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Image of Mirror in Jean Genet's *The Maids***

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**Identity Problem as Self-Othering through the Image of Mirror
in Jean Genet's *The Maids***

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Abstract

In this paper, I will focus on Jean Genet's play *The Maids* (1947) from the aspect of the identity problem with the help of mirror scenes to support my thesis. Terms such as "whirligig", self-othering, alienation, doubleness, and the unification of doubleness will also be discussed. The life of Genet, his otherness, how his alienation is reflected via his characters, the real case of the Papin sisters, and the identity problem of the characters in the play will be analyzed. The play includes three characters, two sisters and a Madame. However, my thesis for *The Maids* is that there are not three different characters but only one character created by Genet that is Solange. Her imagination creates another play by using two more characters; Claire as her double and Madame as the representative of the society and the reminder of their social status. I believe that Genet creates Solange and she creates another play –the play-within-a-play. This research will question how a person could feel "the other" in his own identity and which factors have an impact upon both the creation and the solution of "self-othering".

Keywords: Alienation, Mirror, Self-Othering, *The Maids*, Unification.

Introduction

The feeling of being alienated from the world can lead a person to create another world in his imagination. It can be accomplished either by the creation of a work of literature or an imaginary world of fantasies. Therefore, otherness leads a person to create something to be aware of it or to escape from it. Otherness can be categorized in various ways: one of them is that a person could feel alienated because of society that could push him/her to the margins of a structured life. Another way could take place within man himself. After experiencing otherness injected by society, he himself could feel “the other” in his own identity. As “the other” in society, Jean Genet also creates some of his characters as the reflection of his own identity. As a playwright, he demonstrates his inner conflicts and the society’s conflicts, for instance, master-slave issue, in his works. In this paper, I will focus on his play, *The Maids* (1947), on the aspect of identity problem with the help of the mirror scenes to support my thesis statement. I will also discuss some terms such as “whirligig”, self-othering, alienation, split identity or doubleness, and the unification of doubleness. First, I will analyse the life of Genet, his otherness, how his alienation is reflected via his characters, the real case of the Papin sisters, and the identity problem of the characters in the play as well. My thesis for *The Maids* is that there are not three different characters in the play. There is only one character created by Genet and that is Solange. Her imagination creates another play by using two more characters, Claire as her double and Madame as the representative of society and the reminder of their social status. I believe that Genet creates Solange and she creates another play –the play-within-a-play. It looks like looking at a person and seeing various identities more than one. Solange’s imagination could help us realize the inner struggles of a person, her doubleness, her split-identity, and the conflict with both herself and society. As the imaginary creation of Solange, the play mentions two sisters and a Madame. According to my thesis, they are not two sisters. Claire is the reflection of Solange. That is why I want to focus on the mirror image through the play. Two souls within one body and another character, Madame, are existent in Solange’s play.

Jean Genet’s Life, Otherness and Alienation

Jean Genet’s life is quite significant to be able to understand his characters’ otherness after understanding his own alienation. In Richard Coe’s *The Vision of Jean Genet*, his life and otherness are analysed in detail. He was the son of a young prostitute and he was abandoned to the public authorities before he became one-year-old. He was taken care of by foster families. His childhood passed with run-aways, theft, homosexual acts and being in and out of prison. Other people found some words to describe him as how they saw him. Others started to say he was a thief and he became one though he was not. From the very first moment of his consciousness, alienation took place in every

aspect of his life: between himself and others, there was an impassable gap. Genet most probably had internal and external conflicts. There are two ways for him: the first one is that he had to reject *everything* he learned about himself from others and the second one is that he had to accept it all, and learn to see and feel himself –namely, to *be* himself completely as others said he was. (4-5)

As Coe states,

“For the philosopher, the anguish of solitude lies rather in the fact that the being who is *totally* isolated has no way of knowing himself, of conceiving his own identity, and therefore no way of *being* himself in the plenitude of his own awareness.” (4)

It is clear that to be able see ourselves we need *the other*. I claim that, that is why Solange could not be put on stage by herself because, as the audience, we would not be able to realize the split identity of the character. We need Solange as the main character, Claire as the reflection or double identity of Solange and Madame. There is not only one identity struggle within Solange but also another identity struggle between herself and her status that is conveyed to us through the existence of Madame.

The Maids: The Papin Sisters, Identity Problem, Whirligig, Alienation, and Unification

The Maids is based on the real case of the Papin sisters who murdered the wife of their employer and his daughter brutally. Therefore, Genet leads us to compare a real case and an imaginary one. The play becomes the reflection of real life. His writing takes the role of a mirror. The real case of the sisters could be forgotten in time. However, through the creation and reflection –the play stays permanent. In a way, the play leads us to reality. That is how the mirror image functions throughout the play. As Richard N. Coe argues,

“The mirror betrays, robs, multiples, distorts or lies... In every sense, the balance between reality and reflection is a delicate one: for if the basis of reality and reflection is appearance, then the pure appearance of the object in the mirror is in the end more real than the object which causes it.” (8)

Did Jean Genet want us to believe in what is performed on the stage and what is written in the play? I believe the answer is “No”. When Genet conceived *The Maids*, he intended that the roles are performed mostly by the adolescent boys. It shows that Genet wants to lead the audience to think about the difference between appearance and reality. Those boys look like women with clothes and make-up. However, they are not women in reality. The reflection can be totally different from reality. Their reflection as women makes me concentrate on the issue that their preferences about gender could be

different from how they seem. They can have a man's body but they can feel as a woman. They can be structured by the society as an ideal man but they can prefer to have a sexual relationship with the same-sex of their own as opposed to what society expects. Genet's wish creates that paradox in relation to gender trouble. As Jagger Gill puts it clearly in her book entitled *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*:

“...gender is a performance in a theatrical sense and, as such, is subject to change at will; and the assumption that as a social construct gender becomes a mere arbitrary artifice that can easily be dispensed with.” (Gill 8)

This certainly comes as no surprise that performance is also a reflection. The actors are trying to reflect the behaviours of the characters they impersonate. In society, people are also trying to reflect the expected roles as a man or woman imposed upon them by social structures. In the introduction of the two plays *The Maids* and *Deathwatch*, another play by Genet, Jean Paul Sartre argues that Genet warns his audience about the fact that the characters are the creatures of his own imagination and that they are not existent. Therefore, Genet does want the audience to be aware of the play's being a fiction. He wants us to concentrate on something else rather than pushing us to believe what he writes. I consider by telling his characters are just imaginary, Genet leads the audience to go beyond the scene and the play as well. Beyond the scene, we witness the real life. In reality, there are social issues such as homosexuality, inequality among different classes, the separation of the self and the other. In *The Maids*, the vital point is not about being a man or a woman. These concepts are so much intertwined. The audience witnesses that the males perform the female roles in the play. Therefore, they feel confused by seeing the clothes of women put on men. It is more or less the same in *Deathwatch* which is almost tantamount to *The Maids* thematically. The only difference is that the maids are male. This also supports the idea that the audience should focus on the issues beyond appearance.

Another important point about the play is doubleness, the self & the other, and alienation concepts. By analysing the conversations of the maids, the split identity of one character becomes more apparent. The mirror image helps show how the doubleness or the reflection functions in the revelation of Solange's own identity with the help of her other –Claire. This doubleness is also emphasized by Sartre in the introduction to *The Maids* and *Deathwatch*:

“...That there are two of them is a stroke of genius. Two, exactly the number needed to set up a whirligig... The *maids* are the mysterious cipher of the pure imagination and also of Genet himself. There are two of them because Genet is double: himself and the other. Thus, each of the two maids has no other function than to be the other, to be –for the other– herself-as-other.” (18)

Sartre describes the whirligig, which functions in the play with mirrors. It also functions with some sounds in the play. The play is interrupted three times by an alarm clock, a phone ring, and a doorbell. They function as the representative voices of society. The alarm clock is something people use to organize their time and life. It is also a vehicle for people to adapt themselves to the capitalist world because it sounds its alarm at the same hour every morning and disrupts her role-playing. We realize the metaphorical reference of the alarm clock that the servant is trapped into a mechanical routine that turns him into a vehicle for the capitalist world and its exploiting nature. In the end, capitalism leads to the alienation of individuals. A phone ring is also a kind of an alarming voice. It also functions with society as the outside interferer because someone from the outside of the home uses the phone as a vehicle to contact with the person inside. Lastly, a doorbell is also a vehicle for someone to enter the house. Thus, it is the border of inside and outside of the house. It is also a way to go out, namely to face with the society and its rules. Consequently, these vehicles play a function for the characters to return to their real identities from their imaginary world or to change the point of that time. With the alarm clock, the audience realizes that the sisters are performing as Madame and the other maid. The phone ring allows us to understand Monsieur is free from prison. This is a threat to reveal the identity of Claire. It could also be a reference to reveal the identity of Solange if we look at the play as a play-within-a-play. Not to reveal the reality of their unification, having the same body but different selves, the maids are paralyzed by fear. With the doorbell, Madame comes in and we again witness another character although we witness her existence many times during the play. Their unification takes place with the death-wish of Madame for the maids.

Mirror scenes and the concept of the self and the other can be essential to analyse how the sisters' doubleness functions. In the play, it is stated by Solange:

“...I’ll finish it up. Now, here are the two maids, the faithful servants! They are standing in front of you. Despise them. Look more beautiful. – We no longer fear you. We’re merged, enveloped in fumes, in our revels, in our hatred of you...” (46)

It is obvious that the existence of Madame functions as the reason for their unification. First of all, Claire’s existence is also needed to see the other self of Solange. The other leads us to realize the self and understand it better. Robert L. Moore draws our attention to the fact that,

“...one cannot get in touch with one’s deepest subjective self without also feeling confronted with the self as an objective *other*; one cannot meet this other self without, in fact, meeting many *others*, other persons or figures in one’s dreams.” (Moore 39)

Genet makes the audience or the reader meet many others of Solange, namely himself. Solange's first alienation takes place with the appearance of Claire and their unification also needs another existence that is Madame. As it is stated by Solange in the play, they are merged thanks to the hatred of Madame.

Later on, Solange mentions about the garret:

"I liked the garret because it was plain and I didn't have to put on a show. No hangings to push aside, no rugs to shake, no furniture to caress –with my eyes or with a rag, no mirrors, no balcony. Nothing forced us to make pretty gestures." (50)

Solange wishes to be herself. The mirrors create a reflection and that also reminds her of her gestures and her other self. Claire accuses Solange of her wish to kill her. Solange replies, "Yes, I did try. I wanted to free you." (55) To be able to free, the only solution is either unification or killing one of the selves of Solange, namely Solange or Claire. Solange accepts that they are "so alike". (60) Claire answers back: "...I'm sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a mirror, like a bad smell. You're my bad smell." (61) As it can be seen clearly, the sisters are the reflections of each other or one another. They change roles and create an unending whirligig. By confessing one is the other's bad smell with the function of the mirror, it can be interpreted that the mirror creates the reflection, which brings the sisters to the realization of their doubleness. As a result, they realize their need of unification to be able to survive in one body and even to be able to be free.

Another function of the mirror is that Madame becomes aware of the intention of the maids, which happens right after she looks at the mirror:

MADAME: ...*[She looks at herself again in the mirror.]*

CLAIRE: Madame should have some tea because of the cold.

MADAME: *[laughing]* You're trying to kill me with your tea and your flowers and your suggestions. (78)

The mirror shows us not only the intention of a character but also the real intention of her/him. It is a vehicle to compare appearance and reality. It takes place between a theatre play and real life also. The play is a reflection of real life. The audience looks at the characters and they try to find the most appropriate equivalence of them from the real people they know or from the real cases that happen in their lives. Without any reflection, it is difficult to reach the real self. The body is only a reflection of the soul. We look at the bodies but we do not see the souls. Therefore, the body becomes the appearance. This does not certainly mean it is unimportant. It really is because when we feel we are deceived by the appearance of a person, we learn that we need to search for something else rather than appearance. The appearance and the reflection help us realize the self and the soul. The soul is alive as long as the body is alive. I believe it is alive even after the death of the body but it is

from a religious perspective that is beyond the comparison of reflection and reality concepts. Alice Miller declares in her book *For Your Own Good*, “For the human soul is virtually indestructible, and its ability to rise from the ashes remains as long as the body draws breath.” (qtd. in Sanford 94)

After the real or symbolic death of Claire, it is stated:

CLAIRE: ...Solange, you will contain me within you...

CLAIRE: Forget about them. We're alone in the world. Nothing exist but the altar where one of the two maids is about to immolate herself– (96)

Claire continues to say that it is Solange's duty to keep them both alive. (97) She adds that Solange will represent her in the world. (97) The final part is vital to understand where the play leads us to think:

“...Madame is dead. Her two maids are alive: they've just risen up, free, from Madame's icy form. All the maids were present at her side –not they themselves, but rather the hellish agony of their names. And all that remains of them to float about Madame's airy corpse is the delicate perfume of the holy maidens which they were in secret. We are beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free!” (100)

The situation between the two sisters, among two maids and a Madame, make us think more broadly. All the maids come together. Therefore, the play also refers to their social status as well as their inner struggle as an individual. This struggle takes place not only in their inner world but also in society.

Conclusion

Genet's life, his abandonment, and his own doubleness help us to understand the play better. Genet's creation of his characters is the result of the reflection of his own identity, the reflection of a real case –the Papin sisters and their brutal act of murder, identity the problem as self and other. The play includes two maids and a Madame on the stage. However, I claim that Genet only creates the character Solange. Claire and Madame are the imaginary creation of Solange. We know from the play that these sisters are writing stories and reading as well. Therefore, they have the power of creation upon an imaginary level. That is exactly what the writers do. They create stories, characters, lives, split identities, others and more. Solange, as the creation of Genet, creates her double –Claire. Their unification also needs another “other” to strengthen the idea of the self. They are unified in the hatred and the death-wish of Madame. The mirror and other reflective ideas lead me to view the play from this perspective. With their unification, it becomes more apparent that the play is not only the realization of one individual but it is that of a whole group of people who are othered by the society or by other classes.

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