

Sisters' Relationship in Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

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Abstract

Sisters' relationship is an important purpose for every female. Beth Henley is one of the most important playwrights who focuses on the theme of Sisters' relationship in their drama. Therefore, this study attempts to show the importance of the relationship among sisters to challenge all obstacles in the community. Beth Henley has succeeded in providing a new vision of females' reunite to face their unavoidable tragic destinies and how to overcome their misery. From a feminist point of view, the sister relationship is a unique theme that has been tackled in feminist writings. Sisters' reunite is the heart of the feminist movement which focuses on solidarity, the acts of sharing and supporting each other. A Sister relationship is a type of alliance or union among females, to make them feel more powerful together.

Consequently, it is understood as a common obverse to compete with males. It encourages all women to come together in order to struggle for shifting their subordinated position caused by male patriarchy. Therefore, they can form strong bonds with each other, empowering them to make new life choices. Furthermore, they emphasize their selfhood by means of upward mobility, sexual freedom, or the rejection of woman's reproductive imperative by their relationship. The present study shows the three sisters have succeed in establishing their personhood when they come together to compromise with the dominant ways, as well as the regional, cultural communal awareness. Further, the sisters' relationship is the process of finding truth; gaining an understanding of females' motivations, and desires. Therefore, Beth Henley is one of the most prominent feminist playwrights who are concerned with the theme of sister reunion or relationship. The message at the heart of Beth Henley's play *Crimes*

of the Heart (1982), is that sisters' reunite are the only chance that can save women from the traps of other people's perception and suicide.

1. Introduction

Sisters' relationship is one of the most important themes that have been tackled by several feminist writers in the twentieth century. Many feminist writers say that sister-reuniting never diminishes but only gets stronger with time. Further, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1982), deals with relations among females who have led disturbing lives and are in desperate quest of resolutions to their pressing troubles, trying at the same time to redefine their way of life and optimistically to develop an altered vision of the future. Sisters' relationship is a response to the suffering among women who have been harshly manipulated by men. These females have to recognize that their subordination is not predestined by nature, but is societally enforced before they can better their situations and accomplish their salvation through a sense of sisters union of understanding and kindness among the tortured women to challenge the dehumanizing powers that have long troubled them and produced their misery and hopelessness. Sister reunite is a great way for women to find their selves as fully free individuals (Li 137).

Furthermore, it offers women a scene of hope for survival through love, attention and friendship with other women. Besides, the sister union channels anger and rebellion of women who seek to break free of traditional roles and re-define themselves in southern society. Therefore Lenny, Meg and Babe with their different personalities and lives, came together to overcome their past getting rid of certain crimes of the heart (Aziz 5).

2. Sisters' Bond

In this section, the sister bond is an important means for the Magrath sisters to get their lost identity. A central view of modern feminist belief has been the statement that "all women are oppressed"(Hooks 34), therefore, this play is known as feminist drama. Thanks to the sisters that overwhelming troubles are overcome as they unite on more than one occasion to resolve their problems with a cruel husband, a failing career, and a sick grandfather. Furthermore, the sisters are fully aware of the association between their present dilemma and their mother's suicide. Consequently, Henley reflects the impact of mothers' suicide on the development of the daughter's self-discovery. Therefore, the three sisters come together to settle their past and struggle against the patriarchal system. The first step then to their autonomy is to left the memories of the past "None of the characters can move forward into the future unless they bury the past. And none can move toward autonomy unless they first turn to each other" (Younger133). Accordingly, Babe can realize her mother's psychological condition which she has viewed for a long time as a desire to kill herself. She now realizes it as a means of protest. Henley's unconventionality lies in her belief that the female characters are victims of their nature and inheritance but, they are never helpless victims. They can discover their lost identities away from the false explanations that society selects for them as Plunka claims:

[C]haracters who are helpless victims of forces over which they have no control and cannot understand imply a naturalistic view of existence. Henley is not a naturalist playwright according to this meaning of the term because the drama's action leads to an epiphanous scene in which the character discovers that she can understand herself and her situation and make choices accordingly. Yet the meaning is present in Henley's theater.
(9)

For this reason, females often realize themselves through their relational experience and the connection to other women. In this study, the sister bond is the only female bond to be connection among women will be scrutinized through which women tend to "[emphasize] [women's] connectedness with,

rather than [women's] separation from, one another" (Chodorow 44). In this concern, Lenny, Meg and Babe begin searching for identity as they "awake and sing" (Craig 157). Females are developed when they bond with one another.

Under the pressure and the instructions impacted by their granddaddy, as a symbol of male power, Henley shows the importance of the sisters' bond and how the sisters can free themselves from the oppression of men. Jo Freeman explains in his work *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, that: "They learn to develop self-esteem and to appreciate the value of group solidarity." (60). Alice Walker, the feminist writer, shows that this bond is an important means to face the hardness as in her novel *The Color Purple* (1985), through showing the importance of a womanish bond and how the girls can live freely depending on themselves. This explains that feminist writers highlight the women's community (qtd in Childress 33).

In addition, Carol Gilligan shows how: "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" (16). From a feminist point of view, Henley shows that suicide is not a good solution for women to put an end to their suffering. Instead, they must struggle for their identity and self-determination in traditional society through a rebel against their repressive restrictions (Aziz 11). Therefore, the sister's bond gives the Magrath sisters control over themselves and helps them cope with the southern traditions of male dominance. Accordingly, the Magrath sisters have succeeded in changing themselves as the feminist scholar, Laurence G. Avery claims that 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). In so far as feminism is concerned, the sister bond is "the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity. It must be the foundation of feminist movement" (25).

Thus, Meg can prove herself by describing her experience of her mother's suicide to her sisters and that helps her to confront the past. that she "could care about someone" (*Crimes of the Heart* 45). Meg shows her sisters that smoking is a challenge to traditional society. Therefore, smoking in the play is used as a challenge to traditions and society. In this concern, Meg is smoking to control her life: "(Meg takes a long, deep drag) Gives me a sense of controlling my own destiny. What power! What exhilaration!" (*Crimes of the Heart* 44). Also, it gives a sense of control as Jessie's smoking in Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* (1984). Meg recovers the tender aspect of her human nature and rediscovers "the depth of her own feelings, and experience which, interestingly enough, enabled her to once again begin to sing."(*Crimes of the Heart* 51). Now, she sings without any thought of trying "to please Old Granddaddy" (*Crimes of the Heart* 48). When Babe shoots Zackery, it means that Babe "rebels against Old Granddaddy's reign and forces herself and her sisters to deal with the legacy of their mother who killed herself."(*Crimes of the Heart* 47). By doing so, Babe allows the two sisters to challenge the past and come to an understanding of the whole condition of their mother's suicide.

BABE. (with joy.) Mama. I know why she hung that cat along with her.

MEG. You do?

BABE. (with enlightenment.) It's cause she was afraid of dying all alone.

(*Crimes of the Heart* 50)

Carol Gilligan also states that "The conflict between self and others 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" (71). In contrast to their mother, the sisters embrace mechanisms that allow them to endure their psychological disasters. They even use comedy to decrease the strength of their painful condition to overcome their nervousness and channel

unacceptable impulses into bright-hearted conduct (Mouhammed 37). Laura Morrow, a feminist critic, shows that “Lenny’s birthday cake foreshadows her being surrounded by enduring and increasing circles of love and bond among sisters”. Also, Jonnie Guerra explains that those women, who are trapped in the world of pain and suffering try to find ways to get through the bad days(14). The play's final sense shows how the sisters reconnect with one another to celebrate Lenny’s birthday. The Magrath sisters laugh to escape their hard situation and realize a sense of freedom through:

Old Granddaddy's loss of consciousness which hints at the possibility of a new kind of consciousness, one which might include not only freer choices for women but also a re-definition of "reality" itself; instead of a male-defined reality, this new consciousness might include those woman-centered meanings patriarchy's'mono-dimensional' view has previously denied or ordered. (qtd in Gala88)

The three sisters ultimately do well in freeing themselves from the destructive communal impacts and male authority through knowledge of the important lesson in life which highlights the importance of sisterhood and solidarity(Laughlin 123). Sisters’ bond is so important than attachment to society. Black feminist activist, Florynce Kennedy shows the importance of the sister bond to overcome the hardships in the patriarchal society. Accordingly, they must bond with other women on basis of shared power and resources (qtd. in Randolph 33). Women can share experiences and feelings which help them face the problem and suffering without committing suicide. Alison Jaggar, a feminist critic, 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)

With Meg's encouragement, Babe reveals that: “To talk about our lives [is] an important human need” (*Crimes of the Heart* 51). Similar to Lenny’s effort of preserving her vague consciousness of self, Babe has also gone through

a hard journey against gender domination to reach self-awareness by her reuniting with her sisters. As Old Granddaddy's "prettiest and most perfect" granddaughter (*Crimes of the Heart* 14). She further uncrosses the truth about her miserable married life and why she shot her husband, Zackery. Through sharing personal experience thus, Babe is relieved from her psychological fault and repents: "I'm not like Mama. I'm not so all alone" (*Crimes of the Heart* 47). Meg ultimately comes to know Babe's pain in a loveless marriage which has pushed her to shoot her husband: "There're plenty of good sane reasons to shoot another person and I'm sure that Babe had one" (*Crimes of the Heart* 48). Babe also tells Lenny of Meg's mental breakdowns in an attempt to fill the emptiness in their life. The sisters then support themselves with an emotional bond. So, they seek the way of self-consciousness and self-love.

Nancy Chodorow rightly notices that, females have the potential to support each other based on their experience of performing as women: "Growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others. Feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship" (169). As a feminist, Henley depicts female characters who struggle against men's domination. Thus, the sisters do not pay attention to the beliefs of the community, they are accepted as individual human beings who can give their decisions on their own. Bell Hooks shows in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to center* (2000), that sisters should come to gather by shared beliefs and views, unite in our gratefulness for diversity, unite in our fight to put the end of domination(55). The Magrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*, also understand the important of individuality and unity in the process of self-discovery. They show clearly attention and love for each other regardless of their years of detachment. For instance, they come to realize the meaning of their feelings and living a life of self-worth. Similar to the Younger women in the play *A Raisin in the sun*, the Magrath sisters also depend on their dialogues to portion personal experiences, through which they develop a close bond (Li 160).

To sum up, the sisters become self-fulfilled, self-defined and self-assertive women. Their self-determination helps as a tool to revise the conventional, implicitly patriarchal authority and devaluation of their female gender. They became “new woman” who have freedom against unfair society as Helen Chukwumas shows:

THE POINT THE WOMEN MAKE IS THAT THE SOLUTION TO A PROBLEM IS NOT GOT THROUGH PASSIVITY AND THE HELPLESS SHOWING OF PALMS UPWARDS ... WOMEN ARE ENCOURAGED TO BE ARBITERS OF THEIR DESTINY, TO WORK HARD TOWARD THEIR OWN EMANCIPATION FROM THE SHACKLES OF INTIMIDATING NORMS AND TRADITIONS, OF SUBJUGATING AND NEGATIVE VALUES. (294)

Therefore, Henley explores how the sister bond helps redefine the sisters' subjectivity empowering them to confront the harsh society. In “Criminality, Desire, and Community: A Feminist Approach to Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*” (1986), Karen L. Laughlin shows the importance of unity in the play that “Women is bonding with each other. 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). Further, Imelda Whelehan declares in her work, *Modern Feminist Thought* (1995), that females are oppressed by patriarchy, therefore, they should raise their resistance against it and they should not permit themselves to be soundless toward it by reuniting. As an American playwright, then, Beth Henley exposes her main characters’ rage and indignation against the authoritarian males in their lives.

Henley is a feminist dramatist, because she shows females as suffering from oppression seeking for self-discovery. Furthermore, women can find ways to resolve and overcome their troubles and break out of their obedient roles. Finally, the play shows that the three sisters reflect their sisterly love as they gather around Lenny’s birthday cake. Nancy D. Hargrove states that the final scene of the play reveals the “powerful force of human solidarity” (54). Lenny’s birthday act also shows the reawakening of the sisters who are able of coming together to celebrate life. They further emphasize the context of shared support

and sisterly love in this last scene. Lenny selects to submit no more to anymore, Meg gets her voice and Babe picks to move in her life. Then, with sisters' love, support, and reciprocity, they are prepared to face obstacles in their life, as Gene A. Plunka remarks: "At the end of the play, the communal sharing and outpouring of love produces a dramatically effect...but the freeze frame moment of bonding...offers the only fleeting joy of unity" (124). Bigsby stresses that their mother's grotesque suicide has "left them with psychological wounds, but it has also left them with a determination to survive" (321).

While giving an explanation of the family history, Henley shows how the three sisters attempt to discover a way to deal with their suffering in the absence of their parents by their reuniting. From the feminist perspective, the three sisters have chosen to face all the challenges instead of committing suicide as their mother. Females are further to notice themselves as a subject in their relationship to other females. This is what Lorraine Hansberry, a feminist playwright proves such connection between women enables women's development and quest for respect and acceptance (qtd in Li 16). As Kristin L. Matthews claims, "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). To conclude, it is obvious that Henley emphasizes on females' spiritual alteration and psychological development in her play. She shows in her play that women confront their unhappy past that they are able to overcome their despair, to realize the devastating cultural patterns which contribute to their debasement and eventually to become fully conscious of their potential as worthy and independent human beings. Furthermore, Lenny, Meg, and Babe reach survival through achieving an awakened sense of female solidarity thus creating a sisterly bond of mutual trust, affection and devotion among females that permits their rebirth out of misery and nothingness (Li 140).

3. Conclusion

Beth Henley explores that sisters reunite is a great way to shape the identity of each woman who suffers in a male-dominated society. Therefore, *Crimes of the Heart* reflects Henley's goal to depict the journey which the Magrath sisters pass to find and create their selves by their bond. The atmosphere of love and unity, which prevail throughout the events, is the answer that Henley gives to those women who are presented as full of pain and despair at the beginning of the play. They have learned how to face their crisis together by laughing at the unhappiness and they might find themselves by their reuniting. Thus, they are going to come together for the next expected bad times. The three Magrath sisters unite to settle their problems with an abusive husband, a failing career, and a sick grandfather. To conclude, Henley shows that a sisters' bond is a great way for women to challenge all obstacles instead of committing suicide. By their reunite, the three sisters reject However, Henley helps them try to reject such cultural standards. It is only when they come together to reject such a naturalistic view that they celebrate the discovery of their selves and overcome the miserable past. All the cited events discover how the Magrath sisters come to develop a sense of their selves by developing their communal support and union.

علاقة الاخوات في مسرحية بيت هينلي جرائم القلب

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الملخص

لم شمل الأخوات هدف مهم لكل أنثى لمواجهة كل التحديات في المجتمع لذلك بيت هينلي هي واحدة من اهم الكتاب المسرحيين الذين ركزوا على تيم اتحاد الاخوات في الدراما . لذلك فإن هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لإظهار أهمية لم شمل الأخوات لتحدي كل المعوقات في المجتمع. نجحت بيت هينلي في تقديم رؤية جديدة لم شمل النساء لمواجهة مصائرنهن المأساوية التي لا مفر منها وكيفية التغلب على بؤسهن. من وجهة نظر النسوية ، فإن لم

شمل الاخوات هو موضوع فريد تم تناوله في الكتابات النسوية. لم شمل الأخوات هو قلب الحركة النسوية التي تركز على التضامن وأعمال المشاركة للنساء ودعم بعضهن البعض. و هو نوع من التحالف و الاتحاد بين الإناث، هو لجعل النساء يشعرن بمزيد من القوة معًا. وبالتالي ، يُفهم لم شمل الأخوات على أنه وجه مشترك للتنافس مع الذكور. إنه يشجع جميع النساء على الالتقاء من أجل النضال و من أجل تغيير موقع التبعية الذي تسبب فيه النظام الأبوي الذكوري

علاوة على ذلك ، لم شمل الأخوات هو عملية البحث عن الحقيقة ؛ اكتساب فهم دوافع الإناث ورغباتهن. لذلك ، تعد بيت هينلي واحدة من أبرز الكتاب المسرحيين النسويات المهتمين بموضوع لم شمل الأخوات. الرسالة في قلب مسرحية بيت هينلي جرائم القلب (١٩٨٢). هو أن لم شمل الاخوات هو الفرصة الوحيدة التي يمكن أن تتقذ المرأة من فخ تصورات الآخرين و من الانتحار

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