

Ariel Dorfman's Play *Death and the Maiden*: A Moral Thriller

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Abstract:

My aim through this article is to propagate that The Modern Drama, as all modern literature, mirrors the complex struggle of life. The struggle which, whatever its individual or topical expression, ever has its roots in the depth of human nature and social environment, and hence is, to that extent, universal. Dorfman's play Death and the Maiden can be called moral thriller which describes common man individual's guilt, confession and reality. Morality presents itself as a source of practical necessities. It is not merely a domain of normative reasons, in the familiar sense of considerations that count in favour of the ways of action morality happens to favour. Death and the Maiden is an instruction in the psyche of people who lose their ability for usual consideration on being subjected to traumatic experiences. The burning issues are discovered with immense ability by the playwright Dorfman.

Key words: Moral thriller, psyche, neurotic fears, aching anxieties and Guilt

INTRODUCTION

The Modern Drama, as all modern literature, mirrors the complex struggle of life. The struggle which, whatever it's

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individual or topical expression, ever has its roots in the depth of human nature and social environment, and hence is, to that extent, universal. Such drama is at once the reflex and the inspiration of mankind in its eternal seeking for things higher and better. The medium which has the power to do that is the Modern Drama, because it mirrors every phase of life and embraces every stratum of society. Vladimiro Ariel Dorfman is a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, academic, and literary critic. He has written extensively on literature and ideology, including *The Empire's New Clothes* (1983) and *Some Write to the Future* (1991). In addition to his novels *Hard Rain*, *Widows*, *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, and *Mascara*, he has written short stories, *My House Is On Fire*; poetry, *Last Waltz in Santiago*; and 3 plays, *Widows*, *Readers*, and *Scars on the Moon*.

Dorfman's life illustrates the fragmented experience of the modern Latin American exile. He was known as one of our modern "realistic" playwrights. He had taught men that drama; if it was to live a true life of its own must contract with human feelings, with things near and dear to normal men and women. He wanted the audiences to believe in his characters and situations so they could not avoid what he had to say about it or confronts to their values which his plays offered. *Death and the Maiden* is a stunning piece by Dorfman, narrating the dilemma of suppressed modern woman, Winner! 1992 Laurence Olivier Award for Best Play of the London Season Winner! 1996 – 5 Dora Awards.

Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* can be called moral thriller which describes common man individual's guilt, confession and reality. Morality presents itself as a source of practical necessities. It is not merely a domain of normative reasons, in the familiar sense of considerations that count in favor of the ways of action morality happens to favor. *Death and the Maiden* is a play written by Ariel Dorfman in 1991. The play is a three-act drama. It is a story of three people Gerardo, Paulina and Roberto. The play *Death and the Maiden* by

Chilean dramatist Ariel Dorfman centers upon the dramatic conflict between three main characters, Paulina Salas, Roberto Miranda and Gerardo Escobar. Each of the three characters in the play - Paulina, Gerardo and Roberto are forced to fight with the truth about past atrocities perpetrated by agents of the state during the previous regime. Ralph Harper has rightly said in his work *The World of the Thriller*:

Thriller literature is situational literature, crisis literature. In the language of Karl Jaspers' existentialist philosophy it is the literature of boundary situation. Man is always in situation, but only occasionally for most men is life reduced to total questionability by any particular situation. (Ralph Harper 1969, p.51)¹

Death and the Maiden is a story taking place where a brutal dictator has been deposed and a new government has taken over. All the three characters stands for a definite group of society in a state recently liberated from an autocracy. Paulina Salas, who was raped and tortured under the military regime, she represents the victims of the dictatorship. Her husband, Gerardo Escobar, is a member of the commission selected to inspect the crimes enabled under the regime, and as such symbolizes those who believe that, for the sake of future peace, such crimes must be investigated but not essentially punished. Roberto Miranda, the man who Paulina accuses of partaking in her abduction and torture, represents the perpetrators of crimes under the autocracy. After many Years Paulina lives in an inaccessible country house with her husband, Gerardo Escobar. When Gerardo comes back from a visit to the president, he gets a flat tire. A stranger named Dr. Miranda stops to help him. Dr. Miranda drives Gerardo home and later in the night he returns. Paulina recognizes Miranda's voice and gesture as that of her rapist, and takes him imprisoned in order to put him on trial and extract a confession from him.

PAULINA (very calm): Good morning, Doctor... Miranda, isn't it? Doctor Miranda. (She shows him the gun and points it playfully in his direction.) I had a chum from the

university, name of Miranda, Ana Maria Miranda; you wouldn't be related to the Mirandas of San Esteban, would you? She had quite a mind. A marvelous retentive memory, we used to call her our little encyclopedia. I have no idea what became of her. She probably finished her medical studies, became a doctor, just like you. (Dorfman, 1991:48).²

The play reflects vividly and painfully on the dark time of imprisonment and torture of the central character Paulina Salas, and her treatment by the person she believes is responsible for torturing her, the "doctor death" Roberto Miranda. The soreness of rape and its long eternal effects are well documented. Herman writes:

Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt and helplessness. Their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear. The identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed (Herman, 1992: 56)³

The rape has transformed her from a self-confident, strapping woman, to what she is now, passive, fearful and reclusive. The rape has 'domesticated' her. Dorfman's characters also remain quiet to protect themselves from the torture and violence exerted by the mechanism. The characters also question the system to gain insight to its true nature. In the last, the individuals search for relief in self-delusion and rejection of reality as the reality itself is basically ruthless. The characters are so uncomfortable with their past identities.

I didn't get my diploma... I didn't get too far with my studies, Doctor Miranda. Let's see if you can guess why I didn't get my diploma, I'm pretty sure that it won't take a colossal effort of the imagination on your part to guess why. (Dorfman, 1991:52)⁴

In the play *Death and the Maiden* the relationship amongst these three characters is too much multifaceted. Paulina went to jail and suffered the trauma of rape because she would not give up Gerardo's name that was active in the dissident group. Sarcastically because he was 'saved' he was later appointed to the Investigating Commission. Uncertain of his fault, Gerardo acts as Roberto Miranda's lawyer and attempts to save his life. After hearing the full story of her imprisonment from Paulina, Gerardo formulates an admission with Roberto to pacify Paulina's madness and set her free from her past life.

GERARDO: Paulina! What is this? What in the name of...

Roberto... Doctor Miranda!

He moves toward Roberto.

PAULINA: Don't touch him!

GERARDO: What?

PAULINA (Threatening him with the gun): Don't touch him.

GERARDO: What the hell is going on here, what kind of madness is—?

PAULINA: It's him.

GERARDO: Put... put the gun down. (Dorfman, 1991:61)5

The character Gerardo, who walks in this drama, is shocked and puzzled. He demands to know what Paulina is doing. She explains to him that, this was the man, the doctor that has continually raped her in the questioning room fifteen years ago. He does not believe her because she had told him she was blindfolded when the rape occurred. She is however; convinced that this was the man, and she recognized his voice, the way he smells, even his skin. But Paulina wanted to records the whole confession and has Roberto write it out and sign it. She sends Gerardo out to get Roberto's car so he can go home. While they are alone for the last time, Paulina accuses Roberto of being unremorseful and guilty beyond a rational doubt. Dorfman directs a roasting criticism at society and it's destroying forces. It was not only the topic of natural venereal sickness that offended but Dorfman's broad -fronted attack on bourgeois pretence, arrogance and deceits. It is a criticism

which objectifies the most pleasant representative of that setting and who is its one rebellious part. Throughout the play it is doubtful whether details are proof of Roberto's guilt or Paulina's suspicion. In this play we can see that Guilt seems to be an emotion that we all appear to have. It can be a helpful or hopeless feeling depending on how we use it. Guilt is like any other emotion something to take perceives of and learns from not give in to its force. At the end of the play it is uncertain who is blameless. When Roberto describes the rape and torture of Paulina, we ask whose voice it is - his voice as victimizer or hers as victim?

Roberto: ... It was slowly, almost without realizing how, that I became involved in more delicate operations, they let me sit in on sessions where my role was to determine if the prisoners could take that much torture, that much electric current. At first I told myself that it was a way of saving people's lives ... But afterwards I began to - bit by bit the virtue I was feeling turned into excitement ... the excitement, it hid, it hid, it hid from me what I was doing, the swamp of what - by the time Paulina Salas was brought in it was already too late. Too late (Dorfman, 1991:59).⁶

Roberto evades spots to the further all embracing victimizer in this play. Gerardo can also be seen as a victim and as a victimizer. He was helpless to defend Paulina fifteen years before and now both his logic of sympathy and his position as a member of his country's reality commission overpower him as he faces Roberto. He withdraws from taking individual vengeance against a guilty Roberto, yet he cannot bring him to justice, for his crime remains outside the terms of the truth commission. If Roberto is innocent, Gerardo has planted in a situation of torture. What is clearly a 'false' confession in order to pacify the 'sick' Paulina? So he calls her as sick from mind:

GERARDO: You're sick.

PAULINA: I'm not sick.

GERARDO: You're sick. (Dorfman, 1991:69).⁷

Morality presents itself as a basis of sensible necessities. It is not merely a field of normative reasons, in the well-known sense of thoughts that count in favor of the ways of action morality happens to help. It makes demands on us, ones that it is not open to us to overlook or ignore in deliberating about our options for action.

Hurt by the disloyalty, particularly after the high price she paid for concealing his identity, she still forgave him and stayed with him. In the play we see the trauma of rape is influential and it has transformed her. She has become less sure of herself; she has lost her earlier adventurism and has become a passive, fearful woman confined mostly to her house. By confronting the past, this is the moment when she can set herself free. The rape has killed her ambitions and crushed her. Her decrease to a full time obedient, traditional wife at least has fulfilled the patriarchal ideal of a submissive woman.

Gerardo: Yes, look at you...you still a prisoner, you stayed there behind within them, locked in that basement. For 15 years you have done nothing with your life. Not a thing. Isn't it time you... Paulina: Forget? You are asking me to forget? . (Dorfman, 1991:73) 8

The truth, like the fire, is rising quickly, demolishing the delusions. For her, the only way to find out is to take Miranda confined and get him to admit. To Gerardo's shock, this is what she does and the debate begins: is he guilty? Can you use torture to uncover the truth about other tortures? Do human rights abusers have no human rights? We are bounded by messages that in still fault in most everything we do. There is parental guilt, survivor guilt, helper's guilt, prosperity guilt, relationship guilt, adultery guilt, food guilt, and even pet guilt. Guilt speaks to us about not being good enough, about being a failure (in our own eyes) because guilt becomes a way that we can beat up on ourselves. It can be used to control, to charge and blame. Guilt pushes us to make poor decisions, decisions that are not thought through:

The value of relationships of joint credit, in other words, will have to be shown to be important in something like the way the values are that arrangement our projects and personal relationships. (*Reason and Value*, pp. 385-411.)⁹

Here is a morality play cum thriller of daring artistry that soars on so many levels, from the intellectual to the political and on to the emotional, as to leave a reader reeling. Modern psychology has several advances, in which the difficulty of moral development is being investigated. Among those are psychoanalysis, behaviourism, cognitive psychology, integrative, and cultural-historical approaches. The last one is based on Vygotskian viewpoint and activity theory to moral growth. It is also helpful to highlight the meaning and agreement of lucid (cognitive) and also emotional and motivational aspects of moral growth of the person, stressing moral growth as a central point in personal growth. The betrayal of one human being by another is projected through this music and the commentary on it. Paulina's voice states:

There is no way of describing what it means to hear that wonderful music in the darkness, when you haven't eaten for the last three days, when your body is falling apart, when..." (58). Roberto's voice continues: "I would put on the music because it helped me in my role, the role of good guy, as they call it, I would put on Schubert because it was a way of gaining the prisoner's trust. (Dorfman, 1991:58).¹⁰

The deep truth of human betrayal in its most grotesque form undermines the surface toying with the truthfulness of the confession in this play. In his powerful and suggestive play *Death and the Maiden*; Ariel Dorfman explores some of the issues associated with justice end settlement on both a personal and political level. He has skill fully given an intricate portrayal of Paulina's frustration which makes the play a fascinating psychological study of the protagonist's neurotic fears and aching anxieties. His characters face hard decisions concerning guilt, forfeit, forgiveness, punishment and peace, all

of which have political significance for a new democracy. In portraying both Paulina's suffering and Gerardo's desire for future stability, Dorfman is suggesting that there are no easy answers to such questions, and leaves it up to the audience to replicate upon the issues raised:

The state is present in two time frames in *Death and the Maiden*: there is the past state which sought to rid society of 'dangerous elements' and the current one which seeks the accommodation of pragmatism, the 'politics of agreements' whereby the demands for individual justice are set against the concerns for a stable future. (Anon., 1991b:4).¹¹

Dorfman deals with another existential theme are that Alienation of the human being from the self and the others. Disaffection is somewhat caused by lack of communication, and as a result, the isolated self is tricked in his own condition. So, Dorfman's characters tend to be inert agents in life, which is in fact another option.

CONCLUSION

Dorfman's instructions a close vision of the disturbance and the problems of woman. And he has wedged the minor threads of psychological commotion of human beings; especially he lies in the exploration of the inner world of human psyche and sensibility. He explores the psychological recesses of an individual quest of life itself, trying, thus to sketch the meaning and purpose behind the thinking pattern of human being. Dorfman has mainly highlighted the struggle for power both within a human being, and between an individual and an influential device or another dominant person. He has also been puzzled by the question of existence as the individual is often destined to an inner chaos, hence loses a sense of self. His characters do not seem to be engaged with too high ambitions. In fact, they are merely struggling for their own lives. Dorfman's characters desire for love and admiration, which has

become the basis for power struggles among them. *Death and the Maiden* is an instruction in the psyche of people who lose their ability for usual consideration on being subjected to traumatic experiences. The burning issues are discovered with immense ability by the playwright Dorfman. He has the dramatist's ability to continuously move the stability of compassion. Sometime we side with the husband who believes it's the work of an investigating committee, of which he is part, to examine the sins of the past. But at the same time we come to appreciate Paulina's need to flight her private traumas. At moments we even join with Roberto, who constantly protests his innocence. At the end of the play, Dorfman employs the theatrical apparatus of a huge mirror which glide down, forcing the audience to look at themselves what they would do in circumstances such as those faced by his characters, and to express that the questions explored in his play can be applied on an individual level by every person.

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11. The politics of agreements' was the style adopted by the multi-party grouping of President Patricio Alwen's government of Chile (1990-1994) wherein the search was for consensus and compromise (*Human Rights and the "Politics of Agreements"*- Anon., 1991b:4).