters’ independence for that may imply separation or emotional independence on the daughters’ past experience.

In this sense, it is Jessie’s and Helen’s own disposition, self-perceptions and views about their selves and the world that facilitate their self-fashioning. The dominant communities, on the other hand, allow the younger women to see the need for autonomy through a new and true connection between mother and daughter based not on domination and submission but on recognition. Treadwell and Norman delineate their protagonists’ transgression and transformation of their selves, addressing the difficulties in fostering women’s selfhood in a dominant community. Jessie’s closing the door signifies her declaration of her independence. In Helen’s case, before she is executed, she reaches out to her own Mother, saying: “Let her live, Mother. Let her live! Live! Tell her—” (Treadwell 40). In this scene, the little daughter symbolizes hope. Helen realizes that someone must tell her daughter about the pervasive ideological regulation of society that threatens to suffocate her being. She wishes to prepare her daughter for a different life that she yearns for but fails to achieve in life.

Focusing on the women characters’ inner turmoils within the dominant community of women, Treadwell and Norman intentionally minimize their reference to historical or social circumstances to emphasize the universal relevance of their plays.

As Treadwell deliberates in the “Introduction” to the play, that it is a “story of a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman” (xi). That explains why the women characters at the beginning do not possess any identity or individuality but are presented in generic terms—The Young Woman, the Mother, the Telephone Girl. John Lewis Styan states that by using such a literary device, “Characters lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like ‘The man’, ‘The Father’, etc.” (3) *Machinal* is suggestive and illuminating in the sense that Helen may be any ordinary woman. In this way, Treadwell’s play achieves universality in its treatment of women’s predicaments. As Paul Taylor writes, “[Young Woman] is supposed to be a representative example of the way women are constricted and crushed by a system evolved to suit men (19)”. Treadwell experiments in theatrical expressionism and shows transgression. American expressionism is distinguished for its focus on the inner life of the central character. Treadwell uses such a dramatic technique to address the psychological frustration of a young woman. Elaine Aston, in the essay “Finding a Tradition: Feminism and Theatre History,” shows how “theatrical conventions ... can be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production” (26). By tracing an ordinary and normal woman’s life journey from forced marriage, forced motherhood, and domestic labour, Treadwell accentuates women’s turmoil in performing her

stereotypical patriarchal roles characterized by subjugation and subordination.

Norman also makes the setting and characterization as ordinary as possible, indicating that Jessie's tragedy might occur to any woman. Norman in the Introduction has made special references to the characters:

Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgment about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Mama. It should simply indicate that they are very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country. Heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Mama, are also wrong. (4)

In this case, Norman emphasizes that Jessie and Thelma could be any mother and daughter. They are of no particularity but just ordinary people. The setting in *'night, Mother* is also unlocalised, with both realist details and surrealistic implications. Norman mentions particularly that the play should not hint at any specific region through the accent or stage properties. This is the method to nationalize or Americanize situation and experience. Norman explains, "What I want to present is the theatrical equivalent of once upon a time ... which lifts you up off the stage and sends you back into yourself for the reference points" (*Interview* 337). In her view, the generalization of this play shows verisimilitude, which may be easily understood by the audience. As Don B. Wilmoth and Christopher Bigsby observe, in *'night, Mother*, "Norman staged one of the first American plays to raise important philosophical and ethical questions about women and their relationships in a provocative and compelling manner" (378). In

the 70s when *'night, mother* was written and produced, many women dramatists advocated feminism and sought strategically to break down artistic protocols, claiming the right to self-representation and attempting to expose the omissions and absences perpetrated within and by the dominant, male-authored dramatic tradition. Matthew C. Roudane argues that individual issues actually can be interpreted as a metaphorical threat from a large discourse/institution (12). In this sense, Jessie's personal tragedy captures a generation of American women's psychological suffering and loss.

It is apparent from the plays that Treadwell and Norman present women characters as victims of a larger, complex structure of authority and morality. That is to say, they are victimized by their own conceptions of womanhood, which in essence is the effect produced by their internalization of patriarchal systems. Such systems of beliefs, norms, and standards of the patriarchal society are perceived to dictate the attributes of women. They are presented as docile and are regarded as expectations of or imposition by their mothers. They are the sources of entrapment. By acknowledging their gendered identity as women, the women protagonists are first forced to submit to the authority, which demands them to adhere to their performative roles. Only by breaking away from their performative role selves can these women characters assume their autonomous beings. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, in a male-defined culture, "humanity is male and man defines woman, not in her-self, but as relative to him; she is

not regarded as an autonomous being” (13). Women can only develop their selves by transcending confinements and breaking from the gender norms they have internalized.

Treadwell and Norman use the absent fathers and conventional mothers to represent the conflicting sources of values and attitudes in their women characters’ fashioning of their female selves. Treadwell and Norman also question the validity of the support from dominant communities, which subvert women’s cultivation of their selfhood. Female protagonists suffer from stressful communal inter-relationships, making it almost impossible for them to separate themselves from the moral and psychological constraints imposed by their communities. As Sally Browder observes in her criticism of *’night, Mother*, “the significance of the mother-daughter relationship lies in the daughter’s sense of powerlessness which is unique to women” (110). Through Helen’s act of violence, Treadwell brings out her protagonist’s inner dilemma between seeking self-fulfillment and self-sacrifices for communal recognition. Through Jessie’s suicide, Norman brings out her inability in fostering her self within the domestic setting. The defining community, which is supposed to be supportive to women’s fashioning of self, turn out to be destructive forces in these two plays.

Acknowledging individual difference and mutual caring, Treadwell and Norman believe that women can re-shape their selves on the condition that they challenge their gendered selves. To deliver such a message, Treadwell and Norman have employed

typical feminine discourse in women's communication, in which women struggle for power, effective communication, and true connection. As Jenny Spencer summarizes on *'night, Mother*:

The interactions of a mother-daughter pair who talk about themselves, their family, their relationships, their domestic life, and their past; and who reveal through their conversation the unworked-through grief that the talking itself is intended to alleviate.

(“Marsha Norman’s *She-tragedies*” 156)

Sharing personal predicaments could enhance mutual understanding if women unshackle the gendered language pattern.

Problematic Inter-personal Relationship Evidenced in Feminine Discourse

In capturing Helen and Jessie's alienation and marginalization from the community, both Treadwell and Norman portray their women characters as incompetent or ineloquent subjects who fail in effective communication. The two daughters are deprived of a voice of their own. Catherine MacKinnon argues in *Feminism Unmodified* (1987) that women's styles of dialogues derive not from some innate nature but from the ways they have been cultivated in society and culture. When women are powerless, MacKinnon states that they “don't just speak differently. A lot, [they] don't speak”. For such women, speech is “not differently articulated, it is silenced” (39). Viewed in this light, Helen's incapability and Jessie' reluctance in conversing reveal their subordinate position in the dominant community and their seemingly helplessness in resisting communal discrimination.

Helen's ineloquence indicates her inability in challenging her mother's authority. She is constantly out of breath and speaks in segments, thus allowing others to interrupt her. The concluding monologue of Episode One is a prime example (Treadwell 11) showing her broken language and her fragmented life. Her speech is divided into short phrases:

Let me rest—now I can rest—the weight is gone—inside the weight is gone—
it's only outside—outside—all around—weight—I'm under it—Vixen crawled
under the bed—there were eight—I'll not submit any more—I'll not submit—
I'll not submit— (Treadwell 31)

The monologue is filled with fragmented sentences and repetitive words. Such a speech pattern shows the breakdown of her mental state and her inability in forming coherent utterances. As Ginger Strand argues in "Treadwell's Neologism: *Machinal*",

in portraying the lethal language which surround and stifle her heroine,
Treadwell diminishes their very capacity to do so. (163)

In this sense, Helen's stuttering reflects her shattered life on the one hand and her effort to find her own words and to express her thoughts on the other. Her attempt also shows her struggle to free herself from the restraints of patriarchal language and her efforts of escaping communal influences. In this sense, Helen's deviance from dominant linguistic rules shows indirectly her untarnished "voice" of expressing her thoughts.

In Jessie's case, she is presented as one who "doesn't feel much like talking" (Norman 2). She uses language in a crude and clumsy way, which is in sharp contrast to

her mother's eloquence and fluency. In trying to justify her intention to kill herself, she confesses, "I can't say it any better" (Norman 28) as if to underscore the inadequacy of language. Unlike Jessie's blunt and plain language, her mother Thelma is talkative, which also reveals the power imbalance in the mother-daughter relationship, with the mother as the domineering one. As David Radavich observes, "Mama enjoys creating narrative that at least in some instances bears marginal relation to the truth" (119), while Jessie negates language to show her refusal to communicate with her mother. For example, immediately after having disclosed her intent to commit suicide, Jessie claims to have finished talking, "I'm through talking, Mama. You're it. No more" (Norman 17). Jessie's refusal to talk or to express herself indicates her frustration and protest against the ideology-loaded language and social-cultural norms upheld by her mother. As Christopher Bigsby (1999) observes in *Contemporary American Playwrights*, "For somewhere beneath the apparent banalities of conversations which seem no more than ways of passing the time, of filling the silence, are emotional truths which bruise the language and expose hidden tensions and anxieties" (210). By emphasizing their women characters' ineloquence, Treadwell and Norman not only highlight the daughters' physical and social isolation from the general public but also their inability to challenge the ideology and morality of the dominant community.

In order to capture the conflict-ridden relationship between women in the

dominant community, Treadwell and Norman load the dialogues between them with typical feminine features. Mothers and daughters change the ways they address each other to show the changing relationship or changing power relations. In *Machinal*, Helen usually addresses her mother as “Ma” (Treadwell 14-15). In addressing her mother in an affectionate and casual way, Helen shows her love for and intimacy with her mother. Sometimes the Mother calls her daughter “my lady” (Norman 14) to indicate her ridicule of the daughter’s self-centeredness. Very often, women use affectionate vocatives to create coziness in dialogues with other women. Treadwell presents the intentionally alternative vocatives to bring out the mother’s dominance and the daughter’s struggle to break the influential authority in their dialogues. In this way, their internal power struggles are revealed.

Similarly, Norman shows the uneven power distribution between mother and daughter through the language used in their conversation. For instance, at the beginning, Jessie seems busy searching for some towels, plastic bags, and her father’s gun, while her mother has no idea at all of her daughter’s intent and enjoys the casual talk as usual. Thelma usually addresses Jessie as “Sugar” (Norman 5, 7, 10, 11), “Honey” (Norman 5), or “hon” (Norman 8, 9) that shows her supremacy, fondness and intimacy. When Jessie tells Thelma that she is going to kill herself (Norman 13), the mother gets formal and serious when she tries every means to dissuade Jessie from committing suicide.

The vocative Thelma uses is changed from Jessie to Jess. During the process of dissuading Jessie from committing suicide, Thelma stops using those affectionate vocatives like honey and sugar. When Jessie calls Thelma Mother, she is in a protesting mood. This vocative “Mother” indicates Jessie’s helplessness in expressing herself or making her mother understand her. Jessie uses “Mama” (Norman 32, 33,) when she wants to show the intimacy between them. At a deeper level, such kind of communication shows Jessie’s dialogical incorporation, negotiation, and transgression of the communal patriarchal regulation. Iris Marion Young argues that everyday communicative gestures such as public acknowledgement of one’s interlocutor should be understood as important parts of political communication. Greeting is the moment when the “speaker announces her presence as ready to listen and take responsibility for her relationship to her interlocutors” (58). In the mother-daughter communication, it is not conducted for togetherness or for sharing and articulating one’s experience with mutual recognition and responses. Rather, both women are merely asserting their position with no real communication taking place.

Furthermore, Treadwell and Norman highlight the mothers’ frequent repeated expressions and exaggerations in their dialogues, as the cause for their daughters’ sense of voidness. Both mothers take domineering roles in such dialogues. They conceal or distort information in their talks in order to play the leading roles. Treadwell presents

dialogues of irrelevancies in *Machinal*. For example, the Mother keeps coaxing Helen to eat potatoes, while the daughter keeps talking about the proposal of marriage (Treadwell 13). The daughter wishes to share her life with her mother, while Mother only cares about the daughter's physical need for food, neglecting her deeper needs and concern. It is clear that the daughter and the Mother are not communicating. When the daughter complains about Mother's nagging, the Mother defends, "Just because I try to care for you" (Treadwell 15). Such dialogues of irrelevancies reveal mother and daughter's struggle for power in speech and the difference in views and roles. Through such "dialogues" between mothers and daughters, the playwrights illustrate how mothers use domineering language to oppress their daughters, forcing the latter to subordinate positions in their intimate communal (familial) circles.

Besides, Norman stresses the differences between different communal members' approach to the same topic in their conversations to show their different moral positions and emotional states. Christopher Bigsby also notes Norman's uniqueness in presenting dialogue between women: "she find[s] in dialogue between women a way of opening up channels to emotional needs and anxieties ... a dialogue not restricted to the stage" (*Playwrights* 210). Thelma consciously or unconsciously manipulates the flow and topics of her conversation with Jessie since she regards herself as morally superior to Jessie. Throughout Jessie's entire life, Thelma has been in a position of power because

the mother has always held back the secret about Jessie's disease until the very end (Norman 42) when she calls Jessie a "Freak", and a light bulb (Norman 46). When Jessie decides to end her life, Thelma realizes that Jessie feels hurt when she refuses to tell the truth to Jessie (Norman 75). Thelma and Jessie never seem to reach a level of mutual understanding until Jessie's suicide. Darryll Grantley tries to sort out the pattern behind these misunderstandings in their communication:

It sometimes works comically the juxtaposition of the very ordinary with the extraordinary event being proposed its extremely effective in throwing the whole episode into a chilling relief, but it also betrays a sort of hopeless irremediability about the situation because of the limitation of the protagonists. This is tragedy of the ordinary at its best. (156)

It is only on the night of Jessie's death that Thelma abandons her sense of superiority and communicates with Jessie. Linda Ginter Brown also notices that in the end, both women "finally [communicate] in a powerful way never before possible. Some mothers live and die without ever communicating with their daughters at such a deeper level" (185). When Thelma stops manipulating and treats Jessie as an independent adult, they can really communicate with each other. They come to affirm their bonding and become aware of each other's suffering and personality.

In portraying the dialogues between mothers and daughters as observing or violating general rules of feminine mode of communication, Treadwell and Norman point out that only when women share with each other can they be connected. And with

real connectedness, the mothers could understand the daughters' yearning for personhood. This is the case of Helen in *Machinal*. Mother's agreement to prepare for her granddaughter's future shows the dominant community functions as a supportive community that facilitates seekers of self with reciprocity and understanding. If not, the dominant community defined by family ties may not facilitate women's self-formation at all. Thelma finally understands Jessie's reason for committing suicide. In this sense, communication leads to connection among women in the dominant community of women.

Furthermore, both dramatists emphasize the daughters' universal predicament in dealing with the psychological and moral influences from their defining communities of women. Treadwell treats the problematical interpersonal relationship as catastrophic communal influences on Helen's cultivation of her personhood. As Louise Heck-Rabi notes, "Treadwell [strives] to represent feminine vacillation and desperation in the search for selfhood in an altering and amorphous society" (217). Sally Browder also points out that *'night, Mother* is a play "about the problem and elusiveness of autonomy, one of the stages on which the drama of human development unfolds" (110), the internal tension of Jessie is focused.

Treadwell also states that the chaotic social changes of modern society should be accountable for the problematic interpersonal relationship. As Jill Dolan observes,

Daunted by urban industrialization, represented here by deafening machine noises, train whistles and welding and riveting sounds, the “Young Woman” as she is emblematically called, is the center of a web of social discourses that constrain her choices both as a worker and as a woman, and squelch the more romantic, spiritual impulses of her life. (96)

In this sense, to work as a secretary does not reduce woman’s suffering but enhances it.

As Joan Wallach Scott notices women’s predicament in a modern society, where “domestic and reproductive functions” dictate the life of women who are perceived often as “only partial or imperfect political actors” (74). Domestic entrapment is also addressed by Norman: “I’m always writing about confinement; about being trapped....My theme is how do I get out of here? Most writers get talent and a topic.

When we’re writing out of that central core of our being, about our deepest personal questions, we can be great” (*Interview* 339). In Norman’s own words, the reason why she presents the relationship between Thelma and Jessie in such a conflicting and paradoxical way is to show Jessie as a victim of a “larger, more complex structure of authority and judgment the restrictive system beliefs, norms, and standards of patriarchal society which is the source of entrapment” (Ameen 439). For Helen and Jessie, to separate from the defining community of women is the first step towards empowerment as independent and autonomous individuals. As Nancy Chodorow notes,

A girl cannot and does not completely reject her mother in favor of men, but continues her relationship of dependence upon and attachment to her. In addition, the strength and quality of her relationship to her father is completely dependent upon the strength and quality of her relationship to

her mother.

(*Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* 87)

Treadwell and Norman document in their plays under discussion the complicated configuration of women's female selves through transgression and subversion of the gender-biased communal norms. The dialectical and problematical inter-relationship in a dominant community is seen in both cases as confining and oppressive and exerts a negative impact on the daughters' individuation and struggle for autonomy. And in Helen and Jessie's cases, their journeys are painful, often marked by a strong feeling of powerlessness, entrapment, as well as a sense of alienation and despair.

Due to social expectations and their own moral-psychological burdens, the women characters are on the brink of mental breakdown. Treadwell and Norman present their women characters' quest for selfhood through their exercising their right of choice, which is also problematic. As Nivedita Menon in her essay "*Refusing Globalisation and the Authentic Nation: Feminist Politics in Current Conjuncture*" comments,

The contradiction between our belief in the need to assert and protect the autonomy and the individual citizen and our simultaneous belief in the operation of the hegemony of the dominant power-laden values makes the "freedom to choose" so problematic...what operates is not free will in the feminist/modernist sense, but at the same time, the situation is so complicated that it cannot simply be characterized by *a lack of free will* either. (219)

Helen's choice of sexual freedom and Jessie's personal subversion of the patriarchal

authority through homicide reflect their playwrights' response to the socio-historical change of their times. Treadwell challenges the sexual liberation put forward by the first wave of feminists in the States, while Norman purports the ideal "the Personal is Political" which gained popularity in the 1970s.

Through true connection or communication, either in the form of women character's rebirth or understanding established provide, offers a sense of hope at the end of the plays. As Noddik contends in *Contemporary American Drama*, "hope is to be found in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of role-playing and the freedom associated with the ability to construct the self, to remain a work-in-progress" (132). In presenting such hopeful endings, both female playwrights advocate women's challenge, transgression, and subversion of dominant gender performativity, especially in the moral-psychological sense as a pre-requisite in the shaping or refashioning of the self.

Chapter Two

The Configuration of the Self through Communal Cultural Bonding:

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

While Chapter One presents women's assertion of their personhood in the dominant, Anglo-Saxon, white community, this chapter will examine how women fare in disparate communities. Using Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1979) as examples, I explore how American women playwrights present race and regionalism as important factors in the construction of female subjectivity. Women can be autonomous beings characterized by their mutual support and reciprocal understanding of each other. As the stories are set in an African-American community or southern community, the two women playwrights examine issues such as self-sacrifice and family responsibility, parental love, abortion, racial segregation, marriage, and marital relationship. Hansberry and Henley bring out women's psychological predicaments in searching their selves and highlight their capabilities of self-reflexivity.

Noted for her concern for African-American's lives in the United States, Hansberry scrutinizes women's issues in relation to racial concerns. As Sharon Friedman contends,

One of the least recognized [aspects] of Hansberry's plays [is] the feminist concerns woven into her exploration of racial and economic oppression,

and the struggle against political and human alienation. (84)

Suzan-Lori Parks also takes notice of Hansberry's drama that articulates "the centre of black women's concerns from the continuity of the culture and survival of self and family" (200). Richard Duprey also argues that Hansberry transcends the boundaries of ethnicity to present all people's hopes, fears, and dreams in dealing with ethnic group materials (210). Gerald Weales believes that Hansberry intends to write "a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play" (196). That is to say, Hansberry examines African-American women's frustration, disillusionment, and vision in the socio-historical context of African-American's struggle for recognition and equality in the 1950s and 1960s. In her second and last play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), Hansberry highlights topical issues such as race, class, and gender. Through the characterization of Iris, the female protagonist, the tension between the non-conformist and her husband is presented. And Iris and Sidney's problematic marital relationship reflects not only personal conflicts, but also problems of ethnicity, homosexuality and gender inequality.

The socio-historical background of *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in the mid-1960s, when the American society was experiencing the Civil Rights Movement and antiwar protests. The political turbulence and social change in America during the 1960s have impacted the drama of the period with a number of playwrights challenging

contemporary social codes of behavior. Hansberry is one of them who explores African-American people's psychological journey of self-identification in *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was set in 1959, during the first years of the Civil Rights Movement.

Likewise, Henley presents the possibility of female self-development in a southern community, demonstrating how the bonding among sisters helps them to redefine their selves. With the presentation of her women characters as grotesque, who suffer from moral guilt, selflessness, and meaninglessness, Henley shows southern women's "tragic sense of life, a deep-rooted pessimism, a recognition of human capacity for evil, and the decrees of history and place" (Goodman 1). In *The Miss Firecracker Contest* (1984) Henley highlights the eccentricities of each woman character. She also explores the confinement caused by the family and community in *Impossible Marriage* (1998), in which a pair of sisters Pandora and Floral quarrels and fights over Pandora's marriage. In *Crimes of the Heart* (1978), the women characters commit various crimes in order to free themselves from communal bondage. But they fail to realize their selves in the process.

It is clear that Henley focuses on women's spiritual transformation and psychological development in her plays. As Robert J. Andreach rightly observes, Henley captures,

the separation from the surface reality of the exterior world and the culturally determined self as a journey into the inner reality of the isolated,

fragmented self... with love the one force reconciling the self both with itself and with others, thereby creating magical moments that render existence meaningful. (51)

In the play, women are first presented as performative selves who are just products of their society and culture. When these women succeed in reflecting critically on their modes of existence and subsequently begin an internal configuration of their selves, they come to assert their contingent subjectivity and begin to see their selves in the shaping. At the same time, the problematic interpersonal relationship among women in the community also undergoes drastic change.

African-American Women and Their Communal Bonding

In capturing women's quest for selfhood in a community, Hansberry treats the African-American cultural heritage of bonding as a determining supportive factor. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Lena is presented as a non-traditional African-American woman, who possesses dual values. She treasures the dominant white culture with its emphasis on individualism; and she also sees the need to preserve the African-American culture of bonding. As José Endoença Martins observes, "Mama's New Negro spiritual growth is processed through an interactive duality, allowing black and white culture to join together (34)". That is to say, Mama values the white culture of individualism in the form of American dream and the African-African culture of communal support. Youli Theodosiadou has explained this phenomenon in a succinct

way:

From slavery times the African-American community tried to adhere to African familial structures and to form new familial patterns so as to protect its members against oppression, hardship, and eventual annihilation...The solidarity which developed and was particularly strong among slave women created a system of female interdependence that was instrumental in sustaining them despite the dehumanizing institution of slavery. (195-196)

Mama Lena upholds the African-American philosophy of unity and cooperation and takes it as a way of preserving their cultural heritage and ethnical identity in times of racial segregation.

Besides the African-American communal tradition, Mama also regards individualism as the national characteristics of American people. She believes that one can and should improve one's living conditions through hard work. She thus pampers her daughter Beneatha and her daughter-in-law Ruth and supports the cultivation of their newer selves. As bell hooks argues in "homeplace," the domestic arena created by African-American women has been crucial to the development of African-American children and their formation of identity and dignity. hooks states,

Black women resisted [white oppression] by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (42)

As the matriarch of the Younger's family, Lena is not a conservative African-American

woman in the conventional sense. On the contrary, she inspires her children to rebel and respects the differences in her children. In her speech “Address to the American Academy of Psycho-Therapists,” Hansberry provides an account of this non-conforming, non-conventional woman:

the Black matriarch incarnate: The bulwark of the Negro family since slavery; the embodiment of the Negro will go to transcendence. It is she who, in the mind of the Black poet, scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create Black diplomats and university professors. It is she who, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, drives the young on into the fire hoses and one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery. (qtd. in Carter 52-53)

Lena “is neither a conservative nor a supporter of the racist system and its law. It is she who filled her children with pride in the race” (Carter 52). Such a support from Lena makes Beneatha and Ruth feel free to fashion their own selves. The Younger daughters are taught to be self-reliant. They are not dependent on their men for support. Instead, they play an active role in supporting the family within which they function as fully by their own. Lena is characterized as a role model, who devotes her life to labor and to the betterment of women in her community.

Even though African-Americans belong to the ethnic and cultural minority group, and are deemed by many to be socially disadvantaged, Lena is proud of her ethnic identity. Lena upholds racial equality, ethnic pride, and self-respect:

my husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hand was made to make

things, or to turn the earth with—not to drive nobody’s car for em—or—carry they slop jars. (103)

Lena condemns social racism that relegates African-American people to a subordinate role. Furthermore, she values human dignity: “In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could an how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too (74)”. With her yearning for respect and freedom, Lena endorses her daughters’ craving for individualism and subjectivity and serves as a source of energy, support, and hope to her children. Examples of Lena’s resourcefulness are numerous. Similar to nursing the dying plant in the ghetto apartment, Lena nourishes her children with her racial pride and support their quest for self and individuality. In a sense, the little plant Lena kept in the kitchen is a metaphor of her life force and tenacious survival instincts. Lena strives for prosperity through hardworking and endures all hardships and difficulties. She compares herself to this plant:

Like this little old plant that ain’t never had enough sunshine or nothing—and look at it ... Well, I always wanted me a garden like I used to see sometimes at the back of the house down home. This plant is close as I ever got to having one. (52-53)

Though life is difficult and miserable, Lena always manages to bear it with her strong belief in the future. As she points out to Ruth and Beneatha when she is fixing the plant, “It expresses ME!” (121). While her remarks could be Lena’s teasing about Beneatha’s “express me” in the early scene (48), it reveals clearly her persistence, resilience, and

perseverance. In her comments on Simone de Beauvoir, Hansberry states clearly that what a woman desires is freedom:

She is a subjective being like man and like man she must pursue her transcendence forever. This is the nature of the human race. The problem, then, is not that woman has strayed too far from “her place” but that she has not yet attained it; that her emergence into liberty is, thus far, incomplete, primitive even. She has gained the teasing expectation of self-fulfillment without the realization of it, because she is herself yet chained to an ailing social ideology which seeks always to deny her autonomy and more—to delude her into the belief that that which in fact imprisons her the more is somehow fulfillment. (139)

Presented as one belonging to the older generation of African-American women, Lena also yearns for freedom, of which she has been deprived. By seemingly conforming to the dominant patriarchal values and norms, Lena survives within the system. Her toughness at the same time allows Lena to give full support to her daughters in their cultivation of their personhood. For example, she entertains Beneatha’s dream of becoming a doctor: “...But first I’m going to be a doctor, and George, for one, still thinks that’s pretty funny. I couldn’t be bothered with that. I’m going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that (50)”. It is rare at that time for an African-American girl to have the dream of becoming a doctor as opposed to becoming a nurse. As the son of the Younger family, Walter remarks: “Who the hell told you you have to be a doctor? If you so crazy ‘bout messing ‘round with sick people—then go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet...” (Hansberry 38).

Regardless of the general public's lack of support and the family's tight financial budget, Lena regards Beneatha's professional pursuit as an expression of her individuality and gives the latter full endorsement by financially supporting Beneatha unconditionally. She also intends to set aside one third of the insurance money to pay for Beneatha's medical school fees (Hansberry 91). Furthermore, she has financially supported Beneatha's guitar lessons and other activities in order to develop her daughter's potentials (Hansberry 42). When she is informed by Beneatha that George Murchison is not a viable prospect for marriage, Lena respects Beneatha's decision and says, "I guess you better not waste your time with no fools" (98). It is clear from all these incidents that Lena is committed to facilitating her daughter's development of her potential, and Lena is determined to provide her daughter with a life and a future quite different from her own. What she has been deprived of, Lena would try her best to ensure that her daughter will be provided for.

Lena also extends her unconditional support to her daughter-in-law Ruth. She takes Ruth's problems as her own and is able to empathize with Ruth. In this way, Lena maintains a caring relationship with Ruth, "a connection or encounter between two human beings" (Noddings 15). When Ruth tells Lena that she is pregnant and that she is not sure if the family can support her, Lena understands Ruth's anxiety and depression. As she explains to Beneatha about Ruth's situation,

She'll be all right. Women get right depressed sometimes when they get her way. (Speaking softly, expertly, rapidly.) Now you just relax. That's right... just lean back, don't think 'bout nothing at all... nothing at all—

(Hansberry 44)

Furthermore, when Lena realizes that Ruth has been to “that woman” (102) who performs abortion as her profession, Lena urges her son Walter to help Ruth even if it is just moral support (45). Lena also tries to make Walter understand that “When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. The part that's already living” (109). As revealed in the play, Lena and her husband Big Walter Lee once lost their boy Claude because of poverty (45). That is why Lena fully understands Ruth's crisis. One can infer that it is because of such understanding and support that Ruth devotes herself to her mother-in-law. It is Lena's unconditional support to Ruth and Beneatha that enables these women to bond closely, mutually-supporting each other in life.

What Hansberry advocates is coalition among women in times of difficulty. She celebrates empathy that allows one to focus not on one's deprivation and deficiencies but on supporting and helping the younger generation. Lena is a mother who exerts a positive influence on her children. She is presented as both a defender and victim of patriarchal values while Lena has passed the spirit of freedom and rebellion or defiance to her daughters. She has perpetuated the thoughts and values of the absent Big Walter Lee. As Keith Clark observes,

the father maintained inalienable sovereignty over the home in spite of his devalued economic status. Lena is the purveyor of this configuration of the black family, as she frequently calls upon the ghost of “Big” Walter. (99)

Though he never appears on the stage, the father still dominates the whole family through his wife. As R. E. Hood observes, one of the functions of the spirits in Africa is to “act as bonds of cohesion, community stability, and self-esteem in their bonding with individuals and the community” (305). Big Walter is the symbol of that spirit that evidences the continuity of the African complex legacy, which becomes the link between the living ones and the ancestors. Furthermore, his ten-thousand-dollar insurance plan not only enables his family members to realize their own dreams but also affirms his belief in hard work and self-sacrifice (46). Mama Lena is able to secure her “sovereignty” in the family because of such a large amount of money left behind by her husband. And through constant reference to her husband, Lena not only upholds her husband’s ideology but also legitimates it. Lena not merely parrots her husband’s patriarchal ideas but she also positions herself within the male-dominated African-American culture with its traumatic history. Therefore, her daughters Ruth and Beneatha are fully aware of their African-American cultural heritage on the one hand and their desires for American individualism on the other. As Lena tells her children that “ME and your daddy...WE kept you out of trouble and also that you My children” (74). In this sense, she situates herself within a larger ethnic group. When she invokes

Big Walter, Lena sees herself as the authority. Through such a representation of the mother figure, Hansberry reveals the African-American culture as one with a tradition of communal support and African-American woman as particularly strong and supportive to one another due to their experience as an ethnic minority group.

Southern Women's Journey: From Self in Isolation to Self Actualization

In *The Crimes of the Heart*, the women's community fails to denounce the traditional way of life, which is mediated through their mother. Abandoned by her husband, the mother "started spending whole days just sitting there and smoking on the back porch steps" (Henley 19). Unable to bear such a disgrace, the mother finally decided to kill herself together with her cat. The mother's suicide has resulted in the Magrath sisters' marginalization in society: their "mama has shamed the entire family, and [the Magrath sisters] were known notoriously all through Hazlehurst" (18). What is worse, the three sisters are left in constant fear of loneliness. They suffer from psychological trauma caused by their mother's sudden death and their lack of maternal love and care. As Lana A. Whited observes, the mother's suicide is destructive to the three sisters' configuration of their selves, as well as their relationship in their surrounding community:

Because for a woman the family is almost always the primary community, any woman's decision to commit suicide is, ultimately, also a statement about her perception of that community's value in her life. To continue to live is, then, to affirm one's life, and relationship within the community. To

commit suicide is to reject them, and to insist that we are fundamentally all alone. (72)

The mother's suicide is her protest against the oppressive community and her resistance against her ultimate loneliness. The daughters learn from their mother's death that the community is defining and detrimental to women's achievement of personhood and that women are essentially isolated and lonely in the world. This explains why the three sisters try various means to escape from loneliness as they are haunted by their mother's experience and pessimistic outlook of life. In this sense, they are afraid of social condemnation and abhor communal isolation. At the same time, they begin to doubt women's coalition.

Under the negative influence of their mother, the three Magrath sisters are in constant fear of loneliness; yet, they are also reluctant to join any community of women for fear of rejection. As Kristin Hanson states, "their lack of a mirroring relationship has made the sisters unable to reproduce themselves as mothers in their own mother's image" (191). Seeing their mother as a victim under the patriarchal society, the eldest daughter Lenny chooses to compromise, regarding her conformity with dominant gender norms as a form of self-preservation. Lenny performs as a self-less martyr in the family, devoting herself to doing the family chores and taking care of their old granddaddy. She even tolerates their cousin Chick, who orders her around (3). Lenny desires communal recognition as a way of escaping loneliness. However, she still

suffers from loneliness despite her efforts because of her sense of void and unfulfillment in life. The second sister Meg chooses to take the Old Granddaddy's advice and seeks her fortune and stardom in California, but ends up with a mental breakdown. It is because Meg fails to construct a sense of her self. She has chosen to follow instructions but she eventually finds she can no longer accommodate people's "demands" from all sides. Her loss of voice implies her loss of individuality and agency (Henley 44) in the entertainment industry where individuality is not regarded as a virtue but a vice or an obstacle. The youngest sister Babe accepts the Old Granddaddy's arranged marriage for her, only to find the loveless marriage a prison for her. She suffers physically as a battered wife and psychologically as a self-less phantom (61). In a sense, the Magrath sisters are caught between carrying on and denouncing the community-oriented southern tradition. As Walker Percy states, "The American South [has] a tradition which is more oriented toward history, toward the family...and toward tragedy" (95). The three sisters have made attempts to break through, to lead their own lives and avoid following the footsteps of their mother.

The three Magrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart* also suffer from the absence of maternal love, which results in their lack of mutual reciprocity. For fear of similar humiliation experienced by their mother from the community, the sisters are apparently unwilling to be involved in other women's business. This also explains why the three

sisters have distanced themselves from each other for years and attempted to seek their own “solution” to their marginalization and loneliness. For example, Lenny could not accept Meg’s flirting relationship with men, while Meg and Babe are sarcastic about Lenny’s loveless single life. Besides, they hold different attitudes towards communal influences, especially the coercive rules and regulations from their grandfather. Lenny defends the old man that “all he ever wanted was the best for us” (37). Meg, on the contrary, is unsure and questions what one really wants: “Well, I guess it was; but sometimes I wonder what we wanted” (37). Through Meg’s words, Henley points out that patriarchal rule might be mistaken by some women as their own wish and destiny. Due to pervasive patriarchal influences, women like Lenny and Babe may mistake their habitual submission and performative selves as their own desires and authentic beings. As Billy J. Harbin argues, *Crimes of the Heart* is about America’s shift from a tradition of “self-reliance and moral certitude to transient instability, materialistic prosperity and spiritual bankruptcy; from family and community solidarity, trust and resourcefulness to fragmentation, incommunicativeness and sterility” (83). The three sisters’ fear and refusal to relate and support one another in their intimate community have made the inter-relationship among them stressful. Individual differences and distances rather than commonality, continuity, and connectedness seem to dominate.

The three sisters’ acceptance of commands or advice from their grandfather, a

representative of male authority and a symbol of patriarchal values and morality, elucidates clearly their sense of loss and lack of self as young women. The three sisters' subsequent choices represent three different attitudes and subject positions taken by women in the courses of gendering and subjectivation. Lenny chooses conformity with social expectations as a survival means. Meg chooses to try her luck in Hollywood as a means to break through. Babe allows herself to be passed from her Grandfather to her husband like a commodity without questioning the validity of male authority. Her acceptance of the arranged marriage is an indication of her inability or refusal to choose for herself. As Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak observes, women of the time were taught that their identity was in their roles as housewives and mother and they "were only happy if they were functioning properly, if they obeyed their sexual roles," American society at the time believed that "a woman's basic need was to be a wife, mother, and homemaker. Her only means of completion and fulfillment was in childbearing and in serving other people" (152-153). It is apparent that women suffer in such a patriarchal society where women's rights are not recognized and women's selves are under-developed. As revealed in the play, the two generations of women have tried to seek a way out of their miserable lonely existence through various means but in vain because they have chosen to address their sufferings and frustrations alone. They have also allowed men to instruct them what to do in life.

The two plays show that patriarchal authority in the form of the absent Big Walter Lee and the old Granddaddy creates in women's community very problematic inter-relationships for the women protagonists. Such influences are mediated either through the supportive mother Mama Lena in *A Raisin in the Sun* or through reactionary forces in the self-searching process in *Crimes of the Heart*. Inspired by Mama Lena's independent and optimistic spirit, Beneatha and Ruth succeed eventually in building a sense of their selves and affirming communal support. Whereas, the three Magrath sisters struggle to make connection but refrain from communal support and reunion at the beginning because of their mother's rejection of her community expressed through her suicide. They eventually succeed in freeing themselves from the negative communal influences and male dominance by learning the hard lesson in life and by understanding the importance of sisterly support and solidarity.

African-American Women's Communal Bond and the Ethics of Care

It is clear from the two selected plays that if the psychological connection and identification created by women's community is strong enough, women are more attached to one another. But if the emotional or psychological attachment to the community is weak, then women tend to distance themselves from other women in the community, and they tend to emphasize individual choice and difference rather than reciprocity and commonality. Besides delineating women's attitude towards community,

Hansberry and Henley also discuss women's different positions in the process of gendering or self-fulfillment, especially in face of social injustice such as racial segregation and domestic violence. Hansberry creates Mama Lena as an unconventional woman, a model for her daughters to empower themselves through concerted efforts. With such a powerful and strong mother, Ruth and Beneatha are able to redefine their modes of existence. Supported by their mother Lena, Ruth and Beneatha are also steadfast in upholding their personal philosophy and rejecting hegemonic law (Hansberry 13). Also Lena's influence has led Beneatha and Ruth to think highly of family support (Hansberry 182). Hansberry emphasizes the solidarity of women in their process of individuation, supporting one another in their course toward personhood and to living a free life. However, Ruth is presented as a less conservative woman. As the mediator who compromises with the dominant patriarchal community, Ruth seeks to strike a balance between her performative self and inner desires for personhood as a strategy to preserve her integrity and inner peace. She holds the in-between attitude towards racial assimilation and segregation. She keeps the balance of the relationship in the family as she struggles for harmony by maintaining the family ties and emphasizing the family pride. Ruth has inherited Mama's hardworking spirit, sacrificing herself financially to support her sister-in-law Beneatha, pampering her husband Walter Lee psychologically and physically, and nurturing her son Travis. As

for her own personal development, Ruth often sees it as something secondary, “being a colored woman, I guess I can’t help myself none” (34). Different from her mother’s generation of women, Ruth is aware of her own desires and aspiration in life. Through the character Ruth, Hansberry shows that the least rebellious African-American woman can still hold personal agency regardless of her submissive gender performance.

In her relationship with men, Ruth positions herself voluntarily in the secondary place, complying with gender norms. In this way, she demonstrates her performativity, although she patiently yearns and waits for the time and space for the cultivation of her self. Ruth has her own dream of escaping from the family’s Southside “rat trap” (44):

Honey...life don’t have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things so that things are better...You remember how we used to talk when Travis was born...about the way we were going to live...the kind of house...Well, it’s all starting to slip away from us... (Hansberry 89)

She is ready to compromise when she realizes that if her husband Walter Lee cannot get money to invest in the liquor store, his world will collapse. For Ruth, a woman can realize her self or her dream through a man. That explains why Ruth suggests that Lena should consider relinquishing the money to Walter Lee for “He needs this chance” (42). In Ruth’s view, Walter Lee stands for her future and absolute authority, whose success is also her success. Ruth also takes her son as her hope for happiness and a bright future too. In her relationship with men, be it her husband or her son, Ruth shows her consideration, patience and care. As Joan Tronto states in “An Ethic of Care,” “[i]f care

is tied to the ‘naturalness’ of women’s caring then it is either instinctive, or deeply social or cultural behavior, and therefore not a part of the realm of moral choices” (251). In Ruth’s case, her socially and culturally constructed performative self makes her “naturalize” care as her “innate” quality if not moral commitment. When, her personal needs are put aside, however, she finds herself in a state of selflessness.

In her relationship with other women of the Younger family, Ruth is even more considerate and she is treated with respect and appreciation. She pampers her sister-in-law Beneatha and tries to protect the younger ones in the patriarchal society: “Don’t be so nasty, Bennie” (36). Ruth cares about Beneatha as if she were still a child. As Ruth caresses Beneatha when she quarrels with Lena, “You think you a woman, Bennie—but you still a little girl. What you did was childish—so you got treated like a child (52)”. Ruth tries to shield Beneatha from the cruelty of life and facilitates the young girl’s exploration of life. Apart from indulgence, Ruth mediates between the authoritative Lena and the rebellious Beneatha. For example, when Beneatha crops her hair, Ruth tactfully points out that it might be inappropriate according to the male-dominated aesthetic standard: “Now that’s the truth—it’s what ain’t been done to it! You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?”(80) In Ruth’s opinion, George is a good man, whose opinion should be taken seriously as he can be Beneatha’s potential husband:

BENEATHA: Oh, I just mean I couldn't ever really be serious about George. He's—he's so shallow.

RUTH: well—what other qualities a man got to have to satisfy you, little girl?

BENEATHA: You wouldn't even begin to understand. Anybody who married Walter could not possibly understand. (Hansberry 48)

This exchange between Ruth and Beneatha clearly reveals the two women's different attitudes towards marriage, love, and self. While Ruth adheres to gender norms, Beneatha dares to challenge them. George's judgment on Beneatha's unfeminine appearance is a proof of his shallowness and insensitivity characterized by patriarchal views toward women as objects of male gaze and desire. In this sense, Ruth's coaxing of Beneatha into changing her hair style reveals how she has fallen unconsciously into the patriarchal trap of taming women's docile bodies, through which to perpetuate women's performative selves. In essence, Ruth's mediation shows her philosophy of life and her wish to achieve selfhood through compliance, endurance, and persistence.

Besides her apparent submissiveness to the dominant patriarchal mentality, Ruth has her own understanding about life, love, and marriage, which shows vaguely a self in the shaping. She clearly expresses her fervent desires to move out of the apartment in the ghetto:

Well—well!—All I can say is—if this is my time in life—MY TIME—to say goodbye to these goddamn cracking walls! —and these marching roaches!—and this cramped little closet which ain't now or never was no kitchen! ...then I say it loud and good, HALLELUJAH! AND GOODBYE MISERY...I DON'T NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR UGLY FACE

Here is a woman crying out for change, for freedom. Her suggestion for Lena to spend the insurance money on travelling is a concrete example of her yearning for a new life: “Just pack up and leave! Go on away and enjoy yourself some. Forget about the family and have yourself a ball for once in your life—” (43). In addition to her wish for freedom, Ruth has her own understanding about love and marriage. She enjoys her harmonious marital relationship with her husband and positions herself as one who cherishes a relational self characterized by care and a desire for communal recognition. She is happy going out with Walter: “But we went last night. The picture wasn’t much good, but that didn’t seem to matter. We went—and we held hands (113)”. Her remarks show that she cares about relatedness and yearns for intimacy. What she cherishes in marriage is the moments of mutual understanding, of closeness and of togetherness. In short, Ruth is people-oriented. As Carol Gilligan argues, “The psychology of women that has consistently been described as distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationships and interdependence implies a more contextual mode of judgment and a different moral understanding” (*In a Different Voice* 22). In making her life decisions, Ruth always tries to avoid inflicting harm on others and is ready to sacrifice her own interest. She would go to work in order to support the family although she is not feeling well (Hansberry 34). When the Younger family discusses moving into the white

people's community, Ruth expresses her willingness to work to solve the financial problem:

Lena—I'll work...I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago...I'll strap my baby to my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to—but we go to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!! (Hansberry 140)

In her pledge, Ruth shows her courage and determination to change her life and the future of the family. As Hansberry observes in her essay on *The Second Sex*, “Woman like the Negro, the Jew, like colonial peoples, even in ignorance, is incapable of accepting the role with harmony” (139). Though Ruth adheres to her performative roles, she does not accept them as natural. Her performative self is only one aspect of the emerging new woman who wants to be her own. Her performance of social responsibilities assigned to women does not prevent her from taking charge of her own life.

As a foil to Ruth's compliance and obedience, Beneatha bravely seeks means to develop a self that she can call her own and refuses to be an engaged “surrender” as Ruth (Hansberry 171). She is not satisfied with mere survival; she is unwilling to relegate herself to domestic roles. She demonstrates her ardent desire for independence and does not show much appreciation of other women family members, who sacrifice themselves in support of her: “I have never asked anyone around here to do anything for me!” (37). In this sense, Beneatha challenges the African-American cultural

tradition that stresses on family ties and community support. Her brother Walter once accuses her of her selfishness: “I don’t want nothing but for you to stop acting holy ‘round here. Me and Ruth done made some sacrifices for you—why can’t you do something for the family?” What he fails to understand is Beneatha’s desire to be her self defined by choice and individualism:

Well—I do—all right?—thank everybody! And forgive me for ever wanting to be anything at all! (Pursuing him on her knees across the floor) FORGIVE ME, FORGIVE ME, FORGIVE ME! (57)

Beneatha expresses her contempt and dissatisfaction of Walter’s manner. In essence, Beneatha values her own independence and takes Mama and Ruth’s communal support for granted. Her refusal to acknowledge her family members’ sacrifice reveals her refusal of the ethnical doctrine and cultural tradition of sacrificing oneself for the family or community.

Beneatha is adventurous and eager to explore life and to define her self in her own way. She would try various means from horse riding and guitar playing to play-acting and photography (47-48) in order to discover her potential and exercise her freedom of choice. While Mama and Ruth work like slaves in white families to pay for Beneatha’s personal interests, Beneatha engages herself in a soul-searching journey, trying hard to define herself as an individual:

BENEATHA: People have to express themselves one way or another.
MAMA: What is it you want to express?

BENEATHA: Me! (Mama and Ruth look at each other and burst into raucous laughter) Don't worry—I don't expect you to understand. (48)

Mama and Ruth's amusement shows their ignorance of Beneatha's inner drives for a coherent and autonomous self. And Beneatha's reluctance to explain herself shows not only her contempt for Mama and Ruth's compromising attitude but also her defiance against the existing social and gender expectations of women.

Beneatha always distances herself from the stereotypes of womanhood in general and African-American womanhood in particular throughout the play, advocating a positive, self-fashioned image. As her Nigerian schoolmate Asagai recalls,

Do you remember the first time you met me at school? ...You came up to me and you said—and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen—you said: “Mr. Asagai—I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Asagai, I am looking for my identity!” (62)

While Beneatha looks back into the history of the African-Americans for self-identification, Ruth looks into the future for self betterment as well as for the betterment of her family or the development of Walter or Travis by moving out of the apartment in ghetto. In short, Ruth aims at defining her self in relation to others, while Beneatha aims at finding her own self.

Through the characterization of Beneatha, Hansberry presents a new generation of African-Americans who suddenly find themselves without a purpose after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. According to the stage direction, Beneatha refuses

to use the African-American language, but “a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family’s since education has permeated her sense of English” (35). She is aware of her difference from Mama, Ruth, and Walter who all speak nonstandard and ungrammatical English. Furthermore, she often speaks French to show off her knowledge. Her brother cannot understand Beneatha even when she teases him and calls him “Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir,” meaning “Mister little black middle class” in English (138). Hansberry is quite critical of Beneatha for her arrogance, treating it as Beneatha’s assimilation of white culture. Beneatha is proud of her academic knowledge and her affiliation with the white people. In this respect, Beneatha behaves like Dee (Wangero) the elder sister in Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” in that both young women have received high education and tended to identify themselves with the dominant white culture. Out of her spite of the African-American tradition, Beneatha looks down upon other women members in her community even though she relies on them financially. Furthermore, Beneatha’s mixture of language also reflects her confusion. She denies her cultural root and looks down on her African-American history and tradition, yet she does not know where to transplant her root. Influenced by her white education and dominant cultural views, Beneatha feels different amongst women in her ethnic community. But she is also frustrated to find that she is excluded from the mainstream white culture. Beneatha finds herself confused and lost in the

situation. Her identity crisis prompts her to take care of people and achieves a form of self-realization. She wants to engage with the world and participate in world affairs. As she explains to her Nigerian classmate Asagai, she wants to prove her worth through curing others:

I never to over that...That that was what one person could do for another, fix him up—sew up the problem, make him all right again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world... I wanted to do that. I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. Fix up the sick, you know—and make them whole again. ...I wanted to cure. It used to be so important to me. I wanted to cure. It [used] to matter. I want to cure. (133)

Beneatha believes that she can help change people's lives and to fix people up. But she cannot sacrifice herself by marrying George Murchison even if he is Adam and she is Eve (150) for there is no love between them. In addition to her denial of the conventional marriage proposal, Beneatha even defies God for she believes in human effort in changing the world:

I'm just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has he got to do with anything. Does he pay tuition? ... It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles! (50)

Through the contrastive characters represented by Lena and Ruth on the one hand and Beneatha on the other, Hansberry states her desire for change not through God's blessing but through individual human effort. With the presentation of their evolving

attitudes toward Christianity, Hansberry presents a bond of cohesion among women not only individually but also collectively, a kind of powerful self-esteem bonding women together for the community. In the play, Hansberry endorses the importance of women's mutual support and celebrates women's solidarity. But she is also critical of women's fear of going beyond their comfort zone to embrace challenges, as in the cases of Lena and Ruth. Beneatha seeks to be the promising future in the African-American women's community, but she also needs to learn to be humble and to accept her performative self, including her cultural tradition and ethnic roots. This is something Beneatha has to learn in order to become a whole person or to achieve her selfhood.

Southern Women's Desire for Communal Recognition and Acceptance

Similar to the Younger women's frustration and confusion, the three Magrath sisters also struggle to understand their selves better through various choices. Henley depicts the difficulties involved in self fashioning when the mother is not there to support the daughters or to facilitate their search for selfhood. The three sisters are in a way handicapped for life not only because they are haunted by their mother's suicide, but also because of their lack of subjectivity. Instead of developing a strong sisterly bond, they have drifted apart after their mother's death, leaving each of them helpless and defenseless before the strong patriarchal influence.

Acknowledging the importance of individual differences, Henley makes the

eldest daughter Lenny the most conservative one. She behaves as a self-less motherly figure recognizable by her performative self. Annette J. Saddik in *Contemporary American Drama* points out, “identity under capitalism functions as commodified performance, a product not located in any ‘real’, original or essentialised self, but rather defined by the slipping in and out of roles and costumes in a struggle for power, a postmodern assertion of its protean nature” (140). In a sense, Lenny is portrayed as a self-sacrificing mother or a grandmother surrogate. While “slipping in and out” of her gender roles, Lenny shows her desire for communal recognition. She takes communal recognition as the acceptance of her person and as a form of self-fulfillment. Lenny dodges herself from the public, turning herself into Grandma as Babe comments (20) by doing all the family chores and taking care of her disabled grandfather. As Carol Gilligan states, “sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view” (*In a Different Voice* 16). Lenny attends to other person’s needs to claim her own selfhood. Ironically, she suffocates herself by doing so.

In order to take good care of her old Granddaddy, Lenny even sleeps in a cot in the kitchen so as to attend to him at night. In the play, Henley accentuates Lenny’s servitude and her infant state as an individual. When it comes to the notion of self, she remains in an infant stage. She takes her gender roles as compulsory norms and

represses her own needs and wishes as an individual. Though she allows her relational self to dominate her life, Lenny does not deny her wishes for self development. Lenny's keeping her horse the old Billy Boy shows her reminiscence of her good old days when she was not bound by the reality and responsibility of the patriarchal world (5). Furthermore, Lenny is afraid of being alone. When she celebrates her thirtieth birthday alone, she feels lonely and hopelessly depressed. This explains why Lenny is so easily cheered up by her cousin Chick's disposable birthday gift. In a sense, Lenny is a misfit in the southern community, though she fashions her gendered self to meet social expectations of women.

Henley uses Lenny's physical deficiency, that is, the deformed ovary, as an externalization of her spiritual and emotional aridity. Lenny does not regard herself as a whole woman because of her shrunk ovary. Having been reminded of this fact again and again by her grandfather, Lenny takes this physical deficiency as a sign of personal inadequacy. As Meg observes, Old Granddaddy is the one who's made her feel self-conscious about it (20). Influenced by the patriarch of the family, Lenny assumes that motherhood is women's natural destiny. Lenny dares not pursue personal happiness because she believes she does not deserve it owing to her inability to give birth. For fear of rejection and humiliation, she dares not date anyone but devotes herself to work. According to Meg, Lenny "needs some love in her life. All she does is to work out at

that brick yard and take care of Old Granddaddy” (20). Lenny has taken patriarchal expectations of women and motherhood as natural and regards her physical deficiency as abnormality, which causes her to withdraw herself socially. Burying her wish for personal fulfillment, Lenny performs her relational roles with care and demonstrates submission and resilience. As Robert J. Andreach noted in *Understanding Beth Henley*, “Henley’s characters bury their true selves beneath deeper layers” (29). Lenny is used to perform according to her social and familial responsibilities, leaving her with no awareness of who she is as a person.

As a contrast, the youngest one of the three Magrath sisters Babe is presented as the most idealistic women character, who dreams of a harmonious relationship between her performative self and her individual self. To please her Old Granddaddy, Babe married a man she barely knew. As she recalls, she could not remember whether she was happy or not at her marriage ceremony, only remembering her drinking of champagne (38). After her marriage, she lives a miserable life, isolated and battered. Her husband Zackery, representing the menace, malice, and brutality of patriarchy, is brutal to her:

He started hating me, 'cause I couldn't laugh at his jokes. I just started finding it impossible to laugh at his jokes that way I used to... And suddenly I'd be out cold like a light. (26)

Her failure in seeking warmth and happiness at home has led Babe to an extramarital

relationship with a young black fellow Willie Jay (27). As Babe relates to her sister Meg, “Well, things start up. Like sex. Like that” (27). Through such an “immoral” and “disgraceful” relationship, Babe challenges Zackery’s authority and negligence, “I was alone by myself most of the time” (27). An extramarital affair is Babe’s attempt to seek happiness and self-worth. It is also a rebellious act through which Babe shows her determination to transcend her confining relationship and transgress social-moral norms.

Babe also serves as the tie between Lenny and Meg and works toward establishing an affinity among the three sisters. When Meg laments the thirty-years-old Lenny’s lack of love in life, Babe leaks the secret that with the aid of the Lonely Hearts Club, Lenny has once dated Charlie Hill from Memphis (Henley 21). Babe continues to figure out the reasons why Lenny refuses to develop a serious relationship with men. Based on Babe’s interpretation, Meg comes to know more about Lenny’s situation. In such ways, Babe bridges the communication gap between Lenny and Meg. On another occasion, Babe speaks for Meg when Lenny was angry about Meg: “I could just wring her neck! I could just wring it” (Henley 34). According to Babe’s understanding, Meg does “strange things” in order to get over from the trauma of discovering their mother’s dead body. In this way, Babe facilitates communication between Lenny and Meg, and allows the two sisters to understand each other better.

Similar to Lenny's effort of preserving her vague consciousness of self, Babe has also gone through a difficult journey against gender oppression to reach self-consciousness. As Old Granddaddy's "prettiest and most perfect" granddaughter (Henley 14), Babe dares to express her aversion to their cousin Chick now and then: "And I don't like yours much either, Chick-the-stick! So, just leave me alone! I mean it! Leave me alone! Oooh!" (47). Babe reacts strongly against Chick's malicious comments on their mother:

She said our mama had shamed the entire family, and we were known notoriously all through Hazlehurst. (About to cry.) Then she went on to say how I would now be getting just as much bad publicity and humiliating her and family all over again. (18)

With such oppressive and besieging criticism from the general public, Babe sees it her duty to comply with gender and social norms in order to save the family reputation. As seen in the play, Babe appears to be obedient and submissive, but in reality she is the daring type who challenges the gender norms and violates the marital vow. Instead of staying loyal to her husband, Babe has chosen to remain loyal to her self, to her feelings and yearning for love and happiness in life.

In comparison, the second sister Meg is portrayed as an active self-seeker, who defies consciously gender performativity and fearlessly strives for self-realization:

Meg always run wild—she started smoking and drinking when she was fourteen years old, she never made good grades – never made her own bed! But somehow she always seemed to get what she wanted. She's the one got

singing and dancing lessons; and a store-bought dress to wear to her senior prom. Why, do you remember how Meg always got to wear twelve jingle bells on her petticoats, while we were only allowed to wear three apiece? Why?! Why should Old Grandma let her sew twelve golden jingle bells on her petticoats and us only three!!! (35)

Lenny's jealousy might be caused by sibling rivalry but it also reveals Meg's fearlessness in defining her own self. Meg would lie to Old Granddaddy for her career development (34) and she would bite the shell of pecans instead of using the cracker: "(trying with her teeth) An, where's the sport in a nutcracker? Where's the challenge?" (15). Meg would give each cookie a bite to find if there are nuts inside instead of reading ingredients list on the package (41). Such is her reckless and assertive mode of life. Meg does not care about the consequences of her pursuit for self. As Lenny observes, "I don't know; it's-it's-You have no respect for other people's property! You just take whatever you want. You just take it!"(Henley 41). From such comments, one may conclude that Meg takes a playful attitude towards life and challenges the social expectations on women in the southern community. She is regarded as bad for her moral defiance. As Carol Gilligan states in her book *In a Different Voice*,

The conflict between self and other thus constitutes the central moral problem for women, posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood. In the absence of such a reconciliation, the moral problem cannot be resolved. The "good woman" masks assertion in evasion, denying responsibility by claiming only to meet the needs of others, while the "bad woman" forgoes or renounces the commitments that bind her in self-deception and betrayal. (71)

In performing as a good woman, Lenny denies her own needs and becomes a “loveless” and selfless being alienated from her own self and the community. The bad woman Meg renounces her communal commitments and takes adventures to fulfill her self and to empower herself in life. She seldom cares about those people whom she may hurt in the process. Similar to Jessie’s smoking in Marsha Norman’s *’night, Mother*, Meg defends herself when her cousin Chick rebukes her for smoking for it will cause lung cancer:

That’s what I like about it, Chick—taking a drag off of death. (Meg takes a long, deep drag.) Mmm! Gives me a sense of controlling my own destiny. What power! What exhilaration! (17)

Meg’s defense shows her defiance against dominant gender norms and their corresponding psychological and moral confinements on women. In her quest for self, she refuses to be connected with others because of the psychological trauma caused by her mother’s suicide. As the one to discover her mother’s suicide, Meg comes to cast doubts on life. Meg doubts about the stability of life. She wants to explore life but does not care about the consequences. Though she does not allude to her mother’s suicide as often as Babe, she always fears that she might have inherited her mother’s insanity. In order to cure herself of the memory of her mother’s dead body, Meg forces herself to look at the “rotting away noses and eyeballs drooping off down the sides of people’s faces and scabs and scores and eaten-away places” (Henley 35) of people’s bodies with

the aim of becoming a tougher and less sensitive person. Meg's indulgence is clear to the audience when she persuades her boyfriend Doc to stay with her during a hurricane, and then abandons him, thus ruining their relationship as a result. Her "insanity" causes Doc's psychological and physical trauma, and also damages Meg's reputation in the community. Her subsequent relocation to California can thus be seen as an escape, as a form of self-exile because no one understands Meg's emotional and psychological problems. Furthermore, her reluctance to share her feelings and seek help also results in her inability to relate to others, "I don't know why... 'cause I didn't want to care. I don't know. I did care though. I did." (44). While struggling hard to start a new life after her mother's suicide, Meg feels frustrated at times when she is misunderstood, when she fails to express herself in a clear way.

She is conscious of Old Granddaddy's manipulation of their three sisters' lives and blames Old Granddaddy for Lenny's misery: "Old Granddaddy's the one who's made her feel self-conscious about it [the deformed ovary]. It's his fault. The old fool" (Henley 21). Meg yet still decides to take her old granddad's advice to go to California to start a new life and to develop her career because she fails to resolve the inner conflicts between her consciousness of the patriarchal and cultural demand on communal commitment and her incessant quest for authenticity and freedom. Meg suffers a mental breakdown as a result: "I went nuts, I went insane. Ended up in L. A.

county Hospital. Psychiatric ward” (Henley 44). Meg’s mental breakdown shows how women with a desire to assert their selves can be silenced and can lose their voices as bad women if they try to challenge the moral and gender codes in society. They are often stigmatized as bad women or marginalized as social misfits simply because they are different from traditional women who perform their gender roles without questioning. As Colby H. Kullman observes in “Beth Henley’s Marginalized Heroines,”

intentionally marginalized... these women characters dare not share their sufferings and predicaments with others because they are so alone. Instead of surrender to the futility and absurdity of life, they quest for meaning, dignity, and selfhood. (24)

As seen in the two plays under discussion in this chapter, Meg and Beneatha are self-exiled women in their respective communities. They distance themselves from their family members who force them to conform or to depend on one another for solace. African-American women in *A Raisin in the Sun* eventually affirm their ethnic tradition of communal commitment as a way out, while southern women in *Crimes of the Heart* re-value the importance of communal bond as a means to address their marginalization.

The Process of Individuation and Communal Bonding through Sharing of Experience

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the sisters-in-law Ruth and Beneatha have gone through the process of individuation before they come to see the need for a close bond in their

quests for self. In order to deal with the importance of mutual support and emotional reciprocity, Hansberry accentuates their gendered pattern of dialogue. Language is still useful for women to achieve understanding. Through chit-chat as a means to sort out their problems, women can share experiences and feelings with each other. Alison Jaggar highlights the importance of experience sharing for women:

...feminist practical dialogue continues to assume that personal experience is indispensable to moral and political knowledge and that every woman's experience is equally important, both morally and epistemically. It also continues to assume the ideal context for revealing personal experience is a nurturing and supportive environment. (19)

Through verbal exchanges Ruth and Beneatha eventually achieve solidarity. As Walter points out, intimacy is achieved through conversation among the Younger women: "Mama would listen to you [Ruth]. You know she listen to you more than she do me and Bennie. She thinks more of you" (32). Lena enjoys talking and listening to Ruth.

Beneatha also believes that private talks could enhance mutual understanding:

BENEATHA I'm trying to talk to you.
GEORGE We always talk.
BENEATHA Yes—and I love to talk. (Hansberry 96)

It is apparent from the above that, Beneatha wants to share her views about life and world as well as her personal feelings through women's small talks. As she states, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but ...words will never hurt me!" (113). Beneatha believes that she may resist the corruption of patriarchal ideology by

engaging in harmless female chit-chat. This might be the reason why Beneatha adopts a mixture of different styles in her daily language. Furthermore, it is also through such women stylized talks about pregnancy, familial relationships, and women's aspirations in life that Hansberry brings out three troubled women's desire to express themselves freely.

Empowered by her emerging sense of the self, Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun* finally decides not to undergo abortion. As Carol Gilligan analyses, the right of abortion might indicate a woman's right of choice, yet it also puts women in a moral dilemma:

...while society may affirm publicly the woman's right to choose for herself, the exercise of such choice brings her privately into conflict with the conventions of femininity, particularly the moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice. Although independent assertion in judgment and action is considered to be the hallmark of adulthood, it is rather in their care and concern for others that women have both judged themselves and been judged. (*In a Different Voice* 70)

In this view, Ruth's decision to keep the baby demonstrates her change from moral consideration regarding the family's financial situation to personal desire to do things according to her own wish. In the past, she would have given up the baby to protect the reputation and welfare of the family. That is to say, she equates self-sacrifice for the family with moral goodness. For Ruth, the loss of the baby and her physical suffering resulting from abortion is nothing compared with her family member's well being. However, she eventually comes to see the importance of self-assertion. When Ruth

decides to move out of the crowded household and keep the baby, it is a clear indication of her emerging sense of self characterized by her strong will and independence. The final act of keeping the baby shows Ruth's determination to empower herself and to exercise control over her own life (113). Her choice is an example of her agency as a woman and the emergence of her self characterized by freedom and autonomy. It clearly supports what Hansberry writes in her comments on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that

Woman's body is [an] object or commodity to be appraised, studied, purchased with gift or marriage. Her mind is the source of witchcraft, "contrariness," gossip, mother wit, intuition and seduction, or so say the myths of male supremacist ideology. And thus, man being subject, being the source of all human values, so says the same myth, is befuddled, conjured, and at war with this creature. Thus, she is "the Other" in life; thus she is something short of a human being. (4)

By claiming control of her own body in this case, Ruth succeeds in transforming herself from an object to a subject and from being-for-the-Other to a being-for-herself. Though Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha are presented as marginalized women in this play, Hansberry endows them with consciousness of their female selves and their attempt to act instead of to perform: "RUTH: We can still move... the notes ain't but a hundred twenty-five a month. We got four grown people in this house—we can work..." (140). Her decision to move out and work even harder to save money to pay the installment evidences her independence. From the above discussion, the women characters in this play are in

desperate need of an autonomous self that can be realized by “self-in-community.”

They possess a relational self constructed on the basis of the ethics of care, nurture, and love, and yet they are also aware of notions of equality and integrity. They feel fulfilled not because of their supremacy or domination over others but because of their exercise of equality with others, with the goal toward the common good. As Ann Ferguson states,

each aspect of self is defined by its relation to a different set of social practices with different built-in norms and expectations, and therefore different meaning-relations with others. The self is a multi-faceted conscious and unconscious process. (15)

Ruth finally succeeds in leading a life of her own choice and gaining control over her body, which is a manifestation of her subjectivity and self-reliance.

In the case of the three Magrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*, they also realize the importance of independence and solidarity in the process of self-realization. They show obvious care and love for each other despite their years of distance and separation. For example, they all come to see the importance of remaining true to one’s feelings and living a life of self-worth. Meg eventually comes to understand Babe’s suffering in a loveless marriage, which has led Babe to shoot her abusive husband: “There’re plenty of good sane reasons to shoot another person and I’m sure that Babe had one” (12). When Meg gets to know that Babe has been continually battered by Zackary, she cannot help but burst out in anger: “I’ll kill him; I will—I’ll fry his blood!!” (25) This

reciprocity of feelings and empathy is the basis for a meaningful and the mutually supportive relationship and the establishment of coalition, which facilitate their quest for selfhood in the community.

Similar to the Younger women, the Magrath sisters also rely on women's talk to share personal experiences, through which they develop a close bond. Babe would tell her sisters how she had suffered from domestic violence; Babe would also tell Lenny of Meg's mental breakdown. Meg would also coax Babe into talking about their lives: "To talk about our lives [is] an important human need" (26). With Meg's encouragement, Babe reveals her miserable marriage life and the reason for shooting her husband Zackery. Through sharing personal experience, Babe is relieved from her psychological guilt and repents. Meg convinces Babe that her husband Zackery cannot judge her as insane and confine her to an asylum: "'Cause you're not insane" (61). As Babe openly acknowledges her condition, "I'm not like Mama. I'm not so all alone" (62), because she has two sisters to give her support and love. Conversations between the sisters are often candid and open, which reinforce the emotional bond among them. As seen in the play, Lenny also succeeds in gaining confidence in life with the help of her sister Meg, who tells her, "you're your own woman. Invite some people over. Have some parties. Go out with strange men" (52). And Meg regains her melodic voice when she succeeds in speaking her mind out and being her own self:

I realized I could care about someone. I could want someone. And I sang! I sang all night long! I sang right up into the trees! But not for Old Granddaddy. None of it was to please Old Granddaddy! (Henley 51)

With newly gained insight about their selves and their newly developed coalition, the three sisters are transformed into new beings capable of making connections as in the case of Meg, of facing the world with confidence as in the case of Lenny, and of being her own as in the case of Babe. Their harmonious relationship is demonstrated in the natural flow of their conversation characterized by mutual trust, support, and understanding,

CHICK: Now that young lawyer is coming over here this afternoon, and when he gets here he expects to get some concrete answers! No more of this nonsense and stubbornness from you, Rebecca Magrath, or they'll put you in jail and throw away the Key!

BABE: Meg, come to look at my new saxophone. I went to Jackson and bought it used. Feel it. It's so heavy.
MEG: It's beautiful. (*The room goes silent.*)

(Henley 17)

This is a typical example of women's talk when the purpose is not for exchange of ideas or thoughts, but for sharing of feelings and views on issues that are of common interest to them. Each is not expecting advice or comments from the other person. What is expected or cherished is the opportunity to voice out their troubles or preoccupation each in her own ways. Such "exchanges" are only possible when there is trust and understanding in their relationship. On another occasion, Babe keeps talking about her mother and the cat, while Meg focuses on her bastard father (Henley 19). Seemingly

they are talking about the same issue. In reality, Babe associates her current situation with her mother's suicide, while Meg focuses on her merciless father:

BABE: And that old yellow cat. It was sad about that old cat.

MEG: Yeah.

BABE: I bet if Daddy hadn't of left us, they'd still be alive.

MEG: Oh, I don't know.

BABE: 'Cause it was after he left that she started spending whole days just sitting there and smoking on the back porch steps. She'd sling her ashes down onto the different bugs and ants that'd be passing by.

MEG: Yeah. Well. I'm glad he left.

BABE: That old yellow cat'd stay back there with her.

MEG: God, he was a bastard.

BABE: I thought if she felt something for anyone it would been that old cat. Guess I must been mistaken.

MEG: Really, with his white teeth, Daddy was such a bastard. (19)

With the back-up from her sisters, Lenny could assert her own personhood either in the form of claiming ownership of the house or rekindling her relationship with her former boyfriend Charlie, "My courage is up; my heart's in it; the time is right! No more beating around the bush! Let's strike while the iron is hot!" (Henley 58). The final explosion of Lenny's dissatisfaction with Chick symbolizes the emergence of her independent self. Lenny decides not to tolerate anymore. With the bond with and support of her sisters, Lenny dares say no to Chick. With a broom in hand, Lenny kicks Chick out, declaring her ownership of the house and of her own life (57-58). Lenny's defensive explosion reveals her self awakening and defiance. All the cited incidents above reveal how the Magrath women come to develop a sense of their selves by

developing their communal support and bond.

The so-called crimes or misconducts they have committed earlier can be seen as manifestation of an inner voice for freedom. The Magrath women succeed in transforming their gendered selves, becoming the cause of the discourse rather than the product. As Laurence G. Avery argues, Henley's "characters are not determined by their social environments. They have the power to make individual choices—which is a big reason why the pattern of her plots is comic, not tragic" (661). Viewed in this light, Babe's shooting of her husband Zackery as her protest against male victimization and domestic violence. Unable to endure anymore, Babe tries to revolt. Out of the habitual reaction of gender performativity, Babe intends to shoot herself first (28), but with sudden realization, she changes her mind and shoots her husband instead:

Then I heard the back door slamming and suddenly, for some reason, I thought mama... how she'd hung herself. And here I was about ready to shoot myself. Then I realized—that's right I realized how I didn't want to kill myself! And she—she probably didn't want to kill herself. She wanted to kill him, and I wanted to kill him, too. I wanted to kill Zackery, not myself. 'Cause I—I wanted to live! (Henley 28)

As her lawyer Barnette states, "Zackery Botrelle brutalized and tormented this poor woman to such an extent that she had no recourse but to defend herself in the only way she knew how" (25). From Babe's self statement, one notices that Babe finally comes to understand her mother's mental state, which she has long interpreted as a desire to die. Now she sees it as a form of protest, showing her yearning for a different mode of

life. To Babe, to kill oneself is the negation of one's own self, but to kill the patriarch means a fight against the oppressive forces and a protest against the injustice done to her. Instead of following her mother's example of protesting by suicide, Babe chooses to take charge of her own life and strikes back.

With her sisters' help, Babe dares to face the brutality of life. When she realizes that she is not alone but supported by her sisters, she has the courage to discuss her shooting of Zackery. As she tells Meg, "I just can't tell some stranger all about my personal life. I just can't" (Henley 29). Armed with such self-realization, Babe is prepared to face the fact and discuss her case with her lawyer, exposing her thoughts and views about life and the world. Babe has once thought of committing suicide when she was threatened by Zackery. Now Babe realizes that their mother has chosen death because she has been so alone with no moral or emotional support: "So it wasn't like what people were saying about her hating that cat. Fact is, she loved that cat. She needed him with her 'cause she felt so all alone (Henley 61)". With this realization that she is not alone in the world, Babe refutes the accusation of her insanity and declares that she is "just as perfectly sane as anyone walking the streets of Hazlehurst, Mississippi" (61). Babe is ready to play saxophone and takes it as her future living, which prepares her for a spiritual and financial independent life.

In the two selected plays, the communities of women have served as shelters for

their communal members, protecting them from malicious threats outside. Mrs. Johnson in *A Raisin in the Sun* and Chick in *Crimes of the Heart* are presented as the voices of oppression, which marginalize the liberated women characters. They also serve as the guardians of patriarchy. This is shown in the stage direction:

Mrs. Johnson, who is a rather squeaky wide-eyed lady of no particular age...is a woman who decided long ago to be enthusiastic about EVERYTHING in life and she is inclined to wave her wrist vigorously at the height of her exclamatory comments. (Hansberry 98-99)

Mrs. Johnson is nosy, wordy and vulgar. She pries on other people's lives with a malicious mind. When Beneatha is not present, she infers that the girl might be pregnant (Hansberry 100). She is a racist when she calls the Youngers "the poor niggers" (Hansberry 101). At the same time, she feels jealous when the Youngers move, "Course I thinks it's wonderful how our folks keeps on pushing out. You hear some of these Negroes around here talking 'bout how they don't go where they ain't wanted and all that—" (Hansberry 100). By presenting Mrs. Johnson as one who suffers from inferiority complex (because of her own ethnic identity) and poverty (because of her refusal to work hard), Hansberry presents the oppression the grand system has done to the majority of African-American women, who are devoured. Instead of helping her own women folks, women like Mrs. Johnson have internalized patriarchal values and attitudes and have sided with the victimizers in suppressing and bullying other women.

Similar to Mrs. Johnson in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Henley uses the Magrath sisters'

cousin Chick to represent the oppressive forces in society that tend to be harsh on individuals who are different. In the opening scene, Chick directly expresses her contempt towards the three sisters: “I think it’s pretty accurate to assume that after this morning’s paper, Babe’s gonna be incurring some mighty negative publicity around in this town” (Henley 6). And Chick maliciously criticizes Meg as someone “known all over Copenhag County as cheap Christmas trash” (Henley 6). She repeatedly reminds Lenny of the three sisters’ tarnished reputation, which has almost prevented her from entering the Lady’s club. Chick also tries to impose patriarchal expectations of conventional womanhood upon the three Magrath sisters. As mentioned earlier, when Meg lights a cigarette, Chick would sharply point out that smoking would cause cancer: “Cancer of the lungs. They say each cigarette is just a little stick of cancer. A little death stick” (Henley 17). Chick represents the voice of the community, the conventional moral conscience. She functions not only as a cousin but also as the persona of Old Granddaddy, a mouthpiece of doom and a voice of moral disapproval. She stands for the social rejection of the Magrath sisters, for Chick represents “the mean-spirited mentality of the Ladies’ Social League, of which she is a member and committee head” (7). Through such a character, Henley points out the importance of change and consciousness of the self. Women can do damages to other women out of ignorance, self-righteousness and prejudices. It is due to the presence of such threatening

patriarchal regulations that makes communal support and recognition crucial in women's fashioning of their self.

Female Sovereignty and Women's Communal Relationship

Both Hansberry and Henley use family crisis as the changing factor in women's lives, redeeming them from a life of compromise, submission, or effacement to a life of self-empowerment and fulfillment. In a sense, family crisis offers these women characters an opportunity to put aside their individual differences and interests and focus on communal support. The Younger women in *A Raisin in the Sun* try to settle family problems with concerted efforts. Confronted with the familial plight, family members, especially women, support each other. bell hooks observes how women's solidarity is established through concrete encountering with different others.

Working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate these structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity. It is this work that must be the foundation of feminist movement. (25)

In working together for the common good, the Younger women are capable of meeting challenges together. Mama gives up her matriarchal authority to nurture her children's growth with the support from others. Ruth decides to take charge of her own life by her own choice of keeping her baby instead of going through an abortion. Beneatha decides to realize her dream by practicing medicine in Africa. Both Ruth and Beneatha succeed

in leading an autonomous life after a lot of soul-searching struggles. But such decisions can only be made possible with the support from Mama and the positive communal relationships established between the sisters-in-laws.

Henley treats the subject in a similar way in *Crimes of the Heart*. Facing Babe's legal punishment, the three sisters get re-connected after they have been apart for years. Lenny is encouraged by others to face the reality of her deformed ovary and rekindle her love relationship with her former boyfriend. Meg regains her own voice and self-esteem and can sing for herself. She reconciles with her former boyfriend Doc and moves into a new phase of her life. Babe has the courage to talk about her suffering in marriage and fight for her own rights before the court.

With mutual understanding and support established in such communities of women, Hansberry depicts a hopeful ending in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The Younger women come to see their relationships beyond individual difference. With three strong and independent women's concerted effort and Walter's reference to "we", the communal agreement is achieved:

[W]e are very proud ... And we have all thought about your offer... and we have decided to move into our house ... [w]e will try to be good neighbors. And that's all we got to say. (Hansberry 148)

This "we" refers to Beneatha, Ruth, and Mama, who make their declaration through Walter, the successor of the family's patriarch. This moment is magical because of the

transformation of Walter through women's coercion. In this sense, women's concerted effort may empower women to act and initiate changes in their communal relationships. The three Younger women are ready to face the challenges with their newly gained selves. Through such an ending, Hansberry highlights the possibility of achieving autonomy through coalition, which is made possible through mutual understanding and communal support.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, Henley also presents how sisterhood helps to redefine the three sisters' subjectivity, preparing them to face the stark reality of life. In "Criminality, Desire, and Community: A Feminist Approach to Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*" (1986), Karen L. Laughlin comments that the play

provides an alternative to the traditional comic resolution in which women are united with men and consequently prevented from bonding with each other. Though tentative and open-ended, the play's conclusion points toward a significant reorientation of the Magrath sisters' desires and integrates the three women in a brief but wholly affirmative moment of unity. (48)

The play concludes with a communal scene when the three women demonstrate their sisterly love and mutual support as they gather around Lenny's birthday cake. Nancy D. Hargrove argues that the closing scene of *Crimes of the Heart* demonstrates the "powerful force of human solidarity":

perhaps the dominant theme of her [Beth Henley's] drama is ultimately is the value of love, with family love providing this support more often than romantic love. Furthermore, although they are flawed human beings, the

major characters learn something valuable about themselves or their world in the process of the drama. (55)

The birthday scene also suggests the rebirth of the sisters who are capable of coming together to celebrate life. The three sisters' autonomous selves are emphasized in the context of communal support and sisterly love in this final scene. Lenny chooses to submit no more to anyone; Meg gains her voice; and Babe decides to move on in her life. Furthermore, with sisters' love, support, and reciprocity, they are ready to meet challenges and the unpredictability of their future. As Gene A. Plunka remarks, "At the end of the play, the communal sharing and outpouring of love produces a dramatically different effect...but the freeze frame moment of bonding...offers the only fleeting joy of unity" (*The Plays of Beth Henley* 124). With affinity among sisters and with their newly gained selves, these women are prepared to face challenges such as gender oppression or other problems in life as enlightened individuals. They have chosen to embrace challenges instead of running away from or succumbing to any oppressive forces.

Hansberry and Henley use men to help their women characters to discover themselves. They form a contrast to women's influence on each other. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Lee serves as a catalyst in accelerating the women's discovery of their selves with his intentional and male-chauvinist faults. It is because of Walter Lee's adventurous venture that the three Younger women are forced to see their similarity

instead of their differences. Furthermore, the Nigerian student Asagai with his African heritage also helps Beneatha to discover herself. Asagai helps Beneatha to change and realize that she can be her own self with traits similar to those of the two women who raised her. Furthermore, Asagai encourages Beneatha to pursue her own self-fulfillment through embracing her cultural heritage.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, Lenny's former boyfriend Charlie Hill offers Lenny a possible future of marriage and happiness, while Doc helps Meg to recover from the trauma caused by Meg's mental breakdown and from self-delusion, and to regain her voice and agency. And the young Lawyer Barnett saves Babe from legal sentence. As men are a means to an end (women's individuation), the two women dramatists point out the importance for women to define themselves, to know who they are and what they want in life before they can enter any meaningful relationship. It is when women assert their selves and cultivate their individuality can harmonious inter-personal relationship be established.

Both Hansberry and Henley highlight the importance of women's inter-personal relationship in their plays. Mama Lena helps Ruth to face her unexpected pregnancy and move out of the ghetto. Because of Mama and Ruth's strong will and independence, Beneatha makes up her mind to go to Africa to realize herself. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Meg not only pulls Babe's head out of the gas stove but she also saves Babe from her

desperate situation and loneliness to become a life-affirming individual.

In presenting the dialectical journey of women helping women to examine, define, or position their lives, Hansberry and Henley advocate women's empowerment. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) focuses on a group of women fighting together against racial oppression and glorifies collective resistance. She treats her women characters as active agents who seek their own liberation as well as the liberation of others. Hansberry's play reflects her firm belief that "the world is political and that political power, in one form or another, will be the ultimate key to the liberation of American Negroes, and, indeed, black folk throughout the world" (*To Be Young* 212, 213). In the words of Amiri Baraka,

Hansberry...describing, analyzing, recreating the world and demanding change. Demanding Democracy, Self Determination. Even revolution and educating themselves and ourselves as to why and how ... with a thrilling language of ideas from the mouths of Black people ... Ideology as real life. So that what she said was a thrill of meaning and music. Of explosive revelational image. ("Sweet Lorraine" 525, 527)

Hansberry depicts African-American women as strong and independent, women who are willing to support one another in order to achieve a communal goal, which is to seek one's self and make choices with the support in her community of women. Putting aside individual differences, Hansberry highlights the notion of a self in her rethinking of inter-personal and intra-personal relationship among women in community. That is to say, women should empower themselves so as to become independent women who

are capable of choosing their own modes of existence. This we-relationship with other women enables the protagonists to perform their social roles assigned by the patriarchal order, leading a balanced life that benefits the self and the community. When they are confronted with familial/communal crisis, women are forced to refashion their selves, redefining their own personal needs against a backdrop of patriarchy characterized by gender performativity.

As a dramatist from the American South where community holds tremendous influence upon a person's configuration of the self, Henley explores the interplay between communal influences and individual preferences. Henley once explained that she wants to "evoke the deeper ground of being, the originating network of impulse, which precedes the circumstantial 'I'" (*Interview 6*) in her plays. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Henley shows how women succeed in refashioning their female selves through sisterly bonding. While women wish to live a life of their own, they also need recognition and support from other women to achieve selfhood. As Gene A. Plunka argues, "Bonding through love and community (having a heart) produces happiness that we long for but ultimately have difficulty in obtaining under the burden of daily community norms and values"(123). That explains why both playwrights emphasize the need for women to be aware of the performative nature of their daily gender selves and to be empowered, with the support of other women, to go beyond their performative selves to achieve

selfhood defined by individual rights, personal choice, subjectivity, and moral responsibility.

As an African-American dramatist with a cultural tradition of communal support, Hansberry highlights the importance of women's interrelationship in an individual's self-fashioning. As de Beauvoir contends,

Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality. (416)

According to de Beauvoir, interrelationships among women may potentially offer an "exact reciprocity" which heterosexual relationships fail to provide. A woman is more likely to see herself as a subject in relation to other women. This is what Hansberry demonstrates in her play. Such bonding between women facilitates women's growth and quest for recognition and acceptance. The reciprocity and mutuality are presented as stabilizing forces that empower women to assert themselves and seek a mode of life that they may call their own. As Kristin L. Matthews observes in her reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry "insists that individuals must be willing to join with other voices and the larger community in order to change oppressive social systems—even if that means singing harmony instead of a solo" (558). Addressing women's issues of quest for identity and need for solidarity, Hansberry probes those factors that either

hinder or facilitate self fashioning. As Samuel A. Hay notes, “more thoughtful questions were raised in subclasses concerning women, men, and values, as well as African heritage” (45). In this sense, *A Raisin in the Sun* celebrates the Younger women’s self-searching journeys through their concerted action of moving into the white neighborhood, which is a symbolic act of cultural assimilation.

Though Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959 and Henley wrote *Crimes of the Heart* in 1979, both playwrights show their common concern about women’s social, moral and psychological issues in their quests for selfhood. By discussing the emergence of the re-fashioned self, or self-determination, and women’s rights to choose, Hansberry and Henley suggest constructive models for women in their search for self. Through the presentation of women in communities defined by mutual love and understanding, both women dramatists advocate the importance of integrity and subjectivity, which can be achieved within defining communities where women are willing to support one another in their personal quests for happiness and selfhood, as well as in their struggle against various forces of oppression such as parental manipulation or dictatorship, domestic violence or wife abuse, social gendering, or male chauvinism, sexual or racial discrimination. It is women’s awareness of their own conditions that the two playwrights emphasize. Women’s awareness may help them move beyond their performative selves to achieve subjectivity and integrity at the

personal level and women's rights and equality at the social or communal level. The playwrights' inside view of women allows them to stand out in the history of American drama in the twentieth century.

Chapter Three

Be Yourself: Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* and Wendy

Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*

Using Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), I examine how American women dramatists present their female protagonists' frustration and disillusionment when they attempt to strike a balance between individuality and commonality in specific communities, such as the New England and Jewish community. Both playwrights focus on their female characters' challenge of social and moral gender norms. Through the presentation of their deviation from or defiance against dominant gender and moral norms in the selected communities, the playwrights explore the issues of single motherhood, gay movement, and women's emancipation movements and their impacts on women's configurations of self.

Maria Irene Fornes and Wendy Wasserstein share a common interest in women's issues. In *Mud* (1983), Fornes focuses on women's difficulty in constructing selfhood against other women's malice and menace. Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* (1985) is especially noted for its characterization of Leticia. Well versed in philosophy and ethics, Leticia is still unable to stop the inhumanity taking place in the house. In another play *Sarita* (1984), Fela is tormented by her own desires and men's self-threatening

influences. Different from Fornes' surrealistic stage, Wendy Wasserstein employs popular comic style to express her serious view on women. In *Uncommon Women* (1977), Wasserstein uses women's discussions on their future careers, men, sex and marriage in order to bring out the fact that the society is basically patriarchal. In *Isn't It Romantic* (1983), Wasserstein portrays how Janie and Harriet choose different pathways in their search for love, professional advancement and psychological fulfillment. In 1992, Wasserstein's play *The Sisters Rosensweig* demonstrates her perpetual interest in women's sense of community, their inclination toward melancholy and their yearning for spirituality.

In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Fornes sets her story in New England in 1935 without mentioning her own Latino-American background. She presents eight women with similar educational backgrounds gathering at Fefu's house to prepare for a fundraising event. Through the presentation of these women's different viewpoints about life, marriage, and love, Fornes invites her audience to examine women's subordination and subjugation in the American cultural setting. Fornes casts doubts on the function of ideological agents such as drama in the process of gendering. Through the character Emma, Fornes expresses her views on the potentiality of drama in effecting social change: "Life is theatre, Theatre is life. If we're showing what life is, can be, we must do theatre" (22). In this sense, the New England community in the text can hint at or

symbolize the Latino-American situation. As Carolyn Cope observes in her dissertation, “Maria Irene Fornes’ *Fefu and Her Friends* reveals intimate friendship in the interior scenes of the play while group relationships are explored in the framing scenes” (130). Annette J. Saddik also states her view in *Contemporary American Drama* that *Fefu and Her Friends* “is a feminist play in that it deals with the social forces that silence and destroy women, both psychically and physically. The limiting patriarchal construction/destruction of female identity, the self-imposed internalized oppression that women experience, and the need for a new, self-determined identities are central issues in the play” (167). In this sense, Fornes’ *Fefu and Her Friends* will be examined to show how middle-class women in the New England community allow the playwright to explore the complexity of women’s quest for selfhood.

Wasserstein also depicts Heidi’s growth amidst a group of women friends in *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988). Heidi is an intelligent and wealthy woman who has to deal with her gender roles in the modern world and her Jewish heritage. Wasserstein once entitled *The Heidi Chronicles* as *The Old Girl Network* (Ciociola 67), which shows the playwright’s efforts to explore the importance of same-sex relationship among women in relation to their search for identity. As noted by Barbara Kachur, Wasserstein’s play has been preoccupied with “the anxiety, despair, and confusion women face in their search for self in a contemporary world that continually changes the rules, expectations

and definitions of them” (31). Wasserstein believes that “a truly enviable woman is the tenacity and continuity of her women friends” (*Shiksa Goddess* 119). This explains why she situates her women characters in communal relationships with other women to show the dialogic aspect of self-development.

The Trouble of Womanliness in a Hostile Community

At the beginning, Fefu in Fornes’ *Fefu and Her Friends* has little problem with her performative conformity. She is submissive to dominant patriarchal values, and desires to live up to the dictates of all the socio-cultural norms. As Judith Butler analyses the role of social regulation and power in the formation of individual’s psyche, “this desire for desire is exploited in the process of social regulation, for if the terms by which we gain social recognition for ourselves are those by which we are regulated and gain social existence, then to affirm one’s existence is to capitulate to one’s subordination—a sorry bind” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 79). Fefu configures herself to become a prototypical woman who subordinates herself to gain social recognition. In performing her role self, however, Fefu finds herself unfulfilled, fatigued, and depressed, the symptoms of “the problem that has no name”, or as Betty Friedman terms, “the feminine mystique”:

The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity...the mistake says the mystique, the root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their

own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. (43)

Fefu finds herself tormented by her self-imposed desire and craving for a “real” self on the one hand and her awareness of the regulatory social-cultural forces demanding her to follow prevailing gender norms for women on the other. This is exactly what happens to Fefu who performs all her social roles dutifully and hesitates to go beyond or transgress oppressive conventions that confine her to a set mode of existence. She represses her own “wild” ideas to shocking comments. As Fefu admits, “I like exciting ideas. They give me energy” (Fornes 9). Assunta Kent also points out that Fefu’s reluctance “to risk losing all the old familiar constraints and habits,” that is, her dependence on a husband who regards her and all women as “loathsome,” has reduced Fefu’s “potentially revolutionary ideas to shocking comments” and “[making] a game of her hostility towards her distant husband” (131). According to Fefu, the idea of a better, newer, and fuller personhood always excites her; it serves as the driving force for her to seek self-fulfillment.

In her relationship with her husband Philip, Fefu acknowledges the authority of men’s power and submits herself to his patriarchal commands. She describes men as “[muscles] that cover the raw nerve... [as] insulators” (Fornes 15). With such a humble attitude towards patriarchal authority, Fefu remains passive and obedient in her marriage and depends emotionally and physically on her husband Philip. As she

confesses to her best friend Julia at the final scene, Fefu holds a mixed and sometimes paradoxical feeling towards Philip,

His body is here the rest is gone.... I torment him and I torment myself. I need him, Julia.... I need his touch....I need the person he is. I can't give him up. (*She looks into Julia's eyes.*) I look into your eyes and I know what you see. It's death. Fight! (Fornes 139-140)

Such a self-expression shows Fefu's awareness of her predicament in marriage and her emotional and physical attachment to and dependence on Philip. Her marital status means a kind of social recognition and security that she dares not deny. It provides a shelter for her gendered self. That is why Fefu wants to maintain her marriage. But at times, she feels suffocated by the patriarchal institution. To Fefu, marriage is like a prison within which both the husband and wife try to survive or escape. Fefu's friend Cindy once discusses Fefu's marital relationship with Christina:

CINDY: She has a strange marriage.

CHRISTINA: Strange? It's revolting.—What is he like?

CINDY: He's crazy too. They drive each other crazy. They are not crazy really. They drive each other crazy. (Fornes 12)

Through the game of shooting, Fefu releases her repression. Rebuking her friend Cindy for the latter's presupposition that the gun is not loaded, Fefu states that she is never sure whether the gun is loaded or not (Fornes 13). And Fefu further elaborates,

FEFU: He told me one day he'll put real bullets in the guns. He likes to make me nervous. (There's a moment's silence.) I have upset you...I don't mean to upset you. That's the way we are with each other. ...

...

FEFU: ...—He won't put real bullets in the guns. — it suits our relationship...the game, I mean. If I didn't shoot him with blanks, I might shoot him for real. Do you see the sense of it? (Fornes 13)

Such a dangerous game of shooting between Fefu and Philip reveals the tension in the husband-wife relationship characterized by destructive impulse and violence. Marriage as the validated patriarchal institution for heterosexual love places the couple in defined gender roles with distinct masculinity and femininity. As Judith Butler cogently observes, “masculinity and femininity emerge as traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love; indeed, where masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix are strengthened through the repudiations that they perform” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 140). Fefu's repressed impulse to rebel contrasts sharply with her outward socio-moral compliance. Her performativity in marriage and the configuration of her gendered self are juxtaposed against her subdued “defiance” against heterosexual hegemony.

Fefu challenges the boundaries of womanhood verbally. Very often she makes shocking statements about herself, about women, and about relationship between men and women:

FEFU. My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are.

CINDY. What?

FEFU. Yup.

CINDY. That's just awful.

FEFU. No, it isn't.

CINDY. It isn't awful?

FEFU. No. It's funny— And it's true. That's why I laugh.

CINDY. What is true?

FEFU. That women are loathsome.

(Fornes 7-8)

Fefu's bitterness and view of women puzzles Cindy because it hints at her resentment toward women's socially and culturally constructed selves. Fefu has violated the assumed woman style of communication characterized by sharing, making such a shocking statement about women, Fefu creates suspense by implying that there is something awful about women and marriage. When Cindy criticizes Fefu's husband for saying such an awful thing, Fefu disagrees. This shows that Fefu may share the view of her husband and regard women as loathsome. This casual exchange between Fefu and her friend also shows Fefu's efforts to figure out what a woman should be. Through the conversation between Fefu and Cindy, Fefu attempts to make sense of her marriage and of women's roles in marriage. While she behaves in a seemingly feminine way in marriage, Fefu's discussion about women and her husband's view about women shows her reflection on the subject. Her shocking remarks can thus be regarded as a form of verbal defiance. In doing so, Fefu seeks to explore or give voice to the "other side" of herself, which is suppressed by her performative self. Such an effort is made apparent when Fefu reminds Cindy and Christina of what might be hidden under stone:

FEFU: You see, that which is exposed to the exterior... is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not... underneath, is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life that is parallel to the one we

manifest. It's there. The way worms are underneath the stone. If you don't recognize it... (Whispering.) It eats you. (Fornes 10)

Fefu's analogy clearly points to her awareness that, beneath her obedient and dutiful gender performances, there is a mysterious conflict-ridden self crying out for recognition. Fefu unconsciously yearns for an "authentic" self, that is, to be her own agent, while adhering to her present state and her predetermined performativity, Fefu cannot help but express her inner confusion, pain, and disturbances on occasions like this. When Christina points out the fact that Fefu always makes people around her feel angry, Fefu defends herself:

FEFU. You see?—There are some good things about me. —I'm never angry, for example.

CHRISTINA. But you make everyone else angry.

FEFU. No.

CHRISTINA. You've made me furious.

FEFU. I know. And I might make you angry again. Still I would like it if you like me. —You think it's unlikely.

CHRISTINA. I don't know.

FEFU.... We'll see. I still like men better than women [...]

(Fornes 14-15)

This verbal exchange reveals Fefu's desire to go her own way even if her behavior may annoy her women friends. Her dilemma is clear to the audience: she wants to be her own agent, to act and live like men. But she also hopes to be recognized by women in her community. According to Penny Farfan, Fefu's compliance with her gender performativity, "her strategy for coping with the pain of her marriage is male

identification, but this mode of response is problematized by the presence of female friends who cause her to confront the patriarchal construction of female inferiority” (445). As Fefu says, “I still like men better than women.—I envy them. I like being like a man. Thinking like a man. Feeling like a man” (Fornes 15). Such a statement made before a community of women friends may jeopardize the coalition among women in the community. But Fefu expresses it because of her awareness of subordination, her internal frustration and her desire to live a full life. At the end of the play, Fefu’s agony is revealed when she says to Julia, “I don’t know, Julia. Every breath is painful to me. I don’t know” (Fornes 58). This shows the urgency of her suffocating condition and desire for change.

In the process of shaping her self as opposed to performing her role, Fefu suffers from an agony because she knows that her determination to change, to assert herself, is considered peculiar among ordinary and traditional women. As she confesses to Christina, “I’m strange, Christina. But I am fortunate in that I don’t mind being strange...Those who love me, love me precisely because I am the way I am” (Fornes 14). Fefu admits that she strives hard to live her own mode of life, regardless of other people’s judgments. In this hard struggle, she tries to exercise her rights of choice and ability to make sound decision. For instance, she starts a fight with her friends to find out who shall do the dish washing after dinner:

PAULA. Truce!
SUE. Who's the winner?
PAULA: You are. You do the dishes [...]
FEFU. O. K. Line up. Start doing those dishes.
JULIA. It's over [...]
FEFU. I won. I got them working.
JULIA. I thought the fight was over who'd do the dishes.
FEFU. Yes [...]
JULIA. They forgot what the fight was about.
FEFU. We did?
JULIA. That's usually the way it is. (Fornes 51-52)

This incident shows that no woman is ready to perform her gender role as a domestic caretaker, who will take dish washing as a natural part of her duty as a woman. The incident further illustrates how Fefu resolves the conflict by arranging everyone to line up and share the work. Through collective effort, these women are able to deal with the situation, a situation and duty that they loathe but are expected to perform.

A Woman's Struggle to Relate to Her own Self in Relationship

Similar to Fefu's struggle in understanding herself, Heidi in Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* is also presented first as a conventional woman in a community of women, but later reveals as one who tries to re-fashion her self. Like Fefu, Heidi cannot help but define herself in her relationship with men. However, as Gayle Austin notes, women can take "nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women" (*Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* 2).

However, Heidi suffers from self-contempt and low self-esteem when she is confronted by men, such as her lover Scoop Rosenbaum and her gay friend Peter. Heidi is socially and culturally nurtured to cherish attachment with her male partners for support and recognition. But she is also inspired by feminist moral and philosophical thoughts to fight for her own mode of existence. As John Simon notes, “in this examination of how women, with or without benefit of feminism, adjust to their emotional-biological needs, men matter” (49). That explains why Heidi’s relationship with men is crucial to her construction of her selfhood. For men are like mirrors, allowing women to see themselves clearly.

In relation to Scoop Rosenbaum, Heidi lacks confidence and usually undervalues herself. As Helene Kessar observes, *The Heidi Chronicles* dramatizes “a world where the discourses of patriarchy and the discourses of feminism must encounter each other, they need not re-accentuate the other” (103). These two countering discourses are concretized in the conflicts between Heidi and Scoop. Heidi takes Scoop as the embodiment of the prevailing patriarchal authority who reduces her to the status of man’s sexual other. Throughout the play, Heidi has “no choice but subjugation to his will” (Gussow 13). She can either be his mistress or his “traditional wife, who stays home and stokes the embers of his ego” (Richards 4). As Heidi herself reflects on her relationship with Scoop, “When I need him, he’s aloof. But if I decide to get better and

leave him, he's unbelievably attentive" (Wasserstein 182). Heidi has been awakened by the consciousness-raising rap group and refuses to have herself judged or evaluated by men. Heidi would like to separate herself from Scoop, but could not do so because she finds herself bound to Scoop if not emotionally, at least physically. Just as she confesses to her friend Peter, "I am not involved with him anymore. I just like sleeping with him" (Wasserstein 187). In this sense, Heidi regards herself as merely a "sexual being" to man. As Simone de Beauvoir succinctly puts it,

She [Woman] is simply what man decrees; thus she is called "the sex", by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, He is the Absolute—She is the Other. (*The Second Sex* 16)

Heidi is fully aware of her own powerlessness in her relationship with Scoop. She is the sexual Other to Scoop; she is his subordinate. Yet Heidi is troubled by her desire for independence and selfhood, while her body is still responding to Scoop. To a great extent, Heidi is physically, sexually and emotionally dependent on this "on and off" relationship with Scoop. Her ambivalent attitude towards Scoop reflects her internal conflicts, and demands her cultivation of an autonomous self and her dissatisfaction with conventional womanhood. Heidi's quest is greatly affected by her relationship with Scoop, leaving her in a state of confusion and depression.

What complicates the matter is Heidi's relationship with her gay friend Peter

whose homosexuality comes not only as a surprise but also as a disappointment. Although Peter explains that his choice of sleeping with men is politically and socially as valid as rediscovering and including women's paintings in art history and exhibition, Heidi is unwilling to accept this fact with understanding and empathy. Heidi even feels hurt at the thought of the impossibility of keeping her close relationship with Peter. He remembers vividly how they established their commitment with each other in the past:

PETER: I want to know you all my life. If we can't marry, let's be great friends.

HEIDI: I will keep your punch cup, as a memento, beside my pillow.

(Wasserstein 167)

The subsequent punching scene reveals Heidi's ambivalent feelings of love and hatred, sympathy and antipathy for Peter,

PETER: ...Takes her hand and punches it against his arm. That's for my having distorted sexual politics.

...

PETER punches himself with her hand again: And that's for being paternal. And caustic.

...

HEIDI: Correct. Begins hitting him on her own. And that's for being so goddamn...

...

HEIDI: OH, I give up. Suddenly hits him again. And that's for liking to sleep with men more than women. Hits him again. And that's for not being desperately and hopelessly in love with me. (Wasserstein 191)

Despite Heidi's desire for independence and autonomy, she still wants a life-long companion. With her failed relationship with Scoop, Heidi seeks comfort in her

relationship with Peter. However, Peter's homosexuality comes as a shock and a great blow to Heidi, who feels hurt, humiliated, and denied by Peter. Heidi does not understand Peter's suffering and is not standing there for him as a friend. Heidi immediately responds by saying she can "become someone else next year" (Wasserstein 67). As Helene Keyssar comments, Heidi's offer to be "someone else" "is not a step towards a transformation of self but more like a proposal to wear a different dress tomorrow" (97).

Heidi's relationship with other men is also obstructive to her construction of self. Heidi finds a job in Columbia which is against her boyfriend's wish that she stays in London and that leads to an end to their love relationship (Wasserstein 211). The information about Heidi, who "almost got married" (Wasserstein 211), shows that Heidi still cherishes the conventional security provided by marriage. But there is, the editor, who is absent in the play, but he is the one whom Scoop urges Heidi to expose to the audience (Wasserstein 203), as the main obstacle in Heidi's reconciliation with Scoop. By portraying Heidi's mixed feelings and frustration toward Scoop, Peter, and other men, Wasserstein brings out the complexity of Heidi's quest for selfhood and her problematic self:

The female characters in *The Heidi Chronicles* frequently experience frustration and anger as a result of their failed relationship with men. The female characters in the play feel pressure to succeed and multitask to prove their value in society. (Borko 130)

Heidi's problematic relationship with Scoop and disappointment with Peter's homosexuality show Heidi's conventionality as a woman who yearns for romantic love and a stable marriage. But such conflict-ridden relationships also allow Heidi to re-examine her "self-in-relation", her life as a whole, and who she is, apart from her relational self.

Heidi's quest for self is also affected by such social and philosophical thoughts as humanism and feminism. Her belief in humanism makes her see no gender differences between men and women. As she tells Peter, "I covet my independence" (Wasserstein 167). Heidi also seems to be a fledging feminist when she states that she is "interested in the individual expression of the human soul" (Wasserstein 171). As a Jewish woman, Heidi values the Jewish cultural tradition. As William Chomsky states, Jewish communal culture is the "medium for revitalizing the Jewish community of America, for rendering it dynamic and creative"; and those who know it well would be "the backbone of a meaningful Judaism in the Diaspora" (277). It is ironic that these gender-based stereotypes that used to differentiate Jewish women from idealized genteel American women are seen as factors that complicate Heidi's shaping of her self. After much struggle, Heidi chooses to leave her women friends and their stereotypical views to become a single mother, which can be regarded as an assertion of her newly gained self.

Women's Struggle to Relate to Other Women

In both plays, women care about their relationships with others in their specific communities. They try to relate to others but in vain. They seem to have both male and female friends but none of them seem to understand their desires and frustrations. When Fefu withdraws herself from the stage, Cindy and Christina try to analyze Fefu's personality but they do not go far and deep. Though they are Fefu's friends, they lack understanding and information about Fefu's inner life and marriage. They look like close friends, but in reality they do not know much about Fefu, who only let them know what she wants them to know:

CINDY: She's unique. There's no one like her

CHRISTINA: Thank God.

(Cindy gives the drink to Christina.)

CINDY: But she is lovely you know. She really is.

CHRISTINA: She's crazy.

CINTY: A little. She has a strange marriage.

CHRISTINA: Strange? It's revolting. — (Fornes 11)

Cindy and Christina's discussion about Fefu's personality and marriage shows the lack of understanding among these women. They only find Fefu is peculiar and are not aware of her inner pain inflicted by her problematic relationship with her husband Philip. Furthermore, Fefu's women friends acknowledge her adventurous character:

CINDY: Do you like Fefu?

CHRISTINA: I do... she confuses me a little. —I try to be honest...and I wonder if she is... I don't mean that she doesn't tell the truth. I know she does. I mean a kind of integrity. I know she has integrity too.... But I don't

know she's careful with life... **something bigger than the self**...I suppose I don't mean with life but more with convention. I think she is **an adventurer** in a way. Her mind is adventurous. I don't know if there is dishonesty in that. But in adventure there is taking chances and risks, and then one has to, somehow, have less regard or respect for things as they are. That is, regard for a kind of convention, I suppose. I am probably ultimately a conformist, I think. And I suppose I do hold back for fear of being disrespectful or destroying something—and I admire those who are not. But I also feel they are dangerous to me. I don't think they are dangerous to the world; they are more useful than I am, more important, but I feel some of my life is endangered by their way of thinking.

(Fornes 31; emphasis added)

This brief exchange between Cindy and Christina clearly affects their conformity and Heidi's defiance and transgressive character. As Heidi's friend Cecilia admits,

We cannot survive in a vacuum. We must be part of a community, perhaps 10, 100, 1000. It depends on how strong you are. But even the strongest will need a dozen, three, even one who sees, thinks and feels as he does... As we grow we feel we are strange and fear any thought that is not shared with everyone. (31)

Besides Cecilia's statements, Emma recites what Sheridan Fry has written in the long passage "The Science of Educational Dramatics": "society restricts us, school straight jackets us, civilization submerges us" (Fornes 31). According to Emma and Sheridan Fry, women are "creation of God's consciousness coming now slowly and painfully into recognition of ourselves," and civilization is "a circumscribed order in which the whole has not entered." (31) In meeting environment as "our true mate that clamors for our reunion,"

[We] will seize all, learn all, know all here, that we may fare further on the great quest! The task of Now is only a step towards the task of the Whole!

Let us then seek the laws governing real life forces, that coming into their own, they may create, develop and reconstruct. Let us awaken life dormant! Let us, boldly, seizing the star of our intent, lift it as the lantern of our necessity, and let it shine over the darkness of our compliance.

(Fornes 47-48)

This is presented as Fornes' manifesto, illustrating her position as a woman, who is aware of the predicaments of women and the imminent change. From the alienation between women and men, and between women themselves, Fornes shows how easy it is for women to be alienated from their selves as well. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler states that:

When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic, and the other fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender if conditioning these judgments...this is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make. (214)

It should be emphasized here that the interpersonal relationship in this community of women is never easy. As Fefu describes in the opening scene, women's relationship with other women is often characterized by jealousy, hatred, and resentment:

Men have natural strength. Women have to find their strength, and when they do find it, it comes forth with bitterness and it's erratic...Women are restless with each other. They are like live wires ... either chattering to keep themselves from making contact, or else, if they don't chatter, they avert their eyes...like Orpheus...as if a god once said, "and if they shall recognize other, the world will be blown apart." (Fornes 15)

When they are together, women can only chat or resent, but not share with each other their own experiences. This situation is proved true between Fefu and her women

friends who gather and chat but seldom interact or share.

In the play, Julia is presented as the foil of Fefu. As Gayle Austin observes, Julia is “an antagonist or foil to the heroine” (77). These two main characters of the play show two ways of paralyzing women by internalized oppression. Fefu is a victim of patriarchy and she fearlessly expresses her pain and her desire to be a person of privilege like man. Julia is also a victim. But she accepts the inflicted pain and dares not strike back. Julia’s painful struggles against the pervasion of conventional womanhood reveals her powerlessness. Julia is hysterical at one end of the continuum, while Fefu is a feminist on the other end. Both of them have protested against patriarchal authority. However, Julia suffers from hallucination of being persecuted. Penny Farfan correctly observes, “in the 1930s context in which the play is set, Julia’s physical symptoms both express and suppress her resistance to women’s subordination within patriarchal society” (444). As the foil to Fefu, Julia’s illusory struggles with the misogynous Judges actually reflects Fefu’s internal pain,

The human being is of the masculine gender. The human being is a boy as a child and grown up he is a man. Everything on earth is for the human being, which is man. To nourish him. —There are evil things on earth, and noxious things. Evil and noxious things are on earth for man also. For him to fight with, and conquer and turn its evil into good. So that it too can nourish him. —There are Evil Plants, Evil Animals, Evil Minerals, and Women are Evil. —Woman is not a human being. She is: 1. — A mystery. 2— Another species. 3—As yet undefined. 4— Unpredictable; therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil. — If a man commits and evil act, he must be pitied. The evil comes from outside him, through

him and into the act. Woman generates the evil herself... (Fornes 35)

This general view of women typifies Simone de Beauvoir's seminal remarks about women: the self refers always to man, while she remains to be his Other, lacking a self of her own. According to Helene Keyssar, Julia and Fefu are the "most complex and perplexing of the characters, each woman [in the play] has her own specific voice, her own desires and differences" (99).

Fornes lets Julia die in the strange and half-surrealistic final scene, which suggests multiple possibilities. Surrealism aims "to create something more real than reality itself, something of greater significance, that is, than a mere copy of what we see" (Gombrich 470-471). In this view, Fefu's insistence on Julia's fighting and not surrendering when she feels she is running out of strength builds a climax to the final scene. Feeling fearful and trapped, Fefu accuses Julia of giving in to death and demands Julia to get up from her wheel chair and fight with her. Fefu violently shakes Julia's wheel chair, while Julia states that she is too exhausted to fight. When they are discovered by the horrified Christina, Fefu exits with a pistol in hand. Then a shot is heard and blood is seen on Julia's forehead. The play ends with Fefu's return with a dead rabbit, saying, "I killed it... I shot...and killed it...Julia..." Julia's wound, the dead rabbit: "Fefu turns Julia's head to look into her eyes...Julia looks away... [Fefu] looks into Julia's eyes... Julia closes her eyes... Julia looks at Fefu... [Fefu] covers

Julia's eyes with her hand... (Fornes 39-40)". Julia's death certainly shocks the audience but it allows Fefu to move into a new phase of life. Beverley Byers Pevitts has argued that the death of Julia signifies the symbolic killing of woman as created by the dominant culture in order to enable the emergence of a new self-determined female identity. As Fornes reflects,

often the violent moment has to do with the violence of ending the work. ...It could be that it's so violent for me that I transfer it to the stage. But to remember of the audience who doesn't have the same sense of loss when it's over, its' a shock, right? (103)

Fornes shows Fefu's desperation in leaving behind her performative self; she refuses to live a handicapped life defined by confinement, be it physical or emotional. As Helene Keyssar elaborates that Fefu refuses "to let Julia go" and celebrates her own move "to the symbolic terrain [where she] kills the woman-as-victim...in her own terms in order to ignite the explosion of a community of women" (215). By killing Julia, who is seen as the passive victim of patriarchal oppression, Fefu kills the submissive part of herself. And through such a symbolic act, the community of Fefu's friends will probably lead to some transformation, to some extent. Through Julia, Fornes points out the cause of Fefu's inner pains, that is, although Fefu observes gender norms, she does not want to accept her subordinate position. Her gender-based performance only results in a tamed body, but not a tamed soul. Performance is not real and what Fefu desires is a "real" self, an autonomous self capable of making choice and decisions on her own.

Beneath a brassy, adventurous appearance, Fefu is struggling hard to deal with her rage, dependency, and self contempt. Viewing Fefu's shocking remarks and aggressive behavior, one may conclude that a woman in a traditional community is a precarious self. If such a person is located in a modern community defined as friends circle, she will eventually emerge as a self in the process of becoming. As seen in the play, women not only constitute a community of their own but they also exert influence on others and are being influenced by that same community.

Gayle Austin also notes that in *Fefu and Her Friends*, the oppressive male figure has been "pushed offstage" and thus "his control [has] been lessened by his absence" (80). Philip's absence does not weaken his domination; men remain a constant threat to women's relationship in their women's circle. Catherine Schuleter observes,

Fornes' mirror reflects disturbing images of patriarchy in general and of male behavior in particular, images that will be offensive to audiences who are hungry for traditional male heroism and who demand evidence that patriarchy is still a viable cultural system. (224)

The presence of Fefu's husband Philip, her brother Robert, and the male gardener can be felt everywhere, although they are absent on the stage. Allowing men to stay behind the curtains, Fornes aims to explore the multi-faceted gender relations. As Assunta Bartolomucci Kent observes,

this subtractive method of interrogating sexism rather than one particular female-male relationship exemplifies the subtlety with which Fornes stages the complex workings of gender relations. (132)

The unseen male characters represent the larger patriarchal power that both silences and forces the women characters to recognize their differences. As Ann C. Hall notes, “By removing male characters from the stage in *Fefu and Her Friends*, the play demonstrates the persistent effect men and the patriarchy have upon women” (3). As evidenced in the play, most women’s lives are still influenced or held by men even when the latter is not present. As Deborah R. Geis comments, “nearly all of the monologues in *Fefu and Her Friends*, up to Emma’s lecture, dwell on the characters’ sense of identity as defined in relationship to (or, more accurately, in contradiction to) their views of men” (296). Emma admits to Fefu that she “thinks[s] about genitals all the time” and that she is amazed that “people act as if they don’t have genitals” (Fornes 27). Such statements, according to Penny Farfan, “may signify an intuitive awareness on her part of the operation of a sex/gender system that naturalizes culturally constructed gender norms by obscuring their superimposition on sexed bodies” (446). Through their conversations, Fornes provides the audiences with a glimpse of the intimate relationships between eight women and their struggles with gender, love, self, violence, sex and death.

By presenting men as threats and women friends as allies of men, Fefu finds it difficult in defining her self because, as Melanie Klein explains what constitutes our selves,

Everything good or bad that we have gone through from our earliest days onward: all that we have received from the external world and all that we have felt in our inner world, happy and unhappy experiences, relationships to people, activities, interests and thoughts of all kinds—that is to say, everything we have lived through—makes part of ourselves ... (111)

The strained relationship with women makes Fefu's self fashioning filled with confusion and frustration. Her daily performance according to prevailing gender norms is constantly challenged by her rising desire for dignity and integrity as an independent being.

What is interesting is that women learn from each other during the fund raising rehearsal and allow women's communal relationship to flourish. This kind of gathering is the basis of personal theatre, characterized by the use of a private, domestic space and by the development of a specific form of personal dialogue or conversation "built in mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation [...] This is the dialogue of present time, caught up in the movement of history and development without the secure fourth wall of formal closure" (Case 46). As Helena Keyssar asserts, "Often, one or another of the women does not understand each other, but what one says to another changes the other before our eyes" (99). Similar to Fefu and Julia's confession of their internal pain, their friends such as Cindy also relates her nightmare, in which she was sexually molested by men (Fornes 32); while Paula ponders on the course of a love affair to Sue and confronts Cecilia, her

former lover, about their relationship (Fornes 37), and Emma to come into consciousness (Fornes 28). Diane Lynn Moroff is correct in her observation that, “To *listen* to these characters is often to hear insecurity, fear, and tentativeness, while to *look* at them is to see a community of women variously empowering one another” (33). By sharing their own experiences, nightmares, or pains, women in this community empower themselves. In her conversation with Emma, Fefu realizes the discrepancy between gender performance and a woman’s inner wish for a real self,

FEFU: I thank you. (*Fefu becomes distressed. She sits.*) I am in constant pain. I don’t want to give in to it. If I do I am afraid I will never recover....It’s not physical, and it’s not sorrow. It’s very strange Emma, I can’t describe it, and it’s very frightening....It is as if normally there is a lubricant...not in the body... a spiritual lubricant...it’s hard to describe...and without it, life is a nightmare, and everything is distorted.
(Fornes 29)

It is through the interaction with her women friends that Fefu is transformed from a passive woman into an active seeker of the “authentic” self. The community of women thus serves a dual role first by acknowledging Fefu her performance-based existence among men and then by assisting Fefu in discovering a self of her own.

A Precarious Self in the Making

Similarly, Heidi’s relationship with her girlfriends is also characterized by tension and support. Charlotte Canning writes that “Everything happens to [Heidi], she does not drive the action of the play...Heidi seems to be more than a passive presence

in her friends' lives." (168). Heidi cherishes her relationship with her women friends, treating them as her source of inspiration. As Adrienne Rich notes the importance of women's community to women's identification:

Woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community; the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.* (Compulsory Heterosexuality 657)

Though Heidi tries hard to protect and preserve her same-sex friendship, she feels abandoned and disillusioned as her friends' move on in life. Heidi turns out to be a strong, intelligent, and successful woman who does not depend on a man for happiness and security. This feeling of desertion is particularly intense for Heidi in her relationship with her best friend Susan.

Heidi and Susan are presented as bright, upper-middle-class women who are conscious of the feminist movement in the mid-sixties. In her cultivation of her gendered self, Heidi values her relationship with and recognition of her women friends. She seeks their approval and is eager to define herself in relation to them. When a seemingly desirable young man Chris Boxer, the President of the Student Council, invites her to a dance, Heidi refuses instantly, saying "I am sorry. I can't leave my girlfriend" (Wasserstein 163). This shows Heidi's allegiance with Susan. Heidi is

obviously overwhelmed by her own conflicting feelings: “sort of want to dance...sort of want to go home... sort of don’t know what you want” (Wasserstein 164). She wants to get acquainted to the charming young fellow. At the same time, she clings to her girl friend Susan in fear as she feels insecure in the unfamiliar surroundings. Hoping for emotional attachment and intimacy, Heidi comes to the school dance only to end her dance in reading a book, alone. It is clear that Heidi desires attachment, but she also yearns for independence and individuation with support from Susan. Heidi cannot negate herself in her relationship with men. However, as a trendy person, Susan celebrates feminism after her graduation from college. It is Susan who introduces Heidi to feminist thoughts, thus allowing Susan to get the position as an Executive VP for in a new production company, because they “want[ed] someone with a feminist and business background” (Wasserstein 209).

After the consciousness-raising experience at Ann Arbor (Wasserstein 178), Heidi is dedicated to feminism. Under the group leader Fran’s inspiration, Heidi regards solidarity among women as a possible way for women’s empowerment and transformation. As David Richards cogently observes, “sisterhood strikes [Heidi] as the path of the future: women supporting and celebrating one another in communal solidarity” (6). This conviction about women’s coalition is reinforced by Fran, the organizer of the rap group, who advocates the importance of seeking what one really

wants, inviting other women to move away from their stereotypical roles as wives, mothers, or subordinates in their workplace:

Heidi, every woman in this room has been taught that the desires and dreams of her husband, her son, or her boss are much more important than her own. And the only way to turn that around is for us, right here, to try to make what *we* want, what *we* desire to be, as vital as it would undoubtedly be to any man. And then we can go out there and really make a difference!

(Wasserstein 181)

In Fran's words, women have been universally subjugated under gender-based patriarchal norms and values. Only by solidarity among women and women's self-consciousness can women really make a difference in their lives. The consciousness-raising scene in Ann Arbor serves as the watershed in Heidi's construction of her selfhood. Bette Madl also points out that the consciousness-raising scene "evokes the images of sisterhood that had prevailed during what is now recognizable as a particular phase of feminism" (124). Through Fran's challenge, Heidi comes to realize the damage caused by male chauvinism on women's self development.

As Cortney Cronberg Barko argues,

In *The Heidi Chronicles*, female unity is much more prevalent in the first act of the play than in the second act. Jill, Fran, Susan, Becky, and Heidi all meet for the Huron Street Ann Arbor Consciousness-Raising Rap Group, in which the women encourage each other to pursue their own individual dreams.

(132)

Heidi eventually becomes a scholar specializing in women artists' history.

Due to her friendship with Susan, Heidi sees a stark difference. Heidi regards

Susan as her best friend, but Susan takes Heidi only as her teenage girl friend, who is too idealistic to be treated as a grown-up. As Susan states, “This really has a feeling of completion for me. Full circle. Heidi and I grew up together. We were *girl* friends. But I wanted her to be able to meet my *women* friends” (Wasserstein 182). According to Susan, Heidi is associated with her girlhood, when she tended to define herself in relation to men. In the opening scene, Susan leaves Heidi alone because her attention is caught by a young man who resembles Bobby Kennedy with a superficial charm of twisting and smoking at the same time (Wasserstein 161). In order to attract him, Susan puts on a necklace and rolls up the waist of her skirt. This incident shows that Susan is a gendered woman, who accentuates her feminine traits in order to meet the male gaze and desire:

SUSAN: You know, as your best friend, I must tell you frankly that you’re going to get really messed up unless you learn to take men seriously.
HEIDI: Susan, there is absolutely no difference between you and me and him. Except that he can twist and smoke at the same time and we can get out of gym with an excuse called “I have my monthly.” (Wasserstein 164)

As a contrast, Heidi is a defender of feminism and she devotes herself to the abolishment of sexism and advocates equality. As Scoop comments in the first scene, Heidi is “one of those true believers who didn’t understand it was just a phase” (173). By the last scene, Heidi still impresses Scoop as a true believer: “So I was right all along. You were a true believer” (247).

Heidi feels estranged by Susan's adherence to social and cultural norms instead of embracing feminism as a social movement. Susan falls back into a stereotypical role of a business woman who is characterized by greed and power. She responds to Heidi's question in the last scene:

HEIDI: Susie, do you ever think that what makes you a person is also what keeps you from being a person?

SUSAN: I'm sorry, honey, but you're too deep for me. By now I've been so many people, I don't know who I am. And I don't care. Laughs. Honey, I've been thinking a lot about you and how much I love you, and I promise I have the answer for both of us. (Wasserstein 224)

Susan calls herself a "wild, practical, and fifty-percent rayon" capable of change with time for survival's sake (Wasserstein 209); but she is also presented as a lost soul who fails to define her self. She is confused by what she wants and what the patriarchal society imposes on her. As she told Heidi,

Heidi, you and I are people who need to commit. I'm not political anymore. I mean, equal rights is one thing, equal pay is one thing, but blaming everything on being a woman is just passé. (Wasserstein 226)

Susan has given up her feminist position for pragmatic consideration. She changes to a practical woman who fits into the existing social and cultural system for survival and recognition. In Bette Mandl's words, "Susan has left behind all that Heidi still believes in. She has moved into the 'system.' The sense of betrayal and abandonment Heidi feels is precisely that of someone who had counted on family loyalty, the ongoing support of sisterhood, above all" (124). In treating Heidi's relationship with her girl friend Susan,

Wasserstein shows the temporality of bonding or sisterhood among women. Individual differences such as personal beliefs or choice can easily destroy the rapport between women. But Susan's change serves as a lesson for Heidi, who comes to have a better understanding of Susan's "problem": "What makes you [Susan] a person is also what keeps you from being a person" (Wasserstein 224). For Susan, the compliance with social trend and dutiful observation of gender performance wins her recognition and acceptance in society, which, according to Heidi, causes inner hurt and the loss of being a whole person. As a contrast to Susan, Heidi chooses to become a woman of integrity.

It is interesting to note how easy it is for a woman to be silenced amidst a group of men. In television talk show, Heidi is silenced by the voices of two men, Scoop and Peter, her old friends who also appear on the show. Heidi also feels alienated during her rambling speech at the women's luncheon, because it is framed as the self-pitying ramblings of a woman in the process of a nervous breakdown (Wasserstein 203). As

Heidi remarks,

I'm embarrassed—no, humiliated—in front of every woman in that room. I'm envying women I don't even know. I'm envying women I don't even like...And I certainly don't want to be feeling this way about "Women, Where Are We Going"...And Suddenly I stop competing with all of them. Suddenly I'm not even racing. ...It's just that I feel stranded. And I thought the whole point was that we wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the point was that we were all in this together. (Wasserstein 231)

Heidi yearns for connection in a community of women, seeing it as a way out of her

own entrapment. She feels sad when she eventually finds that she is the only one to remain true to fighting for independence. Heidi's alienation is highlighted when she delivers her speech at the alumnae gathering. Heidi feels stranded, isolated or abandoned: "If we were all in this together, why does it feel so desperate now? ...That is not the 'We'What's missing is the 'We'" (Rothstein 28). For the first time, Heidi realizes that she is fighting for her self alone. Heidi feels betrayed because her women friends have chosen to live a gendered life, taking refuge in the prevailing patriarchal system, which seems to offer women a comfortable and stable life and social-moral acceptance. As Heidi points out the essence of Scoop and Lisa's marriage, Scoop "married her [Lisa] because she's blandish" (Wasserstein 202); he wants his wife to make him "a home and a family and a life so secure that [he] could with some confidence go out into the world each day and attempt to get an A" (Wasserstein 201).

Susan Borko observes that, "[a]s her female friends drift apart and grow obsessed with their professional ambitions, Heidi realizes that she must find a voice and authority within herself, distinct from these women" (135). Heidi comes to realize that she cannot rely on others, not even her women friends, in her quest for selfhood and fulfillment in life. As Scoop rightly observes, Heidi wants "self-fulfillment. Self-determination. Self-exaggeration" (Wasserstein 201) in life as opposed to sacrificing herself for developing her husband's potentials. And Heidi takes the

realization of her potential as more important than “making you and your children tuna-fish sandwiches” (Wasserstein 173).

In the play, Wasserstein highlights Heidi’s problematic self-fashioning which moves between her ardent desire for self development and fulfillment on the one hand and her uncertainty and doubts resulted from her own isolated position amidst her women group. Heidi is troubled by her own mixed feeling when she considers Lisa’s marriage. There is no room for autonomy, self-expansion and definition in Lisa’s marriage with which Lisa is expected to observe gender norms and perform her gender roles accordingly. But she envies Lisa for her secured life and stable social-marital status. As a feminist, Heidi firmly believes that a woman should develop her potentials. However, she also envies those conforming women, who enjoy marital bliss, familial stability and social security. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it, the play is not merely a chronicle of an individual as its title suggests,

It is an interpretation of our history within a particular discursive constellation, a history in which we are both subjects of and subjected to social construction. She is not determined by external elements and she herself is not merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather, she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated. (*Feminist Studies* 9)

Viewed in this light, the play represents a chronicle of its time when Heidi’s quest and uncertainties reflect the quest and uncertainties of her time, of her generation of

awakened women.

As seen in the play, Heidi's search for a self is shaped by two forces, namely, her relationship with other women, and socio-political forces. Heidi's relationship with her friends, male and female, forms the interpersonal tension upon which she launches her self-defining journey. While men often define themselves through individuation and separation from others, women often define themselves in terms of their affiliations and relationships with others. In her relationship with men, Heidi realizes that she does not want to be an object of men's desires. In her relationship with women, Heidi seeks solidarity and attachment, but comes to learn that one has to rely on one's own effort in constructing one's self.

It is apparent that feminist movements serve as the socio-political backdrop for Heidi's quest for self-identity. That is to say, accentuated by her frustration, disillusionment and confusion caused by her troubled self, Heidi's self-definition is very much a part of the sociopolitical landscape of her time. Barbara Kachur has rightly noted,

[Wasserstein's] preoccupation with bringing to stage the anxiety, despair and confusion women face in their search for self in a contemporary world that continually changes the rules... (31)

In presenting Heidi's inner turmoil in the process of her re-fashioning her female self, Wasserstein portrays a precarious self in the shaping within a community of women.

Heidi's self-searching journey elucidates Wasserstein's philosophy of women's self-identity as an ongoing process of becoming. At the end of the play, Heidi has moved closer to formulating her self without denying her attachment to her women friends and without forfeiting her own potentiality. As Wasserstein focuses on a woman's individual growth within a community of women, her view about women's solidarity is considered ambiguous and fluid with no serious commitment to women's cause, according to Jill Dolan. However, the playwright makes her position very clear in an interview:

Why call it 'feminist'? You'd never ask a man, 'Is this a masculinist play.'
I didn't write it as either a feminist tract or a non-feminist tract. I wasn't
setting out to be didactic in any way. (Ouderkirk 11)

Such a response supports what Wasserstein has achieved in the play, which is to explore the (re)fashioning of a female self in women communities. By creating such an environment for her women characters, Wasserstein explores women's potentialities and difficulties in their quests for selfhood. The environment characterized by a sense of sisterhood provides women with the space and environment to develop intellectually and emotionally. Such a journey is never easy and the open-endedness of Wasserstein's play suggests potentiality and possibility.

Heidi's choice of raising an adopted daughter Judy alone without a husband or marriage, providing potential audience a feminist vision of better future. As Borko

states,

Heidi can be better viewed and appreciated as an admirable and courageous woman for taking on the responsibility of raising a child without the assistance of Scoop or any other man, Heidi will raise her daughter Judy to be much like herself, a strong, intelligent, and successful woman who will not need to depend on a man for happiness and security.

(135)

Heidi's self-reliance at the end shows her readiness and determination to brave the world alone with her heightened sense of selfhood and subjectivity. Heidi's adoption of Judy suggests hope in the younger generation. As Sylvia Barack Fishman states in *A*

Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community:

Within the Jewish feminist world, lines have been sharply drawn over issues of family and parenthood. At one end of the ideological spectrum, some Jewish feminists dismiss the importance of the traditional, normative family, insisting that the nuclear family is not central to Jewish continuity. They assert that there are other types of relationships and households in which children may be born and initiated into the Jewish community, and that arrangements outside heterosexual unions can offer companionship and intimacy.

(46)

Some literary critics think Heidi returns to the conventional womanhood since she could not gain support from her women friends, attaching herself to the little baby for solace. For instance, Marie Syrkin feels Jewish women could revise their moral values of motherhood and recognize, on a personal level, "some forms of achievement can be gained only through the loss of a vital aspect of womanhood" (9). Other critics think that Heidi would live a different life through her life with Judy, who will be an extension of her. Heidi herself expresses Judy will be "the heroine for the

twentieth-century” (Wasserstein 248). As Bette Mandl comments, “Heidi’s hope of a better future for Judy could be framed as a feminist vision of possibility” (126). Such an ending for Heidi reveals Wasserstein’s positive attitude and the possibility of women’s transformation through women’s solidarity. Heidi and her daughter Judy, thus, create a world of possibility at the end of the play, suggesting a future when women may have a better future:

Well, I have a daughter, ... [and] there is a chance, just a million-notion, that Pierre Rosenbaum and Judy Holland will meet ... And he’ll never tell her it’s either/or , baby. And she’ll never think she’s worthless unless he lets her have it all. And maybe, just maybe, things will be a little better. And, yes, that does make me happy. (Wasserstein 246-247)

Wasserstein tackles Heidi’s configuration of her self by emphasizing her free-will and independence. Heidi dramatizes the dilemma faced by a modern feminist in the 1980s when women like Heidi rejected marriage and patriarchal domination in search of selfhood, they might feel lost or confused at times. In Wasserstein’s play, the self is no longer a fixed entity but a fluid state. Heidi’s conception of herself is always one in the making, one that is subjective, active, dynamic and changing. However, such a self is not impossible to be coherent and authentic especially in the emergent community of women.

The Two Playwrights’ Treatments of Solidarity and Self-in-Relation

Both Heidi and Fefu quest for self in communities of women. They emphasize

the importance of self-in-relation, while yearning to transcend the boundaries of traditional womanhood. In performing their relational selves in specific women's communities, these two women characters are led to see that interpersonal relationship among women may not assist women in their quests for subjectivity or selfhood as many assume or believe. Fornes and Wasserstein use unconventional dramatic devices to present women's self fashioning in defining communities. Fornes stages four simultaneous scenes in separate rooms, so that the audience is asked to move through the four settings. The fourth wall of the stage is removed and the audience takes turn to watch the play performed on different stages. According to Assunta Bartolomucci Kent, Fornes "[employs] innovative, even startling, textual and performative images in order to expose suppressed truths about (women's) social circumstances" (119). Fornes comments on this form of her play in an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig:

I was thinking about what makes conventional theatre... I realized that what makes my plays unacceptable to people is the form, more than the content... *Fefu and her Friends*, although it has very profound things in it, is a middle-class play. It is about nice middle-class girls from Connecticut... It's mild. What makes people almost vicious must be its form. Because there are many plays that have outrageous things going on, but they have a conventional structure so people don't care. Isn't that curious? (164-165)

Using such an unconventional form, Fornes brings out the temporality and complexity of the communication between and among women.

Compared with Fornes' unconventional dramaturgy in conveying her concern about women's construction of selves in connection with their women friends, Wasserstein's thematic approach to women's issues proves the politics of women's empowerment in *The Heidi Chronicles*. As Jill Dolan observes,

Wasserstein also shifted the typical American dramaturgical emphasis from fathers and sons to mothers and daughters in all of her plays, viewing gender as a site of solidarity as well as oppression. She focuses on mother-daughter relationships not as an essentialist paradigm of cozy mutual narcissism, but as a battleground of values and generations. (448)

In Heidi's case, Wasserstein presents the same-sex relationship among women as the basic situation to explore solidarity as well as patriarchal oppression. Sisterhood facilitates and also hinders Heidi's quest for self. Her experience in the Consciousness Raising Rap Group enlightens Heidi that a woman's self can be realized through her connection with other women, and solidarity among women facilitates women's liberation. Inspired by such a feminist view, Heidi confirms her belief in feminism and the affinity between women. However, other women's subsequent choice to succumb under patriarchal rule leaves Heidi in bewilderment and disappointment. She feels marginalized and alienated not by men but also by her women friends, who are supposed to assume subjugated positions under oppressive patriarchal system. In the play, psychological hurt is inflicted not in man-woman relationship but in woman-woman relationship.

By presenting women's process of self-formation in a web of relationship among women friends, both Fornes and Wasserstein deal with politics in their plays.

Elaborating on what is meant by political, Wasserstein explains in an interview:

It depends on what you see as political. Politics on the largest level is from each according to their ability. Nine girls taking a curtain call can be seen as political. It's important in terms of feeling legitimate. So is the fact that men can come to my plays and laugh, and that some girl from New Jersey comes to the plays and says, "This is my story." And if my story can reach her, maybe she can tell her story. That is very important. Comedy does not segregate the political. (Betsko 351)

Wasserstein refuses to ascribe only a few abstract attributes to the self, but creates "her women characters in the subject position" (Keyssar *Feminist Theatre and Theory* 1).

Fornes also has her own understanding of the politics of women's emancipation. Once she states that she is at odd with radical feminists who "don't consider me a feminist, but a great many people who are sympathetic consider me a feminist and see my characterizations of men as a harsh criticism" (Stuart 15). Despite what the author has said, her play speaks louder than herself. The women characters' individual voices and their empowerment through conversation with each other demonstrate that Fornes focuses on women's relationship with each other as the discourse for individual woman's construction of herself. As Diane Lynn Moroff correctly observes,

Fornes' persistent representation of women places her within a tradition of American social dramas about women's lives as shaped by society and culture, a tradition marked by such playwrights such as Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, and Lillian Hellman. (14)

In this feminine tradition of drama, that is, the emphasis on social-cultural shaping of women's internal subjugation, Fornes gives an insightful account of a woman's individuation process, the shaping of the self:

Presenting and urging the transformation of persons and our images of each other. This latter form of change requires not what we remove or have removed disguises that conceal us from our "true" selves, but that we imagine men and women in a continual process of becoming other... [Drama] is the cultural space that most readily locates the viewer/reader outside, separate from another. Drama... may lure us to see and shape others as identical to ourselves, but that is not what its best work is about ... [rather, it is its] ability to enable us to acknowledge the otherness of others. (93,103)

Diane Lynn Moroff argues that what Maria Irene Fornes stresses is "the redemptive possibilities of the relationships between women" (123). One may conclude that Fornes really shows her feminist political concern in the form of women's empowerment through the character's self-realization as well as through solidarity among women.

Both Fornes and Wasserstein examine the co-relation between the self-searching person and her defining community of women, whose perception of self can easily be seen systematically subordinated, belittled, and reduced to invisibility, subservient passivity, and self-sacrificial altruism by women's communities as the oppressive forces at times by upholding patriarchal values. It is Simone de Beauvoir who observes that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other" (xix). Linda Alcoff summarizes how the universality of such patriarchal conception of a self reinforces

women's sexist oppression:

To the extent cultural feminism merely valorizes genuinely positive attributes developed under oppression, it cannot map out future long-range course. To the extent that it reinforces essentialist explanations of these attributes, it is in danger of solidifying an important bulwark for sexist oppression: the belief in an innate "womanhood" to which we must all adhere lest we be deemed either inferior or not "true" women. (336)

Fornes and Wasserstein show how difficult it is for women to fight against such an assumption to allow their women characters to explore and develop their selves. Fefu openly expresses her yearning for independence and free-will. Heidi also repeatedly utters that women should develop their own potential. In essence, there may not be a ready answer to the question "who am I". Judith Butler contends that the conception of a self is an illusion, and the sexed/gendered self is merely a corporeal style. Women perform their identity through the imitation and repeated enactment of ubiquitous norms (139-140). Furthermore, the attributes and the requirements of the gender norms evolve with socio-historical changes. In the introductory essay to her book *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis claims that an individual's identity is constituted with a historical process of consciousness, which

is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledge available in the culture at given historical moments, an horizon that includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions The search for identity

may be, in fact, a “rewriting” of self in “relation to shifting interpersonal and political contexts. (8-9)

This notion of woman’s individual self evolving with social and historical changes, suggests that the construction of one’s selfhood is closely related to socio-political change.

In both plays, men are generally viewed as obstructive to the self-development of women, while women function as positive agents. The purpose of such a community of women is to help each woman break through the conditioning circumstances that lead to confine women, entrapping them in their womanhood and motherhood. The group dynamic also alleviates the feeling of isolation by helping the protagonist to see that she is not alone in her experiences. As Honor Moore puts it, “the consciousness-raising group is an instrument for getting women to speak—only when they name their experiences can they begin to grow” (xxxv).

Through monologue, dialogue, or speech to expose oneself and share one’s fear and loss with her friends, women in *Fefu and Her Friends* come to empower themselves. Sisterhood does help them to be aware of their situations and inspire them to develop their own potential and seek a life of fulfillment rather than a life of subjugation. Fornes employs radical approaches to set the structure, characterization, language, and theme in the play. Fefu’s relationship with her women friends and her quest for self allow Fornes to show her own feminine aesthetics. In an interview with

Rachel Koenig, Fornes relates the issue of a woman's aesthetic:

Not only is there a women's aesthetic, each woman has her own aesthetic and so does each man. It's like saying, "Is there a Hispanic aesthetic?" Of course there is. Your aesthetic is different from mine – each person has their own universe – but how could we, as women have nothing in common? That's not possible. We are different from men...

(Betsko and Koenig 163)

With such a view, Fornes presents an individualistic style of feminine aesthetics and her feminist political view on women's empowerment. Her exposure of the manipulative power of language is linked to feminist theories of the linguistic construction of women. Her experiments with dramatic techniques, such as the disruption of linear narrative and stage space, the destabilize action of established notions of monolithic reality, set the stage, for pluralistic and female modes of perception and expression, Fornes focuses on the assault on and disruption of language through the use of dialogue as subterfuge and by exposing language as an instrument of political power.

According to Wasserstein's dramatic presentation, women are not satisfied with a life just free of physical abuse or male-imposed violence. Women should be free from invisible socio-sexual oppression in life. For instance, women should be freed from the moral-psychological burden of performing too many gender-defined roles (Park 118). Through the presentation of Heidi's self-questing journey, Wasserstein traces the "myriad changes that women have to assimilate and reconcile themselves with other women during the last twenty years" (Kachur 31). She denounces and challenges the

traditional moral ideals of women that patriarchal society has taken for granted.

In delineating Heidi's confusion and frustration in her web of relationship with women, Wasserstein gives a dramatic expression to the notion of self. In the words of Jean Grimshaw,

always a more or less precarious and conflictual construction out of, and compromise between, conflicting and not always conscious desires and experiences, which are born out of the ambivalences and contradictions in human experience and relationship to others. (103-104)

Robert F. Gross also argues that,

in the plays of Wendy Wasserstein, we see the consequences of liberal individualist drama at an extreme. The self is paramount, but it is impoverished by its radical separation from others, and appears increasingly as an empty item. (53)

Wasserstein has approached the notion of a female self as a never ending process of constitution, which has no ontological essence or transcendental being. As William C. Boles argues, Wasserstein has her own "perspectives about not only the nature and role of the exclusive female community, but also the purpose of the relationships within these communities and even the playwright's political and agenda setting role in depicting the emerging issues of femininity" (77), and in presenting such a self in community. Wasserstein also probes the nature of women's community, pointing out the fact that women's individual autonomy cannot be granted or asserted by any external forces. It has to be initiated by the individual through self-reflection and

interaction with the group, which takes the form of defining women's communities in her plays.

As seen in the plays discussed in this chapter, the communities of women can exert positive or negative influence on female individuals either facilitating their quest for their desired newer selves or obstructing them from living an independent life characterized by subjectivity and fulfillment. Their struggles in the process, their sense of loss and uncertainties in their inner journey clearly confirm the complexity and difficulties involved. Instead of showing men as the obstacle to women's search for self, both Fornes and Wasserstein point to the fact that women can be the cause of women's frustration because the closeness of female bonds can mean bondage. The choice between autonomy and heteronomy cannot be fully resolved, but this is a question that can make or break the spirit of many enlightened women.

Conclusion

A Volatile Self in a Changing World

This study shows that, in the eyes of American female playwrights, the shaping of the female self is a developmental process. It denotes a journey of becoming during which women long for connectedness as well as freedom, individuality and relationality. Very often there are external and internal struggles when different communities impose gender norms and socio-moral demands on women. Some women may trade off their freedom for the sake of survival, but their performative conformity only brings out a rising sense of discomfort. They often feel disturbed by and discontent with their roles, their situations, and their choice. As women try to find comfort in same-sex friendship, the dialectic of female relations may further heighten their sense of disorientation. As seen in the plays discussed, care can come with (patriarchal) coercion, and for the enlightened female subjects they must find a way out by either re-defining interpersonal boundaries or terminating the relationship. As women must also negotiate with dominant values, residual influences or emergent roles in different communities, this search for a sense of the self can be a painful and lonely journey.

As shown in this study, many women playwrights critique the arbitrariness of gender roles, and in the plays discussed, they often end with an interplay between the

individual and the communal, the personal and the relational aspects of women's experience, celebrating the rise of inclusive, mutable, and dialogic subjectivities. Such a notion of self fashioning goes beyond the confines of the ethics of care, which emphasizes the importance of duty and care for others before one's search for self-fulfillment. These playwrights are eager to point out that women are capable of self-realization, that women are able to transform themselves spiritually.

It is clear from the plays discussed that women may differ in terms of race, ethnicity, origin, place, or history; yet they all share a common goal, that is, the search of a mode of existence that facilitates their self-fashioning. American women playwrights have incessantly explored women's inner turmoil and disturbances in various types of communities in order to bring out issues about women's identity crisis and to show how women struggle to attain a sense of self. Besides, in these women characters' unstable and conflict-ridden processes of becoming their selves, the communities surrounding these women have served as the arena of contesting values and troubled thoughts or disturbing views for women. By depicting such precarious selves, the women playwrights under study question the notion of self, as well as the potential bond or relationship between/among women, showing their views on developing one's personal potential through individual efforts and placing communal influences in a secondary position. At the same time, they also show that communal

recognition, especially moral support and psychological togetherness with women from the “we” community, is particularly important to those dis-oriented seekers of self.

They also point out that no matter what the nature or function of the defining community is, women’s self identification is closely related to social, economic, and sexual orientations. At the early part of twentieth-century America, because of the women’s suffrage movement and the first wave of women’s movement, the focus of women’s emancipation is placed on women’s economical, educational, professional, and political right, which are external to women’s psychological suffering. It is against such a social backdrop Sophie Treadwell presents women’s assertion of selfhood in the form of sexual freedom in *Machinal*. Maria Irene Fornes expresses disbelief in gender equality through her characterization of women in New England around the 1920s in *Fefu and Her Friends*. With the evolution of society, women’s politics takes a turn inward. That is to say, women dramatists turn to address women’s internal sufferings instead of focusing on their battered experiences. Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* and Marsha Norman’s *’night, Mother* are prime examples. Besides, ethnic or racial discrimination is also taken into consideration in their discussion of women’s emancipation. Lorraine Hansberry makes special contribution in treating African-American women’s internal disturbance of identifying or positioning themselves in the flux of racial and patriarchal tension in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the

latter part of the twentieth-century American drama, it is shown that the emergent communities of women are relatively more tolerable and open to women's personal development as compared to the dominant community and residual community. Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* is the prime example demonstrating how such a community interacts with an active self-seeker such as Heidi.

It is apparent that communities of women are not only presented as communal or social contexts in women's pursuit of selfhood, but also as a dialogic discourse. Through dialectical interaction with such defining communities of women, women playwrights in twentieth-century American drama examine, question, and negotiate with their performative self and argue for a new and better self, which is characterized by autonomy and authenticity and "real" selves. The so-called real or authentic selves only emerges which can be achieved through defiance against gender-based ethical norms. It is interesting to note that specific communities of women are not merely presented as obstructive forces to women's efforts of seeking personhood, they may be seen as an agent in helping women to recognize their selves. It is noted that by breaking from the communal restrictions provided by specific communities of women, women may develop close bonds or connection as a result. Furthermore, if women can assert themselves by transcending the communal expectation of women, they may learn to develop a harmonious interrelationship between themselves and their community.

By exploring the notion of a self and its construction in specific women's communities, all these women playwrights under discussion put forward their view that gender performativity is pervasive but not unconquerable. The fact that all female characters are first presented as ordinary women, performing traditional gender roles as submissive, compliant, and persistent women, who values care and connection to others highly and are insensitive to gender oppression reveals the playwrights' emphasis on women's consciousness. As seen in the plays, it is only when women exercise their subjectivity and are aware of their situation that they begin to think about selfhood and their rights. The young woman Helen Jones in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* is inspired to take action with her realization of sexual freedom and personal choice of motherhood. This is the case of Jessie Cates in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* who claims her control over her own mind and body through her suicidal act. The three Magrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart* and the Younger women in *A Raisin in the Sun* also exert their subjectivity when they are faced with communal crises. Heidi in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* asserts her self through her choice of single motherhood. Fefu in Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* transforms herself by symbolically murdering her foil Julia.

Such a configuration of the female self in women's communities is the women dramatists' expression of women's empowerment and transformation. They have

presented explicitly women's struggles to transcend and transform their role identity. The ordinary women in their plays have all undergone a journey of confusion, a struggle for liberation, and a longing for self-expression. They manage to break away from the shackles of social-moral ethos and fight for survival by relying on themselves and on communal rapport among women. For the majority of women, to follow and comply with dominant moral norms seem natural and normal. As Judith Butler states, "becoming a subject requires a kind of mastery indistinguishable from submission," and there are "political and psychic consequences to be wrought from such a founding paradox" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 30). The present study on selected plays by twentieth-century American women playwrights shows that their female characters are often dominated by their performative selves and brings out the fragility and precariousness of their emerging subjectivity. Though contingent, these women characters whose self is in the shaping, are presented as conscious women asserting the right of choice or deviating from dominant gender norms. Their consciousness of their predicament and their ability of self-critique allow these women to come to a better understanding of their selves with other women in various communities, such as the dominant community, residual community, and emergent community. To address common concerns or predicaments of women, the twentieth-century American women playwrights use their plays as a platform for the deliberation of feminist issues and for

discussions on the ethical violence imposed on women and the dialectical tension between the dual moral ideals of caring for others and caring for oneself.

The fact that many women dramatists end their plays with a hopeful note shows that they are in general supportive of and positive toward women's self (re)fashioning. As seen in the plays, relationships among women might not always be harmonious. It is also not as harsh or problematic or hostile as relationships between men and women, which are often presented in the form of gender wars in drama. In these dramatic texts, one notices jealousy, spiritual hatred, voidness, estrangement, misunderstanding, and loath among women, but it is still possible for them to establish rapport. With these optimistic endings, women playwrights stress the temporality of connection between women and highlight the beauty of emotional bonds. They also deal with the intricacy and delicacy of moral, emotional and psychological turmoil of their women characters in face of challenges, dilemmas, and confusion caused either by alienation or "betrayal" by their communities, as in the case of Fefu in *Fefu and Her Friends* and Heidi in *The Heidi Chronicles*.

Through the exploration of individual woman's struggle against their performative role selves as the first step forward self-formation, these women playwrights delineate modern American woman's disturbed psychological state in their journey toward personhood. At the same time their shared concern for women'

entrapment in gender roles and the process of individuation among women are dramatized, revealing the fact that women's constructions of the self may not be made simply out of personal choice but of discursive emotional and communal consideration. Their women characters' configurations of their selves are deeply influenced by other women who are treated as defining communities that set moral or communal norms for women. These American women playwrights present women as selves-in-community, where women characters are featured as performative selves in the early part of the plays when they perform according to dominant patriarchal norms and practices reinforced by their own habitual behavior and moral ideal of caring for others.

In the plays studied, the endings are loomed with possibilities. The endings are presented as epiphanic moments with women's re-fashioning their selves concomitantly and with the transformation of the community of women. Lorraine Hansberry's hopeful note to the ending of *A Raisin in the Sun* gives an open-ending to the play. Beth Henley ends her play with the three Magrath sisters' celebration of the eldest sister Lenny's thirtieth birthday in *Crimes of the Heart*, denoting these women's happiness and safety at the end. The three sisters succeed in finding their place in the community, through mutual understanding and support. Lenny is happy with Charlie Hills, the mysterious man from Memphis. Babe's future is promising as she develops a close relationship with the young lawyer. With men's help, Meg re-gains her voice and

will sing for them. In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Fefu finally shoots for real after repeated shooting games with her husband Philip. Whether or not Fefu has shot the rabbit or her friend Julia is not the central issue. The important point is that Fefu has chosen to take action, to make a change. Through the hopeful endings, the women dramatists under discussion state their feminist position on the issue of the shaping of the female self in women's communities, affirm and positive influence of same-sex relationship in facilitating women's growth and the fashioning of the self.

With such treatments of women's communities in fostering women characters' personhood, these women playwrights show their optimistic view of a better future for women. In exploring women's journey toward personhood, these women playwrights highlight women's interpersonal or intra-personal relationships provided in defining communities of women, be they dominant, residual, or emergent. It is emphasized that interpersonal relationships between women can be problematic because such relationships may be affected by perpetual patriarchal mentalities internalized by women themselves. In such cases, the majority of women in these communities can be regarded as men in disguise for they uphold patriarchal values regarding women's roles. They appear as dear friends, close relatives or family members of the female protagonists. The absent male figures such as the father in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, the Old Granddad in Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, the deceased father

Big Walter Lee in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Philip the female protagonist Fefu's husband in *Fefu and Her Friends*, and Scoop and Peter in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* all pose menace and malice upon women and regulate, or define the essence of womanhood and femininity in each play, leading to the self-searching women characters' sense of alienation and/or isolation in the communities of women. Women often feel their otherness in the community for they do not share the common values of their communities.

In the dominant community of women consisting of mother and daughter within domestic setting, for example, the daughters such as Jessie Cates in Norman's *'night*, *Mother* and the Young Woman Helen Jones in Treadwell's *Machinal* get very little support from their mothers in their personal developments despite their mothers' care and maternal love. They are troubled by the fact that they are treated as their mothers' properties or extensions. Such correlative relationship between one's search of selfhood and the confining communities of women is often noticed in twentieth-century American drama by women. Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* (1921), Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939), and Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* (1979) are prime examples in which the interplay and tension between the individual and the communal are explored.

In the residual community of women in which the moral framework presented in the form of ethics of care becomes a residual way of life, women often see individual

differences rather than commonality because of sibling rivalry or competition for the favor of the community members. The Magrath sisters illustrate the love-hate relationship among siblings in their attempts to gain the old patriarch's favor. The Younger daughters Ruth and Beneatha can hardly establish a rapport between them because of Walter Lee's intervention.

Furthermore, in the emergent community of women, which consists of women friends, classmates, or workmates, tension between the individual and the community may also take place. The nature of such a clash is best illustrated in *The Heidi Chronicles* in which Heidi is abandoned by her women friends for being a solitary seeker of self. Fefu in *Fefu and Her Friends* also experiences a stressful relationship with her women friends when she insists on being her own self and true to her self. While the emergent community of women welcomes individual differences and shows more tolerance toward women's searching for one's self, it may still lead to distance rather than intimacy among members of the community and may inflict hurt to the self-seekers. Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), *Isn't it Romantic* (1983), and Maria Irene Fornes' *Mud* (1983) are just a few more examples showing the female playwrights' interest in the polemics between self and community.

It is made apparent in the study that the more conservative the defining community, the more radical women will be in asserting their selfhood. In the dominant

community, women usually take extreme measures, such as Helen Jones and Jessie Cates. The neurotic woman in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* "re-fashions" herself as a new person capable of making life choices after murdering her husband. This violent act can be taken as her desperate fight against the oppressive patriarchal authority. In a comparable way, Jessie in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* proclaims her subjectivity and her control over her own destiny by committing suicide. It is the woman's protest through her own death. Such personal self re-constitution through death and separation may seem radical or dramatic but they signify the women characters' determination to assert their selves and gain autonomy and ownership of their selves. Through the assertion of their personhood, the dominant community of women is transformed from unsupportive to supportive.

In the residual community, with communal rapport as a feasible solution to easing the tensions between women, these self-seeking women are able to develop a sense of subjectivity. Three Magrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*, for example, enjoy a moment of harmony and unity, abandoning the estrangement that has long existed in their relationships. Through such a union, they succeed in defining themselves and establishing a communal bond. The Younger women in *A Raisin in the Sun* also choose to move into their new house and are ready to face future challenges together.

In an emergent community of women, Fefu's shooting of the disabled Julia with the wound on Julia's forehead signifies her determination to end the submissive aspect of her self. Such assertive and violent act signifies Fefu's transformation from a submissive and passive existence defined by her role identity to become an assertive and active person, who seeks to define her own self and refuses to surrender to fate. Heidi's final choice of single parenthood through adoption shows her desire for a better future, her acceptance of women's individual choice despite her disillusionment in a non-supportive community.

It is clear from the plays studied that regardless of the nature and function of the defining communities of women, all the female characters are portrayed as women who often take their performative selves that are relational as their internal and natural attributes at the beginning. However, their selves might be split or contradictory in some cases when women are conscious of their "real" selves. With such awareness, women are eager to maintain their harmonious connection with other women on the one hand, while acknowledging their personal differences and yearning for subjectivity on the other hand. These women seldom find their relationships with other women as supportive of their personal development. Instead, they seek moral and psychological support from their surrounding women's communities, while they gain their sense of self through personal individuation. American women playwrights in the twentieth

century have recurrently expressed their views that it is only when women succeed in achieving their personhood can they reach a state of harmony in their communities.

In examining the nature of these types of women communities, the selected women dramatists in the present study also take into consideration those socio-historical factors that contribute to women's self-fashioning. Sophie Treadwell shows how the dysfunction of mother-daughter relationship has its cause in the mechanized and dehumanized society since the early twentieth century when the rapid development and industrialization of the American society, as well as social mobility, have resulted in the estrangement and alienation of individuals not only from the community at large but also from their own selves, making it necessary for people to re-discover or re-define themselves in relation to their communities or social network. This process is especially urgent for women whose selves had been under-developed or un-recognized. Lorraine Hansberry points to the unfair racist social system, which traps African-Americans in a racist, sexist, and poverty-ridden existence. Wendy Wasserstein and Maria Irene Fornes scrutinize feminism as a socio-cultural position or attitude that is closely related to women's quest for self under communal influence. For example, the consciousness-raising group serves as an agent in the women characters' discovery journey in Wasserstein's play. She casts doubts on the feminist doctrines put forward by the second-wave women's movements, especially the "having all", who

believe that a woman could maintain the harmony between a successful career and a fulfilled family life. Through Heidi's final decision on single parenthood, Wasserstein suggests that the "having all" approach to or attitude toward life may cause women even more distress or deep psychological depression. Through Jessie's final struggle against the invisible socio-moral system, Marsha Norman upholds the view that "the personal is political" and points out the debris of women's internalization of gender norms. The Magrath sisters' paradoxical and controversial attitudes towards their mother's suicide further demonstrate Beth Henley's concern about Southern women's moral burden of their historical past.

As seen in the plays discussed, in order to stress on the polemics of the relationship between/among women, American women playwrights often present their women characters' communication in distinctive gendered pattern. For their women characters, language is a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it enhances mutual understanding since language is the tool for sharing personal experience among women and for self expression. As Jessie and her mother Thelma come to an understanding on the very night of Jessie's suicide. Meg Magrath in *Crimes of the Heart* exclaims that to express is the most basic human need. In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Fefu and her friends Emma, Christina, Paula, Cindy, and Julia are able to empower themselves through their dialogues. Expressing her own personal experience at the alumnae ceremony, Heidi

denounces her stereotypical view of women's community. But language may also hinder women's communication. Women may use language to distort, conceal, or omit information, aiming either to express their selves or to protect themselves by creating distance in their relationship with other women, or preventing them from forming bonds. Fefu is the typical example. She conceals her inner self by using verbal violence to disguise her compliance with patriarchal practices. Her brutality in words causes some of her friends, such as Cindy and Christina to admire her, or other friends such as Paula and Emma to distance themselves from her, or some as Julia to appreciate her. But such a manipulation of language prevents Fefu from achieving the sisterly bond as the Magrath sisters experience in *Crimes of the Heart*. Furthermore, the manipulation of language may also harm the mother-daughter relationship. Both Thelma in *'night, Mother* and the unnamed mother in *Machinal* distort or conceal information in their dialogues with their daughters at their own will, thus causing their daughter's alienation. It is also such same-sex power struggles that lead to disharmony in such women's communities.

The present study of selected twentieth century American women playwrights reveals that they all have employed various innovative techniques to address women's desires to escape from communal regulations and coercive forces of dominant mode of life in order to find a space for their fashioning of their selves. It is pioneering for

Treadwell to employ symbolic naming and ritualized life journey of the characters on stage at the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the subject matter of murdering one's husband also shows her daring thematic experiment in theatre that had unsettled her audience. Similarly, Hansberry's choice of the characters' American Dream of moving out of the ghetto was considered pioneering in the 1960s. Norman and Henley are both noted for their innovative treatment of the mother-daughter relationship as an exclusive community of women, juxtaposing it against the male-dominated canonical plays that focus mainly on father-son dichotomy.

Dismantling the fourth wall, Fornes presents the four scenes in *Fefu and Her Friends* on the stage simultaneously, thus demanding her audience to take shifting positions while watching the play. In this way, Fornes endows each of her woman characters with a personal voice, presenting the multiple dimensions or aspects that characterized gender relationship between men and women. Fornes also brings out the didactic function of the play in transforming her audiences. Her play can thus be regarded as a critique of drama when Fefu and her friends gather to do a theatrical rehearsal for a fund-raising event during which time the women characters question the everlasting influence of drama on human life and development. In the case of Wasserstein, she employs light humor and comic scenes to deliver her serious concern about women's moral-psychological conditions. This light-hearted approach to a

serious topic contributes to the marketing success of the play, allowing her to draw public attention to the women issue subsequently.

Viewed as a group, these women dramatists reveal the predicaments that women continue to face or suffer after more than one hundred years of women's struggle for liberation. For the majority of women, adhering to established gender norms seems to be the natural. With the presentation of women characters' performative selves and their subsequent struggles and transformation, the women dramatists draw the audience's attention to those social and political concerns that might have an impact on women's quest for an authentic self defined not by gender performativity but by self-actualization and subjectivity, not by collective forces or social/familial expectations and obligations but by personal choice or conviction. These women playwrights showcase different feminine aesthetics and sensitivities when dealing with women's relationship and women's communities into their works. They have made significant contribution to American drama by exploring the precarious self in exclusive communities of women.

The problematic interpersonal relationship among women elucidates these women playwrights' feminist politics and gender position,

The feminist "We" is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent.

The tenuous or phantasmatic status of the “we”, however, is not cause for despair or, at least, it is not only cause for despair. The radical instability of the category sets into question the foundational restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only of genders and bodies, but of politics itself. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 194)

The present study strongly substantiates Judith Butler’s views that the self in any women’s community is polemical not only because of the problematic relationship among/between women, but also because of the conflictual process in the process of individuation and in the shaping of the self, which accentuates the complexity of the issue. In their plays, women’s agitation, confusion, and disillusionment as well as their struggle for self-realization, are delineated and dramatized through conflict-ridden communities and contesting interpersonal relationships among women. Such a contextualization reveals the women playwrights’ feminist politics and their advocacy for women’s empowerment assisted not so much by external forces as by women’s own spiritual awakening, determination and self-reliance. These women playwrights let their women characters struggle for the realization of a free-willed self characterized by empowerment and freedom, which are presented as the essential prerequisites for achieving selfhood. As seen in the selected plays, women refuse to leave their communities. Instead they compromise in order to find a common point. In the process of seeking to define themselves by re-examining the performative aspect of the self,

their selves appear to be in a precarious state until they succeed in striking a balance between their gendered selves and their emerging selves that they call their own.

These American women playwrights single out how communities need women, and vice versa, but women experience perpetual exclusion, disillusionment, and disenfranchisement in the communal context. Most important of all, these dramatists affirm women's individual differences, shared concerns, and common interests. The solidarity of women in the dominant community is affirmed, although such moments of understanding may be fleeting. The sense of belonging to these communities of women is assumed. It is implicit in their acknowledgement of sisterhood, which celebrates the pleasures of sharing of experience including frustration, understanding and support, in women's fight for public recognition, personal happiness, and self-fulfillment in life. The feminine dialogic and discursive modes of communication, characteristic of women in different kind of communities of women, desperation, clearly elucidate the tension, doubt, agony women face and their determination to assert themselves. A close study of the selected plays shows that American women drama has gone a long way from its early depiction and discussion of women's conditions, including confusion, frustrations, and predicaments in women's communities where most women may have been "colonized" by patriarchal values and practices, to its focus on women's self-fashioning through dramatic treatment of women's position and positioning in a

rapidly changing social and cultural milieu. Their belief that the self is never fixed but is always in a fluid state of becoming supports these American women playwrights' view of women's communities as sites of contestation or negotiation, instead of fixed domains where familial or moral norms will always apply. These communities also serve as testing ground for the women characters whereby they re-examine their roles and subject positions in the family and the community. What is significant as revealed in these plays is that the playwrights have all moved away from the conventional either/or mode of thinking. Instead, they point out that women take the ethics of care seriously but they also yearn for autonomy and self-fulfillment. The emerging sense of self-consciousness accentuates a precarious, in-between state of women, who live simultaneously for-the-self and for-the-other. Instead of offering solutions to the problems presented, these playwrights create interesting women characters who are no longer angelic princesses, or loving mothers, or dutiful wives, in order to engage the audience in ongoing dialogues and debates on women's self-fashioning against a backdrop of social, moral, ethnic, or philosophical change.

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