

## DRAMATIC WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

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### Abstract

*Gender has been a more common basis of inequality than race, religion or caste because gender inequality seeps into the household while other forms of inequality start outside of the family. Being so deep-set in all cultures, gender bias results in a perforated fabric of society. The bandwagon of freedom initiated by Sartre was expected to include everyone, even women who have faced oppression in the name of being the weaker sex since time immemorial. It is a disappointment to notice that Sartre too, fails to give women their fair share of glory in his works. Sartre propagates his theory of freedom and choice; all 'men' are inherently free, quite literally! There are male characters, whom he projects as epitome of freedom but there is a poignant silence when it comes to his females characters who end up being secondary support to the men around, just as observed in the real world. This paper is aimed at a detailed analysis of women characters of Sartrean plays that never enjoy the limelight and are pushed into anonymity despite equal potential.*

**Keywords-**Women roles, Gender bias, Freedom, Choice.

### *Woman enjoys that incomparable privilege irresponsibility- Simone de Beauvoir*

The indisputable champion of controversy in twentieth century, post World-War II, Jean Paul Sartre stirred up ripples in the philosophical waters across nations with his notions of 'Freedom' 'Authenticity', 'Other', 'Bad faith', 'Nothingness' etc. Sartre's dramatic oeuvre comprising of his famed plays No-Exit, Dirty Hands, The Flies and The Respectable Prostitute is replete with existential themes. The characters are diverse people; backdrops variegated more often than not, from mythology to racism. Intrinsic should be to Sartre's freedom gender equality, as freedom can never be manifested as liberty and bias

simultaneously. Having had a lifelong poly-amorous relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, a staunch feminist, Sartre's portrayal of women in his plays vis-a-vis choice, responsibility and action is all the more noteworthy. Sartrean heroes survive at extremes with immediate calling for decision and action. How heroic are women of Sartre?

If Sartre's Orestes is the most formidable of his characters, who supplants the myth of fatality by a tragedy of freedom then his counterpart Electra is the most disappointing of her lot of Sartrean women. In the play, *The Flies*, the audience observes that both Orestes and Electra undergo a diametrical change as their characters journey forward. The indifferent stranger from Corinth is finally driven to murder and a passion to disentrail Argives, whereas burning with filial indignation, Electra promises action and vengeance only to flinch at the deciding moment.

The myth presents Orestes as the protagonist and Electra as the aid. That Sartre builds Electra, as an impulse is an intrinsic extension of the myth itself. The twist however, lies in the sudden withdrawal on Electra's part when she comes face to face with the pressing need for action. There is a stark conflict at the climax between the two characters. Orestes, the 'male' heir owes up to his assumed responsibilities towards Argos whereas the reckless princess cannot pull about enough courage to go through the actual act. She is fearful that by performing the dreaded act, she will lose the very play-toy, her anger that gives her life meaning. Electra says:

Oh, I wanted this to happen. And I –I want it now, I must want it...He is dead, and my hatred is dead, too...what was it then, I wanted? What? ...It's done my; my enemies are dead. For years and years I've revelled in the thought of this, and now it's happened, my heart is like a lump of ice. Was I lying to myself all those years?  
(Sartre, 104)

In the above lines, Electra is confused about her feelings. She discovers her cowardice and cannot face it in the eye. By contrasting Electra to Orestes in a ludicrous manner, Sartre foregrounds certain clichés about women. When Electra calls Orestes a 'thief' who has stolen her morsel of peace, she affirms her limited horizon. It is as if to illumine a halo of authenticity around Orestes, Sartre had but no choice to resort to the age-old myths of a helpless woman seeking a protector. For Orestes to be great, someone had to be insincere. When Orestes opts for hazards, someone must be reluctant. Although it is against the macro-masculine figure of Zeus, that Orestes takes a stand but Sartre has very casually made use of the convenient 'fair sex' as the scapegoat.

Queen Clytemnestra calls herself a whore, a murderess throughout the play. She carries the repentance of a crime she colluded with her lover. Having committed the crime together both Aegistheus and Clytemnestra repent in different ways. While Aegistheus is not filled with remorse but only burdened with the task of ensuring order; Clytemnestra repents mostly for her lost son. Aegistheus, the male counterpart to Orestes is the guardian of Argos who is encumbered with masculine responsibility of being a protective king. Clytemnestra can be

said to have achieved nothing by committing the crime. Earlier she was an othered wife, now she functioned as an othered consort. She never grasped the reins herself. Instead of planting a firm foot after murder of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra assumes the typical role of a mother grieving for her lost son, and placating her petulant daughter. She too, needs a play-toy and her remorse serves this end. She had never had a plan for her own self in the after-Agamemnon era. In the play, Sartre uses the convenient tool of reducing Clytemnestra to the concept of 'mother' and a slighted consort. This provides a clear stage for Aegistheus to shine as an influential king laden with quasi-divine responsibility. From Agamemnon the husband who betrays her, Aegistheus the lover who belittles her to Orestes the son who eventually kills her; Clytemnestra's fate is always at the mercy of men.

Clytemnestra and Aegistheus both are murdered by Orestes but their deaths carry a certain bias as well. Aegistheus is given a somewhat stoic death. He asserts his own will when death comes face to face with him. As per Sartre, Aegistheus manages to save his kingly pride by choosing to act in a certain way. The death scene of Clytemnestra on the other hand is ill defined. The audience only learns about her screams. Sartre has preferred more stage time for the lover Aegistheus to the queen who kills her husband; who is none but 'THE' Agamemnon. Clearly, Clytemnestra as a character has more sides to reflect upon as the queen of Argos, wife of Agamemnon, beloved of Aegistheus, mother to Orestes and Electra. Sartre has reduced both Electra and Clytemnestra to hysterical women who display enough passion for them to be key characters but little depth to supersede the important male characters.

In order to understand the character of Lizzie in the play 'The Respectable Prostitute', there is a simultaneous need to analyse the passive and invisible character of Mary; who never shows up on stage and is restricted to being an elite contrast to the trashy female protagonist. In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir states, "the prostitute is a scapegoat...as a pariah" (584)

Despite hailing from opposite backgrounds, Lizzie and Mary are two ends of the same seesaw i.e. woman. Lizzie is a conscientious prostitute who refuses bribe for false testimony against a Negro. Lizzie's truth will cost the senator his nephew and his reputation. Sartre designs Lizzie as a woman full of scruples because the senator should not have so easy a coup hence, the 'respectful' in the title is justified. To get past her morals, the senator wields the 'woman' card. It is only after Mary is mentioned that Lizzie's logic begins to wobble. The senator tells Lizzie that her truth will shatter a mother's conviction, that he has brought along a mother's hopes and aspirations for the future of her dear son. Lizzie is a loner with no family, no loved ones, no status. She makes no difference to anyone's life whatsoever. She regrets being irrelevant. The mention of Mary, the mother who apparently knows Lizzie by name because currently, Lizzie holds the power of testimony, gives that long desired touch of relevance. Lizzie can visualize herself contributing to Mary's future. Mary, a white elite woman, who otherwise may have never had any need to be dependent on a prostitute. The

idea of being relevant to a rich white woman appeals more to Lizzie than being relevant to an outcast Negro, marginalised like herself.

Lizzie. You think she'll be pleased with me?

The Senator. Who?

Lizzie. Your sister.

The Senator. She will love you, from a distance, as her very own child.

Lizzie. Perhaps she'll send me flowers?

The Senator. Very likely.

Lizzie. Or her picture with an inscription. (264)

It is no coincidence that Sartre has named the Senator's sister as 'Mary'. The name brims with motherhood and compensates for her absence from stage. By the very name, Lizzie can comprehend that she may herself never be able to embrace motherhood. Mary at the other end of the seesaw represents everything that Lizzie is not. Mary is a wife, a mother, an old experienced rich woman who comes from a prominent lineage and is instrumental in continuing that lineage. Lizzie is none of that. Yet their lives have crossed for a purpose that Lizzie must fulfil.

Both women in the play are scapegoats for the sake of tradition. Mary's views in the play are mediated via the senator and their authenticity is doubtful. It may be true that Mary is unaware of the bargain being made in her name. Perhaps she is a righteous woman who would condemn her son's vileness. Her role may be limited to being a trophy wife and mother to extend in silence the tradition of glorious past marked with masculine brave hearts. Lizzie too, is expected not to hinder the tradition of the past by virtue of her womanliness. Lizzie can experience the joys of a mother even if vicariously if she gives in to the tradition. Dirty hands, more than a political drama, is a complex play about the emotional symbiosis between its two lead characters namely, Hugo and Hoederer. Jessica, Hugo's wife is distant from the party politics that interlinks the male protagonists. Yet, Jessica's character as a catalyst is crucial to the growth of the play.

Hugo is an assassin who develops an admiration for the man he must kill. But, admiration alone cannot stymie Hugo's conviction. Hugo is afflicted by an inferiority complex that has its roots in his past. His obsession with the party and his task is associated with overcoming that complex. Hugo is primarily fighting with an assumed insignificance in his mind. He must consummate his assignment but his weakness is his consistent deferral and this is where Sartre finds the need of a woman character, nobody less than a wife, so that the right amount of intervention takes place. Jessica is more agile than her husband is and were it not for her, Hugo would have been compromised early in the play. Whether it's the scene where she hides the loaded pistol or when she saves her inebriated husband before mumbling out the secret, Jessica proves that she is more than just a femme-fatale. There is a constant undercurrent of misogyny in the play especially from the side of Hoederer, on whom Jessica throws herself because she is hopelessly attracted to him:

Hoederer. [...] women are all afraid of loud noises, the little mice, otherwise they'd make remarkable killers. They're pigheads you know. They get their ideas ready-made, and then they believe in them as in god. With us others, its not so easy for us to shoot some chap for the sake of theory, because we're the ones who cook up the theories and we know how they are made. (226)

When Hoederer orders Jessica never to enter his office again, Jessica says, "very well I leave you to your masculine friendship. [*She goes out with dignity.*]" (184)

Several instances in the play highlight the passionless marriage of Hugo and Jessica. They both chide each other like brother and sister. Eventually, they are both drawn towards Hoederer. Sartre projects the sexual tension between Jessica and Hoederer as the reason for his murder. His target awes Hugo because Hoederer's presence comforts him and boosts his confidence. Facing neglect all his life, Hugo cannot muster enough courage to kill the one person who nourishes his ego without pretence. Then what could possibly provide the impetus for Hugo to go against Hoederer? The answer lies in the reversal of the very reason that fostered their bond; condescension. At the moment when Hugo catches Hoederer kissing his wife, Hugo says, "never mind Jessica, forget it. I'm not sore at you and I'm not jealous; we weren't really in love. But he, he almost took me in: "I'll help you, I'll help make a man of you." What a fool I was! He didn't give a damn for me." (233) Hugo had the privilege of catching Hoederer in his weakness. He says, "[...] at least once I've had the pleasure of catching you in a bad moment. And besides- besides- [*he rushes to the desk, snatches up the revolver, and covers Hoederer*] you have freed me." (233)

This caused a series of reactions. Firstly, Hugo can convince himself that he *has* been cuckolded. Secondly, he learns that the man he had begun to worship is not free from mortal flaws. Thirdly, Hugo feels that by seducing his wife, Hoederer is emphasizing Hugo's gutlessness and lastly, if Hugo flinches from action in this case, he will be stamped a sissy forever.

Thus, it is only Jessica that eventually causes murder of Hoederer, not because Hugo cannot bear her betrayal instead, what pinches him is the betrayal by Hoederer. She being a woman is only an age-old weakness (a weakness that arises from the belief of man that the woman is his possession) that reveals Hoederer's betrayal to Hugo and precipitates his actions.

Unlike others, the play No-Exit introduces its characters, irrespective of gender, on the same platter. All three of them are dead, stuck in hell, sheer cowards, sinners and torturers to each other. What is striking of the characters is that females outnumber the male. There is one man, Garcin and two women, Estelle and albeit lesbian, Inez. The constitution thus, suggests female dominance yet that is not the case.

All three characters are dependent on each other for mutual validation. Each constructs his/her identity by other two's perception. As a conditioned gender, Estelle and Inez understand subjugation more specifically than Garcin. Over centuries, women have become

the quintessential 'other', thus objectification for women is a regular occurrence. The existential dilemma of 'self-identity' has already been a mode of living for women.

In the play, the problem of male gaze is immanent for both Inez and Estelle but their handling of it is different and subjective. Estelle for Sartre, is a femme-fatale whose sin lies in the murder of her illegitimate baby. Estelle had made it through her life by posing as a sexual object for men's attention. By playing upon her physical charm, she married a rich old man, off whom she fed herself like a parasite. She gave vent to her sexual needs by taking up a side love affair. The result of the affair is a baby whom she drowns in cold blood. Estelle's reaction to male gaze is her physical refinement. In a patriarchal society, where she grew up as a natural 'other', she opted for the less troublesome road to man's good books; her 'sexuality'. She understands that Man keeps his woman as a trophy; she adjusted herself into the mould to secure her share. Both Estelle and Garcin are cowards but Garcin's cowardice is more repugnant because he never faced the trauma of objectification or limited options in society. Sartre has shown bias in exhibiting the cowardice of Garcin and Estelle. Garcin backed out of a war. He seeks, even from hell words of appreciation from his office colleagues. Estelle too, is a coward not because of a debacle like her male counterpart; instead, her infamy lies in her failure to be a virtuous wife and mother. It is doubly appalling for a woman to be a wicked mother as the myth has upheld motherhood as the prime most instinct of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir is critical of the society, which is overly concerned for the well-being of an embryo and condemns the abortionist but does not care for the child once it is born. The society has no soft spot towards an orphan. The woman is assumed as a being responsible only for procreation and has no other duties and rights whatsoever. This is because the entirety of a woman is reduced only to her ovaries and uterus. Estelle's actions are sinful but they are her response to her objectification via male gaze.

Inez is a lesbian yet a woman so the problem of male gaze pests her as well. Inez resorts to mimicking the male gaze. She denies being other-ed by virtue of her sexual orientation. Instead, she intimidates others by objectification. Barring herself, she exerts her gaze on men and women both. She being firm in her stand manipulates people into conceding to their objectification by her. Yet, for Inez to evade her own subjugation, demeaning others becomes a necessity. As a defence against the imminent other-ing, she rebounds with a subjective force. She is well aware though that her situation is precarious and therefore, Inez is twice 'othered' as a person. Even though, Inez manages to torture Garcin for the approval he seeks, yet she cannot supersede him because Estelle's attention is directed towards Garcin. Estelle has nothing to gain by reciprocating to the advances made by Inez because she is only a 'fellow woman' to her:

Inez. Come to me, Estelle. You shall be whatever you like: a glancing stream, a muddy stream. And deep down in my eyes you'll see yourself just as you want to be.

Estelle. Oh, leave me in peace. You haven't any eyes. Oh, damn it, isn't there anything I can do to get rid of you? I've an idea. [She spits in Inez's face.] There! (34)

Only Garcin can validate Estelle's needs. This eventually causes Inez also, to be at the mercy of Garcin.

**Conclusion:**

Perhaps no other philosopher spoke of freedom as vehemently as Sartre yet, it is clear that even Sartre who courted a pioneer feminist all his life and raised eyebrows over ideas of subjugation could not depict in his oeuvre women of free will. His women are more or less an extension of the myth that is 'woman'. His Electra cannot outdo her brother Orestes, Lizzie has to back down whatsoever, Jessica has to contend with her place as a luxury to an incompetent husband and Estelle and Inez can never steal a sigh of relief against the arrows of male gaze. Sartre himself could never push the boundaries in favour of his women characters. Instead, his female creations conform to ideals standardised for the 'fairer sex' in the patriarchy.

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