

On Tragic Factors of Portia Coughlan's Death

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Abstract

As one of the masterpieces of Marina Carr, Portia Coughlan told the heroin Portia's tragic story in the Irish patriarchy society. According to Raymond Williams' theory of modern tragedy, this study analyzes four factors that caused Portia's tragic fate so as to reveal the plight of Irish women and the oppression they suffered in a patriarchal society.

Keywords

Portia Coughlan; Tragedy; False relationship; Loneliness; Victim; Deadlock.

1. Introduction

Marina Carr(1964—) is one of Ireland's foremost contemporary playwrights. Her plays mainly focus on current women and the lives of ordinary families in contemporary Ireland, reflecting on the plight of women's existence and identity crisis under the suppression of patriarchal authority in Ireland through the microcosm. Her contribution to Irish theatre and her feminine voice is unparalleled. Thus, she won various rewards, such as, Irish Times Playwright's Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters E.M. Foster Award...

Completed in 1996, *Portia Coughlan* is the second play of Marina's trilogy of female tragedies. It is a play in three acts that tells the story occurring on the day and the following day of Portia's 30th birthday.

The play opened on the morning of Portia's 30th birthday, she drunk alone in a darkened living room and listened to the ghost of her twin brother Gabriel singing nearby Belmont River. The story then developed from the moment her husband Raphael went back home to give Portia a birthday present, then her aunt, friends and parents came on the stage in turn to offer birthday wishes to Portia. The second act specifically told the end of Portia's death and how everyone reacted after her death. The third act told the story of the day after Portia's birthday. On this day Portia argued with almost everyone around her, she tried to reveal what she had been thinking, but nobody could understand her. In desperation, Portia finally killed herself as a resistance against the patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Basis

In *Modern Tragedy*, Williams pointed out tragedy had become a universal concept in modern society, and he combined tragic literature with the real suffering of ordinary people to form a tragic view of life. Tragedy not only satisfied people's emotional catharsis and social cognition, but more importantly, tragedy could give individuals the courage and strength to face the future with its unique narrative style. Modernity is sweeping across the globe and tragic events are frequent in current society, Williams focused on the real suffering of ordinary people from the literary study of tragedy, which was a guide to how to build a free and equal ideal society. According to his points of view, personal tragedies were usually resulted in four factors: false relationship, loneliness, victim and passive resistance in a deadlock (Williams, 1966).

3. The Depression Caused by the False Relationships

According to Williams, one of the most important factors of personal tragedy is: “men and women suffering and destroyed in their closest relationship” (Williams, 1966:381). In Portia’s short life, she suffered from two false relationships from her closest men: one with her twin brother Gabriel and other with her husband Raphael.

As the products of their parents’ incest, Portia and her twin brother Gabriel inherited such an abnormal relationship. Portia never thought there is something wrong in their relationship, instead, she believed they destined to love each other, for they entwined from their mother’s womb, they were soul mate because they shared similar appearance and thought. They were so closed that she “and Gabriel made love all the time down be the Belmont River among the swale, from the age of five” (Carr, 1996: 250).

Because the incestuous relationship is forbidden in all societies, their parents, relatives and friends were ashamed of their monstrous love. At the age of 15, overwhelmed by the denunciation of their family and society, they decided to commit suicide. They jumped into the Belmont River together, but while walking in the river, Portia got scared and stopped, Gabriel was swept away by a sudden undercurrent. She felt extremely guilty and remorseful for Gabriel’s death, she was unable and unwilling to get out the shadow of Gabriel’s death. She often lingered nearby Belmont River alone in order to hear the songs sung Gabriel’s ghost. Haunted by Gabriel’s ghost, tortured by the agony of losing him, gradually, she became more and more depressed.

Nevertheless, her depression was ignored by her dictatorial father. Two years later, she was forced to give up the chance to go college and marry Raphael-a rich cripple whom she did not love. Portia once hoped her husband would be her salvation, but Raphael only cared for her beautiful body. Different values and lifestyles between them led to their unharmonious marriage. Raphael was busy in making money and paid no attention to Portia’s inner needs. He thought Portia should be satisfied because he offered her large luxury house, enough money, expensive jewelry... However, what Portia expected was just Raphael’s company and understanding.

Portia’s psychological needs could not be met, even worse, her physiological needs also were disregarded. She often suffered from insomnia since Gabriel’s death and rarely got a good night’s sleep. When Portia was falling asleep, Raphael stroked her to woke her up. On the brink of collapse, Portia cried at Raphael: “And when you touch me at night, sometimes I’ve just got to sleep, often the first sleep of weeks, and I’m slidin’ into a dream that’ll take me away from this livin’ hell and you touch me and lurch me back to Belmont Valley, and times you’re lucky I don’t rip ya to pieces or plunge a breadknife through your lily heart!” (Carr, 1996:217)

Portia’s depression was caused by the false relationships with Gabriel and Raphael was so deep that she felt she lived in “the house creakin’ like a coffin... Sometimes I can’t breathe any more” (Carr, 1996: 202).

4. The Autism Caused by Loneliness

In a tragedy, the loneliness of characters in private tragedies was innate and inevitable. Williams pointed that “What is generalized is the loneliness of man, facing a blind fate, and this is the fundamental isolation of the tragic hero” (Williams, 1966: 169). The loneliness of Portia was a catalyst for her death. Her loneliness caused by external and internal factors.

On the one side, Portia’s morose character was due to her patriarchy family. She was under her father control and must accept all his decisions including the marriage he arranged for her. When she confided to Aunt Maggie: “I’m going to college and have my place and all, but Daddy says no, marry Raphael” (Carr, 1996: 194), Aunt Maggie, as a supporter of patriarchy, didn’t

comfort her, instead, Aunt Maggie tried to persuade her that she lived a happy life, because she married to one of the richest men in the county. Portia realized it was hard for her to get the understanding of others, she was unwilling to communicate with others, gradually, she became more and more unsociable.

From Portia's childhood to adulthood, even after her marriage, she was spied on by her father. Sly Seen ya talkin' to young Halion today down be the Belmont River.

Portia Spyin' on me again.

Portia I'm sick of you gawkin' at me from behind hedges and ditches and sconces. I'm a grown woman and what I do is none of your concern (Begins walking off) (Carr, 1996: 208-209).

Though Portia protested against her father's surveillance, Sly turned a deaf ear to that. Unable to escape from her father's control, she became more and more autistic. Gradually, she was isolated to the outside world which brought various restrictions on her.

On the other side, as the product of her parents' incestuous union and intermarriage within the family, Portia had a morose personality, because the dangers of consanguineous marriage increase the incidence of polygenic diseases and recessive genetic diseases in children, which can be detrimental to the mental development of children.

It was difficult for her to develop trust in those around her since her childhood, Gabriel was the only one Portia could trust. But after Gabriel death, she was plunged into the abyss of loneliness. She often went alone to the river where Gabriel drowned and listened to the songs sung by his ghost. She became increasingly distrustful of those around her, and she was even unwilling to confide in any one. Her best friend Stacia felt it was difficult to communicate with Portia, she once said to Portia's grandmother: "Portia was me friend, Mrs Scully, me only friend, and I realize now I didn't know her at all." (Carr, 1996: 224)

The oppression from the patriarchy society led to her unwillingness to communicate with other people. Gabriel's death led she just lived in a world of her own—she addicted to listen to his ghost's song and was indifferent to anyone or anything, she even thought "to insist on the meaning of loneliness is to interpret life" (Williams, 1966: 170).

5. The Victim's Passive Resistance in the Deadlock

After the suicide incident, Portia survived but Gabriel died, Portia lived in the endless hatred of her parents. Although their parents knew that she was also a victim of the incident of commit suicide, they still subconsciously attributed all the causes of his death to her.

They did not physically abuse her, but they rationalized the violent acts of the perpetrators by degrading the victim to morally flawed individual. That is why Marianne, her mother, accused "One of your bad-tempered moods again" when Portia didn't want to respond to her complaints, she even humiliated Portia "And You'd swear you were never taught how to Hoover a room or dust a mantel; bloody disgrace, that's what ya are" (Carr, 1996: 250). The very existence of Portia as the victim was stigmatized with negative labels such as "violent" or "lazy", which became an excuse for her mother's persecution on her. It is difficult for Portia and Marianne to get along peacefully, and their relationship has reached a stalemate.

But when she couldn't tolerate her mother's unreasonably troublesome anymore, "Portia leaps, a wildcat leap front the table onto her mother, knocks her down, on top of her" and "(flailing at Marianne who is pinned under her) You've me suffocated so I can't breathe any more!" (Carr, 1996: 245) However, her rebellion was regarded as her was not right in the head. It very hard for Marianne to understand Portia who "is left to struggle alone, is misunderstood and is broken. He also breaks others, in his own fall" (Williams. 1966: 455). She became a symbol of persecution because of Gabriel's death, and even a target for elimination simply because she survived.

What's more, Portia was not only a victim of the suicide incident, but also a victim of Irish patriarchal society for where women are thought to be the men's appendant. Traditional Irish society required women to obey their father's authority before marriage and take care of their husbands and raised children after marriage. Women were forced to give up or even sacrifice their dreams and careers for the sake of their families and accepted unhappy family relationships.

As a daughter, Portia was required to obey her father's authority. That was why she forwent school and got married when she was only seventeen. But she was not always be a docile daughter, when Sly revealed the deepest wound in her heart by attributing Gabriel's death to her: "I'll sort you out once and for all, ya little hoor, ya, ya rip, ya fuckin' bitch ya!" and threatened "You're not my daughter anymore", Portia retorted: "I'm not your wife nor your mother so don't you come in here takin' your rage out on me, ya fuckin' coward ya!" (Carr, 1996: 248). She refused to comply with Sly's groundless accusations.

Irish society not only demanded women to be obedient to patriarchy, but also required women to bear children and continue the family line. Though Portia declared to her husband she never "wanted sons nor daughters", her will was ignored, she was "woo me into motherhood" (Carr, 1996: 216) by him. However, Portia refused be a traditional mother whose children were the center of her life and who could sacrifice everything for their children. She showed her resistance through her alcoholism, her refusal to participate in household chores and her apparent inability or unwillingness to care for her children. Though she was accused that "your home is a mess and your children have no mother" (Carr, 1996: 244), Portia still did it her own way.

Nevertheless, Portia's resistance to the mental torture brought about by her parents and the oppression brought about by patriarchy were not actively. In most situation, Portia was submissive and resigned. Only when she could no longer bear it any longer, she attempted to resist against the predicament by eccentric behaviors and quarrels. But it was deplorable that her verbal unsatisfaction sounded like the rage of impotence. Nobody understand the connotation of her eccentric behaviors and verbal abuse; thus her resistance was always ignored by others. After her passive resistance failed, Portia decided to end her predicament in the most extreme way—commit suicide. Just as William presented in *Modern Tragedy*: "In a deadlock, there is still effort and struggle, but no possibility of winning: the wrestler with life dies as he gives his last strength." (Williams. 1966: 455).

6. Conclusion

Portia struggled to free herself from the deadlock, but her solitary nature left her in a state of isolation and the power of the patriarchal society made her resistance seem insignificant. Portia was doomed to be a victim, because "it is still seen as a false and alterable society, but merely to live in it, now, is enough to become its victim" (Williams, 1966: 324).

Actually, Carr implied Portia's tragedy is more than a personal tragedy, but an epitome of Irish women's dilemma—"Carr's heroines' seem to abdicate from a confrontation with patriarchy, or if they do engage, they, disappointingly, throw in the towel by committing suicide" (Wallace, 2001: 435). Because as "angels in the house", Irish women are demanded to sacrifice for their family while their needs and rights are often ignored. When they were in deadlock and failed to find a way out, committing suicide became a silent and passive resistance. Though the analysis of Portia's tragedy, this study illustrates the importance to respect women and care about their inner needs as well as the necessity of gender equality and mutual understanding among people.

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