

The Theater of Transformation: Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother*

R. Kamini

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Avvaiyar Government College for Women,
Karaikal, Puducherry; India; rgks24@gmail.com

Abstract

Megan Terry is one of the American influential feminist playwrights, and her plays have inspired many other dramatists to broaden their imaginations and to create dynamic and innovative experimental works. Considered among the first dramatists to embrace feminist causes and avant-garde techniques, Terry's work often presents female characters in situations that test them or require them to challenge their own gender preconceptions. Her plays encourage women to transform themselves by demonstrating the changes that Terry herself envisions.

Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother*, one of her experimental, transformational plays demonstrates various aspects of relationships between women, first espousing the most optimal situations that a woman can strive for and then showing how women, as well as their society, place restraints on their achievement of their most favourable growth. Transformation, is, for Terry, one of the most effective theatrical means to overcome such enforced definitions. Her plays consist of so-called action-blocs that are connected not by plot or conflict development, but rather by rhythmic patterns and transformations. Terry uses only three women and minimum props for *Calm Down Mother* despite the fact that there are, in essence, multiple characters and blocs that make up this play. Over the course of the play, the three women take on different relationships to one another as they change from middle-aged shop owners to old women in a nursing home, to young prostitutes, sisters, friends, and mothers and daughters. In each section of the play, the characters explore what it means to be female, how society views them, and what tools they have to improve themselves.

Keywords: American Theatre, Feminism, Theatrics, Gender Politics, Identity, Transformation

1. Introduction

*...anything that gives women confidence, shows themselves to themselves,
helps them to begin to analyze whether it's a positive or negative image, it's
nourishing.*

Megan Terry

Megan Terry is a forerunner in the development of American feminist drama, Her early modern American feminist dramas have had enormous influence on the genre because of their feminist subjects and themes and their unique and innovative style. Megan Terry in her plays presents a conception of character and identity that focuses on

the social constructedness of gender roles rather than on nature or any other pre-given determinant. The identity is to be liberated among other things, from the prison house of enforced definitions of femininity.

2. Theatrics of Transformation

The present paper endeavors to analyze Megan Terry's transformation technique in the context of gender identity in *Calm Down Mother*. The transformation is an acting and a playwriting technique whereby without any logical explanation or transition, characters and situations change or transform abruptly into different characters and situations. *Calm Down Mother* is made up of several transformations,

making a series of eight vignettes possible, all dealing with women and their various relationships with one another. Transformation, is, for Terry, one of the most effective theatrical means to overcome such enforced definitions. Terry effectively challenges the metaphor of the prison house of the self in general and the female self in particular by using dramatic techniques of transformation. Her plays consist of so-called action-blocs that are connected not by plot or conflict development, but rather by rhythmic patterns and transformations. These action-blocs are mostly drawn from intertextual sources of popular culture, at once using their formal structures and their gender-identified descriptions.

The play is a series of scenes or vignettes involving a number of different female characters. The actors (three in number) involved in the production of this piece play all of the characters by means of a technique called transformation. The transformation is an acting and a playwriting technique whereby without any logical explanation or transition, characters and situations change or transform abruptly into different characters and situations. This technique in drama relies solely on the skill of the author to make the transformation work and to fit into the rest of the play as a unified whole, and on the performance and skill of the actor to be able to transform so completely from one character to another without any sort of transition. This technique is a difficult one to master both for the author and the actor, but it can be a highly effective technique for presenting the message of the drama. *Calm Down Mother* is made up of several transformations, making a series of eight vignettes possible, all dealing with women and their various relationships to one another.

In the play *Calm Down Mother*, the characters are ordered as 'Woman One', 'Woman Two' and 'Woman Three'. When the stage is lit up, the trio is shown gathered in the form of a plant. The voice of an old woman is heard from a recorded audio articulating the metamorphosis of three uni-celled organisms from inert beings in the sea to their anchoring on the land. When the audio is over, one woman from the clustered form singles herself, comes to the front stage and introduces herself as Margaret Fuller. 'I'm Margaret Fuller,' she begins. 'I know I am because from the time I could speak and go alone, my father addressed me not as a plaything, but as a lively mind'¹. Keyssar explains: "For most women, however, it is difficult to know oneself as a 'living mind', and the montage of scenes that follow in *Calm Down Mother* catches moments in that struggle for a variety of women characters². This opening vignette sets the tone for the rest of the

play which explores women's struggles to come to terms with their lives intellectually. The next scene takes place in a delicatessen in Brooklyn. The characters in this scene are two elderly women who work at the delicatessen and a young girl who stops in to buy a six-pack of ale. As the elder women talk with the young girl, they admire her lovely hair, reminisce about how beautiful their own hair used to be before they aged, and marvel at how soft the young girl's skin feels. This vignette is quite feminist in its exploration of aging and the supposed loss of physical beauty that goes along with it. Terry seems to be trying to show her audience just how limiting it can be for a woman to be too preoccupied with her physical appearance. For the elderly women in this vignette seem unable to accept the fact that they are aging, and that they are losing their hair, but that it is alright, and that they can still be happy even without their long curly hair and milk-like soft skin. The two elderly women are not the only ones who are limited by their preoccupation with their physical appearance. Terry, like so many other feminists, wishes to speak out against the tendency of the society to judge women only by their physical beauty and not by their inner beauty and personality. The women of this scene have become too preoccupied, too obsessed with their beauty. Men and society have told them for so long that a woman must be beautiful, must have soft skin and long curly hair, that when the elderly women lose these surface physical characteristics, they feel very badly about it, and indeed, mourn for their loss. The young girl is also affected by preoccupation with physical beauty as she empathizes with the elderly women who have lost their hair. In this vignette, Terry shows what an oppressive and detrimental effect a preoccupation with physical beauty can have on women of all ages. Following this scene, the actors "transform" out of their characters, to "become themselves" and address the audience.

Regarding the structure of the play, every scene is interconnected with the threefold interface among the three women and factually and figuratively shares the prevalent friction between generations. For example, in scene two elder women who are sisters owning a Brooklyn eatery, are wistful as the hair of a young female customer is reminiscent of their days of youth and their mother. Similarly, one scene shows a woman stretched out on the floor and simultaneously her two daughters meet in a far away space realizing their mother's imminent death due to bone cancer, the predicament of which enables the hitherto strong-willed sister to disclose her crisis allows the 'strong' sister to reveal her own susceptibility. She tells her mother and sister that she is tired of hearing men tell people that

birth control is wrong. She believes that since she can produce one egg every month for the next thirty years, she has three hundred and sixty chances of becoming pregnant inside her body. Therefore, she feels that it is alright for her to use birth control. She also believes that the men who are preaching against birth control are just trying to control women's lives and bodies. Sue then goes on to say that they will not have her eggs, that she will take control of them, and of her body, and will continue to take her birth control pills.

3. Feminist Overtones

The feminist voice in this scene is very clear. Terry is asserting that women must take control of their lives and their bodies, and indeed, of their eggs, and not let the men limit them by forcing them to have babies. She also seems to be showing women that it is time that they take control of their sexuality by choosing birth control as a legitimate way of enjoying that sexuality, and ignoring what society or what men tell them. The character Sue in this scene seems to answer a lot of the questions that Terry has raised throughout the play. For example, Terry raises the issue of women's bodies and women selling them to men in an earlier scene about prostitutes. The characters of this scene are not happy characters, they fight with one another and have to answer to their pimp's beck and call. But Sue, in the final scene takes control of her body. She decides that men will not tell her what to do with her body or with her sexuality and she decides that birth control is one way she can regain control of her body and life. Also, Sue asserts her independence very strongly in this scene. She is perhaps the most independent woman in the play, for she stands up not only to society, but to her family as well. The portrayal of Sue embodies a strong, independent female that has control of both her mind and her body and who is going to make it. This final scene fits in nicely with the rest of the play, and by placing it so close to the ending, Terry is able to close with a strong-willed independent role model for all women. *Calm Down Mother* ends with the actors again "coming out of character" and speaking directly to the audience.

This ending stuns up *Calm Down Mother* with the message to the women in the audience that there is more to life than their bodies. Terry is telling the audience that women should not be limited to their anatomies and to the fact that they can have children. Instead, women need to explore the other aspects of their lives such as their intellect, and their relationships with other women. The ending of *Calm Down Mother* is ironic and is optimistic. And it is

about the duality of the body and the mind, and about the power of the mind. Also, with this ending, Terry was trying to make the feminist statement that there is more to a woman than just an ordinary meaningless existence.

Also, with this scene, Megan Terry reminds her audience time and time again of the limitations placed on women, by men and society that they can and must overcome. In this transformational drama, Terry is able to explore many subjects that are of great concern to feminists even today, some twenty-years after the piece was written. These subjects are the concern about women who are aging, women dealing with their anger against men and society, women trying to deal with illnesses and the losses these illnesses bring with them, and the problem of women needing to take control of their bodies, but not letting their bodies control them, or letting men or society control them. Another aspect of *Calm Down Mother* that reinforces the feminist voice of Terry is the unique structure of the play. She noted that with *Calm Down Mother* she wanted to show different aspects of all of the characters. This non-hierarchical, episodic structure which does not acknowledge a main character who stands out as a leader is inherently feminist in nature in that it denies the structure not only of the traditional drama of men, but because it also denies the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal society.

4. Conclusion

Thus this structure, while not completely unique to feminism (indeed this structure is used in plays by other types of plays as well) is used with great frequency by feminists in their writings, art and organization. Early works of art such as Terry's *Calm Down Mother* with this type of non-hierarchical, non-pyramid-like structure served as models for feminist artists of later years, and contributed greatly to the development of the unique style of these artists. It is important not only to note this feminist structure of *Calm Down Mother* but also to study its effectiveness in presenting the content of the play. Because Terry does not focus on one single character, or even three specific characters, she makes the play less personal and more universal. It forces the audience not to identify and become over-involved with the characters, but rather forces them to listen to the message of the play. It also forces the audience to look at the society in which the characters live rather than the characters themselves. It reinforces the very feminist belief that "the personal is political and the political is personal".

5. References

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