



Research Article

**MARIA IRENE FORNES AS A FEMINIST AESTHETIC PLAYWRIGHT WITH A SEARCH FOR FEMINIST AESTHETIC AND FEMINIST FREEDOM OF INDIVIDUALITY IN A MALE-DOMINATED SOCIETY WITH REFERENCE TO MUD AND THE CONDUCT OF LIFE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to project Maria Irene Fornes as an eminent feminist playwright of America and as a dramatist of pure imagination and acute creativity who evinced immense interest in writing plays with the sole intention of parodying society or behaviour and dramatizing what is already existing in the form of ordinary emotion or experience with a focus on her portrayal of multiple possibilities of human relationships and unique art of characterization using effective stylistic devices in her dramatic world. Tracing the origin and growth of feminism, it examines how her plays consistently reveal a precise criticism of stereotyped gender roles, an affirmation of women's strength and a challenge to women to better use their own power of womanhood in all possible ways exploring and expressing women's identity, potentialities and the nature of oppress to assert their spiritual and physical separateness from men, making it a point as a conclusion that Fornes is a feminist playwright women and their roles and issues investing her plays with sympathy, empathy and some sort of oppression, emotional or political plus the desire to free one's self from any kind of oppression. In a word, it may be said that by critiquing the hierarchy, Fornes has dramatized the hope of a more humane, compassionate world, writing about women because of her strong sense of commonality and identification with them.

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**INTRODUCTION**

As an eminent feminist playwright of America, Maria Irene Fornes is considered as a dramatist of pure imagination and acute creativity who has immense interest in writing plays with the sole intention of parodying society or behaviour and dramatizing what is already existing in the form of ordinary emotion or experience. In her plays, she writes about establishing multiple possibilities of human relationships, not necessarily in real time or space but in her own stage time and space. Each play of her in her is something unique not only in the art of human relationship not only in the art of characterization but also in the use of stylistic devices. Having a warm delicacy and grace, her work gets distinguished from most of what is written today and as an exemplary artist, Fornes is said to have created through the double work of writing and teaching a life situation in the modern theatre away from the crass hype that attends so many letters beings; one of the last of the real bohemians among the writers, she came to prominence only in the sixties.

Generally speaking, a more sharing of experiences does not make one a feminist.

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Feminism in its early stages was essentially a political philosophy underlining the autonomy of woman as posed to the view that the woman is the other of man. If defines and describes woman in her own terms and not with reference to man. Feminism both as a concept and a movement has emerges is a reaction against male domination and superiority. Throughout history, the personality of woman is sought to be draw fed and crushed and her very status as a human being is questioned under the overwhelming male-domination. This is evidently brought by sarah grim he the following words as:

“man has subjugated women to him will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his selfish gratification, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind.....he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought....” (P3)

Feminism seeks to “rectify this distorted image of women so as to place her on an equal footing with her male counterpart. Woman writers have protested against the inequalities through their writing” (Prabhakar 35). Post-modern feminist accept the “otherness” of Existentialist Feminist like simon de Beauvoir and turn it into an advantage for the otherness gives the woman a new way of being, thinking and speaking that allows

for openness, plurality, diversity and difference with an emphasis on the positive otherness. The very aim of feminism, according to Maria Jenny Howe, is "to alter radically the mental attitudes of men and women" For David Beucchier, feminism implies "any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex"CP36) "The ninetieth century feminists were more concerned with establishing women's rights to refuse unwanted sex, including that within marriage, then with the rights for women to seek sexual satisfaction on equal terms with men. Women have as much right to sexual satisfaction as men, although for the most part this was defined in terms of heterosexual relationships" (Diana 76)

The first wave of American feminism began with the Seneca Falls Women's Right Convention in 1848. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* marked the second wave of feminism in 1966. This was further intensified by Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch* in 1970's. At the same time, the Political movements of the 1960's compelled the feminist tendency of these women to challenge the existing patterns. Women began to look for political solution while facing discrimination at all levels possible and political inequality, reminded them of the gender based discrimination in taking policy decisions. All feminists were of the view that the made oppression was possible mainly because of literary oppression, the tool that men used to marginalize women from the mainstream, literary oppression was seriously felt when women's experiences were totally excluded from men's writing. In other words, only a male writer's interpretation of women's experiences or problems got recorded as something authentic and women were denied any rights to define themselves because of constant literary oppression. The white woman in America still suffers all kinds of discrimination at the hands of the male-dominated patriarchal society.

The very idea of all feminists was to create an atmosphere in the society so as to accept feminism not as a movement but as 'a way of life' or 'a lived religion' in other words, feminism should not be judged as a set of principles but accepted and recognised as an altered way of life with a changed outlook. In a women's writing, a woman is being seen within a different paradigm as both self and other, with subject and object. For the first time because of feminist attitudes, women's experience have become the subject matter of all literary genres. A New language used almost in all possible ways against madness, suppression, oppression, isolation, alienation, and silenced voices has come to be heard. Women's writing started giving explicit representation of all bodily functions of women and the writers steeped in feminism started disentangling women from the traditional images or jewel stand of women. Women were found giving expression to female genitalia, its beauty and sexuality very boldly through their literary genres, in spite of women's writing being branded as biomorphical sexual narcissistic and mythic. "A world which receive woman either as virgin or whores receive a shock as the revealing pictures of women" (Rajeswari 20)

Feminism, therefore, is nothing but an source of a new awareness, power and knowledge to the contemporary thinking. The subject of feminism is women's past, present, future and contemporary history. It brings into consciousness undiscovered aspects of women's lives. To understand Maria Irene Fornes, one needs to have the theory is intense and immediate addressing itself to the world of women. It is both

theoretical and practical. As a women-centered theory, feminism provides is an uncompromising pledge and an antidote to exploitation and oppression of women. The contemporary feminist theory has developed through several stages of inquiry by exploring the origins of women's oppression. The Radical feminists argue that women's biology was the root cause of patriarchy. Lesbian feminists challenged compulsory hetero sexuality as the main stay of patriarchal relations" (Tierney 139).

Since the early sixties, Magan Terry had been a sustaining force in feminist drama, nurturing other American women playwrights and continually extending the reaches of her own plays. According her, "anything that gives women confidence ... helps them to begin to analyse whether it's a positive or negative image, it's nourishing". Her plays, however, consistently reveal a precise criticism of stereotyped gender roles, an affirmation of women's strength and a challenge to woman to better use their own power." (P53) Feminist theatre developed in America as a means of exploring and expressing women's identity, potentialities and the nature of oppression. By dramatizing their conflicts and joys, the women in these groups seeks to make other women feel good about being female and to experience outrage at what they consider to the gross injustices in the relationship between the sexes. The women wanted to change the way people think about them in male-dominated world. As a first step, they look the stand in giving vent to their authentic experiences in their theoretical performances. Feminist theatre has emerged as their foremost step to shatter stereotypes and create new role-models. Feminist play is not a mere hematic response to the current issues. It is creating a New World, New experiences and new attitudes. Concerning primarily with individuals and their relationship it does uproot the old role-models and drama techniques with a focus on a new image of women based upon their modern outlook, their priorities and their relationship with men. As Janet Brown puts it, "the viction in the new feminist drama is not man but traditional womanhood or traditional woman or male-identified woman." (Feminist Drama 17) Feminist theatre, therefore, questions male projection of feminine sexuality.

All feminist theatres are rhetorical enterprises and their primary aim in action, not art. All American feminist are said to have reacted against the 'patriarchy' in actual and symbolic terms, influenced by the capitalist structure of the economy. Falling in line with the context of feminist theory and theatre practice, Maria Irene Fornes has been writing the finest realistic plays in America. Fornes has brought the much-needed intimacy to drama and her economy of approach suggests another vision of theatricality, more stylized for its lack of exhibitionism. She has always had a common sense approach to drama that situates its in the utter simplicity of her dialogues, she writes sentences, not paragraphs. Her language is a model of direct address having the modesty of a writer for whom English is a learned language. Bonnie Marranca Writes:

"one of the characteristics of Fornes's plays is that they offer characters in the process of thought. Her characters often questions receive idea of emotion, even how one engages in thought. 'what would be the use of knowing things if they don't serve you, if they don't help you shape your life? Asks mae in *Mud*, a partially literate woman who yet is dignified with a mind, however limited units reach" (P69).

Truly speaking, Maria Irene Fornes' women do not necessarily want to be women- Fefu, the heroine of *Fefu and Her Friends*, envies men for their strength and ease, but nonetheless, Fornes women are women constantly asserting their spiritual and physical separateness from men. Though Fornes is not always perceived as a feminist playwright, her plays are grounded in a deep understanding of feminist existence. *Mud*, *The Conduct of Life* and *Sarita* are projected from a feminist perspective *Mud*, which has a woman as its centre, does neatly emphasize Fornes' concern with the tentative relationship between language and physical presence in the theatre. Mae in *Mud* is a life giving force. She is the one who provides food for the two unemployed men Henry and Lloyd. In *Mud*, feminism is seen as default in a subtle manner. Mae decides to desert the crippled Henry and useless Lloyd, to establish her individuality in the male-dominated society. Killing of Mae in *Mud* doesn't in any way terminate her journey into the world of self-realization. In *The Conduct of Life*, three women establish a sisterly relationship when they have to confront sexual exploitation. Olimpia has concern with Nena, a twelve years destitute, whom Orlando sexually assaults. Leticia kills Orlando the provider of the three, the patience of the woman's tested under the patriarchal society, where men consider themselves superior to their counterpart. Sarita explores the conflicting power of art and solid-political change. Sarita, a fourteen years old girl-who undergoes tortures at the hand of Julio her former lover and Marx her husband who seems to suspect her. She undergoes tremendous pressure from all sides. She is encircled by the male made codes where the laws are framed from the men's point of view. Lurana Donnell O'Malley holds:

"Fornes' plays have consistently stood in a problematic relationship to feminist theory. Her women-centered plays are routinely associated with the feminist movement- Bonnie Marranca called her work "deeply feminist in 1981" (P103)

In the words of Susan Sontag, "Fornes' plays have always been about wisdom-what it means to be wise. The actions performed by the women of Fornes' plays are women's work because they are actions of self-knowledge and love for the self. *Mud* is a play that lays stress on Fornes' concern for women and women's issues. Mae in *Mud* a women-centered play is a 'spirited young woman', 'single minded', 'determined' and a strong believer. By placing Mae as the centre of action, Fornes is embarking on an adventure into women's space. The playwright unravels the mystery of a woman growing up into an individual finding a space of her own. Feminist drama in nothing but the assertion that a woman has a life of her own on the questions of *Mud*'s shocking conclusion in an interview with David Savran, Fornes herself said:

"I think usually the people who expressed to me their dismay at Mae's being killed are feminist women who are having a hard time in their life. They hang on to feminism because they feel oppressed and believe it will save them. They see me as a feminist and when they see Mae die, they feel betrayed" (P57) She action of *Mud* takes place in a single wooden room. There is a cluster of furniture and the room is filled with clothes, men's and women's. The clustered room suggests space restricted for a movement. The doors are very narrow and the dominant colours in the room are ashen and cold, there is no greenery here, the way the place is set suggests that there is

very little of life. Mae lives in this space and the play ends with Mae looking for a "better place to be";

"I'm leaving, Lloyd, I'm leaving somewhere else. I'm leaving you and Henry. Both of you are no good. I got rotten luck. I work too hard and the two of you keep sucking my blood. I'm going to look for a better place to be...And a room to live in" (Mud 39)

She wants to step into "a room to live". Mae's desire to leave the room and to find a room to live in suggests a rite of passage. Mae has decided to cross the threshold and launch herself into a new space-on assertion of a woman's will, her freedom and her capacity to travel along. *Mud* has paved the way for a new language of dramatic realism and a way of directing it. *Mud* has as its centre the act of a woman achieving self-actualization. Mae through her desire to read and acquire knowledge realizes that knowledge is the beginning of power and personal freedom. *Mud* is imbued with feminism of the most subtle order. The fact that Mae is murdered does not in any way diminish her self-actualization. She is portrayed as a symbol of oppression and the victim of a male-centred society. Being capable of empathy and compassion, for the suffering, Mae is an individual capable of growth and her discovery is the assertion of her individuality Mae's sexual relation with Lloyd and later with Henry is concerned with the feminist assertion that sex is essentially a power game and both man and women have sexuality of their own. Mae's desire to leave Lloyd and Henry is also a desire to find a companion who would satisfy her sexual needs in a room of her own. Mae is like a female Don Juan, who grows up from 'fucking' to 'making love' Mae commits the mistake of taking refuge in another man, Henry to realise herself:

"I am a hungry soul,  
I am a longing soul,  
I am empty soul" (Mud 27)

To Mae, an individual must be of value-Mae will not be wanted in materialistic world:

"I don't think I'll be wanted in such a world" (Mud 24)

The whole play is a journey of self-discovery undertaken by Mae and her quest as a woman to establish her individuality ends in her death. She frees herself from the two blood sucking animals-Lloyd and Henry. Journey metaphor is the assertion of Mae's self-realization and her desire to know herself.

*The Conduct of Life* lays focus on sexual oppression as the most violent form. *The Conduct of Life* explores the inter-connections among gender, class and power. Orlando, an army lieutenant in a Latin American country, declares in his opening soliloquy:

"Man must have an ideal,  
mine is to achieve maximum power.  
That is my destiny" (TCL 68)

Orlando inflicts tortures on his wife, Leticia, his maid Olimpia and Nena, the 12<sup>th</sup> year old destitute whom he makes his sex slave. Orlando who sexually tortures Nena so severely that her screams rising from the cellar are audible in the house is a sadist. Fornes says "He's in love with a child". His 'love' manifests itself in assaults that Orlando rationalizes to Nena:

“What I do to you is out of love.  
Out of want, it’s not what you think.  
I wish you didn’t have to be hurt  
I don’t do it out of hatred  
It is not out of range.  
It is love” (The Conduct of Life 82)  
He tells Nena that this sexual violence is his gift to her.  
Orlando claims:

“It is a desire to destroy and to see things destroyed and to see  
the inside of them It’s my nature” (TCL 82)

Orlando is a hard-hearted man who does not love anybody and  
he uses women as objects of pleasure. Orlando becomes  
insensitive and he refuses to listen to anybody. For him, killing  
the life is a sport, nothing can touch him except sensuality;

“Hunting is a sport: As kill” (P69)  
Leticia resembles Mae in *Mud* in her desire to be  
knowledgeable, for she equates appearing as an ‘ignorant  
person’ with being ignored. She tells Orlando’s friend Alajo,

“I would like to be woman  
who speaks in a group  
and have others listen” (The conduct of Life 70).

Violence is closely related to sex in *The conduct of Life*.  
Leticia is no more sexually vibrant and attractive to Orlando, so  
Nena becomes the vehicle for his sexual satisfaction. *The  
conduct of Life* is the story of three women who conduct their  
lives. Among the three women, (Leticia, Olimpia, Nena) in the  
play, Olimpia is the most daring. She is the maid in the house  
of Orlando doing all the menial work in the house and  
developing empathy with Nena. She is the lady of extremist  
view; When Orlando exploits Nena, she does threaten to kill  
him in sleep:

“One day I’m going  
to kill you when you’re asleep” (P80)

In *Mud*, Mae attains freedom by her death where as in *The  
conduct of life*, the three women by the death of Olimpia and  
Nena attain freedom by the death of Orlando. Both the plays  
*Mud* and *The conduct of Life* are concerned with the freedom  
of women.

To conclude, it may be said that Fornes is a feminist play  
wright who identifies herself as a feminist examining women  
and their roles and issues investing her plays with sympathy,  
empathy and compassion. Through her plays, she deals with  
the oppressed and some kind of oppression, emotional or  
political plus the desire to free one’s self from any kind of  
oppression. By critiquing the hierarchy, Fornes dramatizes the  
hope of a more humane, compassionate world. Let the reader  
take Fornes at her word that she writes about women because  
of her strong sense of commonality and identification with  
them.

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