

**WOMAN IN CONFLICT: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SHARON POLLOCK'S
BLOOD RELATIONS**

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Abstract

The play blood Relations by Canada foremost woman playwright Sharon Pollock is an account of a historical fact presented on stage with elements of expressionism and surrealism. The question is raised: What is truth? This is central to Pollock's relativist moral stand towards the murder and murderers. On August 4, 1892 Lizzie Borden 'discovers' the body of her father and step-mother. Later she herself was charged for that murder. The subsequent investigation and trial of Lizzie set a precedent for media coverage. The play goes on through the dialogues of Lizzie and Actress. The play substantiates the fact that it is not a sin to act in order to exist, when your existence is put on line. The society and patriarchal domestic set up corners the Woman with a voice and views. Those who conform adapt. But Lizzie is someone who resolves to act rather than conform to the oppression.

Introduction

Sharon Pollock is a well known Canadian Playwright, Dramaturge, Director, Theatre critic, Wordsmith, Adjudicator, Writer. Her stage plays have been produced by major and alternative theatres in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, India, Japan, Belgium, Greece, and throughout Canada. She has scripted a large number of plays for Young Audiences, written for both radio and television, and led playwriting and theatre workshops and labs both within and outside Canada.

She has received The Governor General's Literary Award for Drama in 1981 for *Blood Relations*, in 1985 for *Doc* and was short listed for the same award in 1986 for *Whiskey Six Cadenza*. In 1987 she was the recipient of the prestigious Canada Australia Literary Award for her body of work. Her historical drama *Walsh*, based on the relationship between Chief Sitting Bull of the Oglala Sioux and James Walsh of the North West Mounted Police, was

produced by Theatre Calgary as a major theatrical component of the 1988 Cultural Olympics held in conjunction with the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. Her play *The Making of Warriors*, one of six scripts commissioned internationally was produced by the C.B.C. in celebration of The Second International Women Playwrights Conference in 1991. Canada's prestigious Stratford Festival Theatre has produced three of her works, *Walsh*, *One Tiger to a Hill* and *Fair Liberty's Call* at the Avon, and Tom Patterson Theatre while *Blood Relations* was a recent production of The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Blood Relations under that title was first produced in 1980 at Theatre 3 in Edmonton, Canada. This was not the play's first appearance on stage, however, Sharon Pollock extensively revised her plays after first couple of productions. The previous version was produced as "My Name is Lisabeth" in 1976 at Douglas College in 1976 with Pollock herself playing the role of Lizzie Borden. After significant revision, she renamed the play as *Bllood Relations* and staged it as a new work in 1980.

Discussion

Blood Relations is a psychological murder mystery written by Sharon Pollock. The play is based on historical fact and speculation surrounding the life of Lizzie Borden, and the murders of her father and step mother, crimes with which Ms. Borden was charged. On August 4, 1892, Ms. Borden's father's body was 'discovered' by Lizzie in a downstairs room of the family house. Soon the Borden's maid Sullivan discovers the body of Lizzie's step mother. The crime shocked the Massachusetts community and the nation as a whole. Lizzie was acquitted because of the lack of solid evidences but the crime was never solved. The public questioned her innocence.

While contemporary women have many choices in deciding her life course at least to an extent. This was not the case in 1800's. Women were second class citizens expected to fulfill specific limited roles in society. Pollock's *Blood Relations* shows us a woman who is trapped in a body and an assumed role for which she is not suited.

While Lizzie is spoiled, she is also prepared to preserve her independence. She offers to work in her father's office but that opinion is denied to her. Presented with the choice of conforming to a way of life she detests or living more than a servant. Lizzie decides to actively after her and her sister's fate – her actions suggests such a psychological will.

Lizzie's father wants her to consider Johnny MacLeod as her husband. MacLeod is a neighbour who is a widower with three young children, and is looking for a wife. With his daughter already in her thirties, Mr. Borden is worried that Lizzie will never get out on her own. The only solution was marriage. "It's natural" He tells her.

Lizzie resists this by saying, "He's looking for a house keeper and it isn't going to be me". Her step-mother finds no fault in such a domestic arrangement because that is what she did by marrying Mr. Borden. She gets a house to live in and food to eat. But this is not what

Lizzie wants from life. She just can't fit into the norms the society offers her. It is not her fault, Lizzie tells the actress at another moment. Somehow she didn't get that magic formula that is stamped on the brain, the formula for being the socially acceptable version of a woman. What she says is interesting, "Through some terrible oversight, I am born....defective".

The future is intolerable to her. She strolls and chats to Dr. Patrick, the only person with whom she can engage in a fantasy of life with a bit of freedom. The brutal killing of her pigeons shakes her off this fantasy too. She has reached a point where the fantasy is no longer satisfying. She must take action in deciding her future. Lizzie makes a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to solicit Emma's support in her opposition to Harry's plans to take over the farm. But Emma wants to avoid confrontation. Lizzie feels misunderstood and betrayed, since the loss of the farm impacts Emma's future as much as it does her.

Lizzie has ideas in her head of how she wants to live her life. What is clear is that she will never succumb to the pressure to marry even though being a wife and mother were the only duties assigned to a woman towards the end of the nineteenth century. When her parents point out that it is natural to marry, she refutes by saying she is unnatural. Lizzie persuades her father by saying;

"I want out of all this. I hate this house. I hate... I want out. Try to understand how I feel... Why can't I do something?"

The question of course has no answer. As the daughter of a wealthy respectable community member, the society expects her to function as a responsible and appropriate woman. And living outside her home does not fit into the narrow constraints of society's expectations.

The double edged sword is this; even if she were allowed to strike out on her own, Lizzie has no real property rights. She can own property, and have her "own" life only as connected to a male family member, whether father, husband or brother. She demands as her right is there to one third of the farm, but no one feels to or give her any.

The only future she can envision past the death of her father is an intolerable one with her step mother and uncle Harry. She foresees her sister Emma obediently waiting on her step mother, while she, Lizzie, will sit alone, isolated in her room. This future is unimaginable to a woman like Lizzie. What follows the brutal killing of the pigeons and the firm decision to pass over the farm to Harry on part of Mr. Borden, appears to be a pre-meditated and cold-blooded criminal act. She was brutalized by a society which cornered her to act in a way she detests. There was no escape, or so it seemed to her. She was a victim, something we understand as the play ends, and Emma again asks for the truth. the question at the centre in *Blood Relations* according to Anne Saddlemeyer in *Rough Justice* is "Which is the greatest crime; Imprisonment of soul or Life at any cost?" The evidence presented in the play seems to confirm Lizzie's acceptance of the latter. Realizing that living in her father's

household meant a slow death of her ideals and the imprisonment of her independence. Lizzie chose to act. Born in an era which is unwilling to accept a woman as unique individual, and misunderstood by her family, she resolves to case her plight as a victim. Lizzie had to choose between the lives of her parents and her own life. Her final gesture, an accusatory finger pointed at the audience, is a call to the society to look into their own prejudices and pre conceptions of what is 'normal', what is 'acceptable'. While modern society has made significant strides in accepting behaviour that was once considered odd or anti-social, there are still many people who are persecuted because society at large cannot understand them. By accusing the audience, she is saying that, by imposing strict roles for woman, nineteenth century society was just as guilty of the Borden murders as the woman who picked up the ax.

Conclusion

Blood Relations is a play in which the woman is in conflict, not with her father; she loves her father, but with the society and social norms around her. Lizzie like many other women of the age, is ultimately a victim of her times and her family. Lizzie's story until the production of this play was considered to be that of a cold blooded and thankless child, but upon the production of Pollock's play it was opened up to a much wider discussion on feminist studies and the rights of women in society.

Works Cited:

Pollock, Sharon. *Blood Relations and Other Plays*. New West Press. Canada, 1980.