"YOU GOTTA ADMIT YOU HAD IT COMIN TO YOU": TRAUMA, GENDER VIOLENCE AND FEMALE BONDING IN MARSHA NORMAN'S *GETTING OUT*

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1. Introduction

Although nowadays nobody would dare to argue against the relationship between literature and gender violence, this has not always been the case. In this paper, I intend to analyze Marsha Norman's first play *Getting Out* (1977) focusing on the traumatized protagonist, Arlene/Arlie, and trying to identify the possible causes of her trauma as hinted at in the play. Additionally, I will try to show that this play also offers a possible means of recovery from trauma through female bonding, illustrating the importance of female bonding in cases of gender violence and how women can reconcile themselves with their community. The analysis of the characters Arlene/Arlie will focus on the family conflict (especially the mother-daughter relationship), examples of gender violence, and the power of friendship among women.

The very mention of the words *gender violence* opens up a long-running and unresolved debate as to the origins, causes and consequences of such violence. This debate is partly the result of the inexactitude and confusion of a number of controversial terms here. One example is the indiscriminate and interchangeable use of the terms 'marital violence', 'domestic violence', 'patriarchal abuse', 'patriarchal terrorism', and 'gender violence' to describe a situation in which a woman is attacked. Hence, as gender violence law expert Ana Rubio has noted, this diversity of terminology confuses rather than clarifies: "the disparity of terms used to refer to violence against women —domestic violence, sexist, patriarchal, gender violence— has the effect and intention of confusing rather than clarifying"[1] (2010: 149). The first thing that needs to be established, then, is what exactly is meant by gender violence and what types of violence it includes:

> Gender violence encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices […] Violence against women has been called 'the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world'. (United Nations Population Fund in Harne and Radford 2008: 18)

Thus the term *gender violence* can refer to domestic violence, sexual abuse and a wider range of abuses committed not only against women, but also against children, typically the forgotten victims of this type of violence. However, it has to be clarified that, when I speak about children as victims of gender violence, I am referring to the violence exerted against women's children in a domestic environment as part of the continuum of violence directed at damaging these women. This violence can be explicitly directed against these children, for example by hitting them or, even killing them because, this way, women are harmed too. But it can be an indirect type of violence too in the sense that children suffer when they see the violence exercised against their mothers and, thus, are also psychologically damaged. Therefore, it is different from specifically-directed child abuse committed by adults and that, as UNICEF acknowledges, refers to any type of abuse either physical, psychological or sexual committed by an adult against a child. Child abuse includes also neglect and abandonment of children, and any kind of exploitation (child soldiers, children working in very bad conditions and children sexually exploited). Child abuse can occur anywhere, at school, in the streets, at home, or at any other place and it can be committed by any adult ranging from relatives, to teachers, caretakers or family friends. In this essay, I will be dealing with child abuse and, at the same time, with a girl who was not only abused by her own father but who also witnessed her mother's abuse within the home.

Ana Rubio also explains that the confusion of terms concerning gender violence today occurs through the tendency of news media to make indiscriminate use of terms such as gender violence, domestic violence, and patriarchal violence without considering that they correspond to different subtypes of the wider term gender violence.

As a consequence of the daily media attention which this problem has come to receive, gender violence has been considered as the social plague of the twenty-first century society. While this consciousness raising is partially due to the prevalence of cases of gender violence in the media, it is also a result of the publication of statistics by institutions such as the *Instituto de la Mujer* (Institute for Women's Affairs) in Spain and similar organizations around the world such as the UN Women Amnesty International or several feminist organizations which specify the number of women abused, of women killed, and the estimated percentage of women who do not denounce their assailants. However, it is also undeniably the case that the situation of women has been questioned throughout history, especially in literature, although this fact seems to have been ignored by scholars over a long period of time, until the emergence of feminist movements in the 1970s.

Surprising as it may seem, then, although the visibilization of gender violence in literature became an established literary topic in the 1970s, the relationship between literature and the social denunciation of gender violence[2] goes as far back as nineteenth century literature. Women writers of that period tried to question the role models imposed on them, and the 'punishments' they had to suffer if they did not behave as was expected. Despite the fact that many episodes of abuse were known by neighbors and family, and were described by these witnesses, such acts did not carry any sociopolitical or moral reprobation, and were ultimately condoned by society. Women continued to denounce violence and to claim their rights as human beings during the successive decades of the twentieth century. However, it was not until the 1970s that the situation was fully exposed, with an explosion of women writing about and denouncing gender abuse. Some of these women, such as Betty Friedan, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde did so from what can be considered a theoretical point of view. Others chose to write about gender violence from a more fictional perspective. Among these, playwrights such as Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez and Marsha Norman write specifically about this type of violence. However, as Sharon Friedman points out, the explosion of women playwrights writing on women's issues during the 1970s in fact began at the very start of the twentieth century, due to the freedom of expression that the dramatic genre permits:

> It is against the background of twentieth century American drama —a developing native theatre that, in conjunction with the early women's movement, prompted more women to write for the stage, and encouraged new playwrights to pursue a certain freedom of expression— that one can see very clearly the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has expressed itself in the drama. (1984: 71)

One example of this denunciation tendency provided by literature could be *Trifles* (1916) by Susan Glaspell, where a woman goes to prison after killing her husband, and through the characters of two women neighbors, the audience can guess that she has been the victim of continued abuse throughout her marriage. The determining factor that leads this woman to kill her husband is that he kills the only company she had: a canary.

Moreover, theatre is essentially performance through physical bodies. It is a genre written to be performed, not only to be read, and a reaction from the audience physically watching the performance is also expected. In this sense, the preference of women for the dramatic genre during the twentieth century is not hard to understand, since the medium offered them a way of writing for, about, and through their own bodies:

> Alone among all literary productions, the theatre's medium is the physical body — the virtual corporality of the text makes the drama unique. Since it is primarily women's bodies that have been politicized in systems of exchange, the textualization of the female body poses special problems and potential for the woman playwright. (Hart 1989: 5)

Nonetheless, the 1970s was not only important for women because of the attention paid by dramatists to female issues, it was also a key decade for the improvement of the situation of women in general. This decade witnessed an explosion of women writing about gender violence with the clear purpose of denouncing and displaying this prolonged abuse, which previously had been, let it be said, protected by social controls such as privacy and shame, factors that had prevented the authorities from intervening. The usual defense was that, in his own home, a man could do whatever he wanted with his wife, daughters, and even sisters, in that he was shielded by the patriarchal system. It is not surprising, then, that one of the main objectives of feminist movements was to denounce this situation of blatant abuse that so many women underwent. However, feminism was not the only movement concerned with this situation. During the last decades of the twentieth century, the discipline known as Trauma Studies was developing an extensive evaluation of the causes and consequences that gender violence had on women. In fact, gender violence ranks third of all psychological traumas to surface "into public consciousness", along with hysteria and shell-shock, as Judith Herman notes:

> Three times over the past century, a particular form of psychological trauma has surfaced into public consciousness. Each time, the investigation of that trauma has flourished in affiliation with a political movement. The first to emerge was hysteria, the archetypal psychological disorder of women. […] The second was shell shock or combat neurosis. Its study began in England and the United States after the First World War and reached a peak after the Vietnam War. […] The last and more recent trauma to come into public awareness is sexual and domestic violence.[3] (1997: 9)

Health professionals started to observe that not only soldiers, who returned home after war, presented a range of symptoms typical of post-traumatic stress disorder that made them incapable of adapting to life in society again. These professionals noted that more and more people were affected in a similar way by other traumatic events that also affected their lives. Among them were included rape and child abuse (forms of gender violence):

> As a consequence of the increasing occurrence of such perplexing war experiences and other catastrophic responses during the last twenty years, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder. (Caruth 1996: 11)

In so far as trauma is of interest to psychiatry, psychology and public health, it is also of great importance for historical and literary studies. Its relevance here is closely tied up with the inherent political, ethical and historical dimensions of trauma, in the sense that traumatic events "often happen due to social forces as well as in the social world" (Marder 2006: 1); that is, because it occurs within society, it thereby has relevance for historical and literary research.

Trauma Studies is a discipline that has its origins in Freudian psychoanalysis, and in the literary output resulting from more recent overwhelming and devastating events such as the Holocaust. Scholars of Trauma Studies start from the premise that trauma is a special issue in that it crosses all physical and psychic borders. Although the original meaning of the word *trauma* in Classical Greek was literally 'wound', referring to an actual physic wound that could be healed, it soon took on the meaning of a less fleshy wound, one that affected the psyche and was not easily healed (if trauma can ever be said to be healed) in medical contexts. This kind of wound affected the present lives of the individuals but because of something that had happened in their past. Thus, as Freud[4] proved in his research, the study of trauma was something different due to the special features accompanying its development in the individual, affecting his/her way of living and even his/her language:

> What is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwhise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 1996: 4)

In this context of exploring solutions and ways of dealing with trauma and all the special issues it leads to, a group of scholars started to look at literature, more specifically at narrative, and discovered that literature is an ideal medium for the re-enactment that is part of the traumatic process, a re-enactment that is easier to bring about through fiction, using fictional characters and fictional language, rather than by expressing our feelings and fears directly when we usually cannot find the appropriate language. It was from this first group of researchers that Trauma Studies took their start.

Trauma Studies as applied to literary texts has developed since the early 1990s especially through the work of two groundbreaking specialists in the field of comparative literature: Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Feldman. They shifted attention to the fact that literature, in contrast to legal discourse, functions as a means of bearing testimony, a way of expressing in words that which is normally or traditionally left unsaid. Such studies serve to demonstrate the commitment of the world of the arts to individual and collective suffering, as explained by Sonia Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín:

> Trauma Studies has highlighted the fact that art in its different manifestations has frequently been used as a healing device by writers, minorities and society in general, either because of the things that are explicitly said or because of the way in which it draws attention to what has been silenced [...]. The awareness that art is capable of representing pain and suffering in a conscious or an unconscious way requires a new conception of representation. Trauma Studies works from the premise that narrative and storytelling can contribute to the healing of a traumatised individual or group. (2013: 2)

This healing power of art will be the main focus of the present study, in that Trauma Studies not only aims at explaining the social, historical and political circumstances associated with the emergence of this trauma, but also tries to provide solutions for victims and to help them in their recovery from trauma, or at least it tries to identify solutions that have not previously been explored.

2. Exploring Trauma in *Getting Out*

Getting Out is the first of a group of three plays in which Marsha Norman explores issues concerning female identity, the struggle against patriarchy, and the right to achieve autonomy in a society that still tries to restrict women's rights. Although the prospect concerning these matters at first looks pessimistic, the possibility of hope is offered through connection with other women:

> These plays focus on female characters, address a female audience, and foreground issues of female identity. All three consider the problem of surviving in a patriarchal society, find limited hope in the connections between women, and chart the devastating emotional consequences of "self-realization" in a society that still defines and determines the feminine subject position negatively. (Spencer 1992: 148)

Getting Out is not a conventional play. From the beginning the audience is forced to confront a protagonist suffering from a split personality disorder, and as a consequence, the past and present intermingle in the characters of present-day Arlene and young Arlie. Note, for example, the stage directions: "light comes up on Arlene, walking around the cell, waiting to be picked up for the ride home. Arlie is visible, but just barely" (Norman 1978: 9).

Arlene is a former prostitute who has just got out of prison, having been convicted for accidental murder (she kills a cab driver who has tried to take sexual advantage of her). But she is also Arlie, her younger self, a malignant, naughty child who enjoys watching others suffering while she tries to put her own miseries out of mind. Watching the two of them together is important because the audience will discover two opposite characters who are nevertheless the same person. As Spencer observes, Arlene and Arlie represent the masculine and the feminine part of a split self:

> The self is split almost entirely along lines associated with gender differentiation: the tomboyishly "masculine" (aggressive, angry, violent, willfull, and "bad") Arlie is juxtaposed to the "feminine" (meek, quiet, withdrawn, indecisive, and "good") Arlene. (Spencer 1992: 153)

Through this technique of presenting two different actresses portraying the same character, Norman leads the spectator into feeling the same distress that Arlene/Arlie feels. However, what the audience does not know at this stage is that lying behind her state of mind is a traumatic experience buried in her early childhood, a trauma she has been trying to repress: being sexually abused by her own father, and subsequently being abandoned by her mother. As Jenny Spencer has argued, these traumatic events, along with other sordid episodes in her life, can be traced back to the existence of a patriarchal order:

> Raped by her father, exploited by her boyfriend, sexually harassed by the prison guards and emotionally manipulated by the chaplain, Arlene's female identity is shaped, damaged, conditioned and reconstructed by and for the representatives of patriarchal authority. In other words, no separation is made between self and sexual identity: Arlie's sex determines the particular forms of abuse she suffers, just as Arlene's rehabilitation depends on the management of her sexual behavior and the appearance of a presentably feminine demeanor. (Spencer 1992: 154)

It is no wonder, then, that Arlene/Arlie is a traumatized woman, and it is only natural that the spectator will appreciate some symptoms of trauma when the character is on stage. The coexistence, side by side, of Arlene and Arlie is the clearest of these, since one of the most characteristic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the constant recalling of the past, specifically the scenario of the trauma itself. Yet some hints of a process of recovery can also be detected within the play.

Thus it can be argued that there are two clearly recognizable symptoms of the trauma that Arlene is experiencing onstage, and that the audience can appreciate: the presence of Arlie, in the form of constant flashbacks that prevent Arlene from going a step further, and the fact that her relationships with males will be marked by the prolonged abuse suffered in her early childhood. Since she was sexually abused by her father, thus a victim of child abuse, she has come to assume that, for men, she is a mere sexual object:

> The reenactment of the relationship with the perpetrator is most evident in the sexualized transference that sometimes emerges in survivors of prolonged childhood sexual abuse. The patient may assume that the only value she can possibly have in the eyes of a powerful person, is as a sexual object. (Herman 1997: 139)

Even when she tries to rebel against this label of being sexually accessible, for example when she kills the cab driver who has tried to rape her, she is punished with incarceration and is treated like an animal by the prison guards. For this reason, it is not until she leaves prison that she needs to find and redefine her place in society. She tries to do so by denying her old self, Arlie, and trying to be Arlene, a new person. She needs to recover her family bonds to prove she is now Arlene, but this is not going to be an easy task.

Reconnection with the ones you love and the ones who presumably love you is one of the steps towards recovery. At the very beginning of the play, Arlene expresses the importance of regaining her mother's faith and of being considered part of the family again. When her mother comes to visit her, on her first day out of prison, Arlene subtly asks to be welcomed back into the family fold and to take part in the normal routine of family life:

> ARLENE: (A Clear request) I'll probably get my Sundays off.
> MOTHER: Sunday… is my day to clean the house now. (Arlene gets the message, finally walks over to straighten the picture. Mother now feels a little bad about this rejection, stops sweeping for a moment.) I woulda wrote you but I didn't have nuthin to say. An no money to send, so what's the use? (Norman 1978: 25-26)

What these words seem to suggest is that Arlene is in fact not welcome back into the family at all; her mother evidently feels wholly detached from her, and has come with the sole purpose of doing what society would consider to be correct, rather than because she really feels the need to get closer to her daughter. Besides, when Arlene tries to recall sweet memories from her childhood, her mother can only remember the naughty and dangerous things Arlie used to do:

> MOTHER: [...] Little Snotty-nosed kid tryin to kill her daddy with a bologna sandwich. An him being so pleased when you brung it to him… (Laughing.)
> ARLENE: (No longer enjoying the memory.) He beat me good.

> MOTHER: Well, now, Arlie, you gotta admit you had it comin to you (Wiping tears from laughing.)
> ARLENE: I guess. (Norman 1978: 24)

As far as I can see, Mother seems to be incapable of recognizing the true motives for Arlie wanting "to kill" her father by putting toothpaste in a sandwich. Moreover, Mother even supports Father's decision to beat Arlie because she "had it comin to her". Hence, it seems that Arlene is not able to enjoy her childhood memories because they are full of stories of violence, not only of her father's abuse, which is only hinted at through Arlie's words and is never explicitly shown on stage, but also because of the physical violence her mother suffered:

> MOTHER: You remember that black chewing gum he got you when you was sick?
> ARLENE: I remember he beat up on you.
> MOTHER: Yeah, (Proudly) and he was really sorry a coupla times. […] (Norman 1978: 19)

Arlene's mother was not only incapable of helping her daughter when she was raped by her father, but also of recognizing and fighting against the situation of abuse that she herself suffered. Mother, as she is called in the play, without being given a name, is a woman who has fought for her family. Her husband, who does not earn money to support the family, is a despicable man who abuses his daughter and his wife too. Mother despises Arlene for both accusing her father and for being a prostitute and the truth is that she is very familiar with these two situations since she has been forced to resort to prostitution herself to have enough money to eat. This situation is described in Arlie's words:

> ARLIE: she drives the cab to buy us stuff, cause we don't take no charity from nobody, cause we got money cause she earned it. […] (*More angry.*) She drives at night cause people needs rides at night. People goin to see their friends that are sick, or people's cars broken down and they gotta get to work at the … nobody calls my Mama a whore. (Norman 1978: 24)

Thus, Arlie finds justification for her mother, something that Arlene no longer can do. This extract comes in the form of assorted memories while Mother is visiting Arlene. They have more things in common than may appear at first sight but, whereas Arlene is ready to forgive her mother, Mother is not capable of forgiving her. Mother is an abused woman who is used to working hard in order to support her family. However, she is incapable of seeing that Arlie is just another victim and blames her for the terrible things that happen to her. In fact, Mother accuses her of being malignant and she even reaches the point of talking to the principal of the school with a view to putting Arlie into a special school because of her behavior.

It would seem, then, that the mother-daughter relationship in *Getting Out* challenges Greiner's claims as to the existence of a stronger bonding between females: "The pivotal moment in female bonding may be the birth of a daughter; some clinical theorists conclude that mothers bond more forcefully with daughters than with sons" (1993: 34). It might be supposed that this type of bonding occurs because mothers were once daughters and that the identity of the mother might be preserved to some extent in the daughter. However, any such bond, which would constitute a huge step in Arlene's recovery, is completely broken in this play, with Mother wholly unable to believe in her daughter's new opportunity in life. A crucial moment in the play, one in which we observe the extent of the damage to the mother-daughter relationship, happens when Mother finds a man's hat in the apartment. Arlene explains that the hat is Bennie's, the guard who brought her from prison. Mother immediately gets furious because she thinks that her daughter is working as a prostitute again, and strips from her daughter any belief that she really has changed:

> MOTHER: […] I knowed I shouldn't have come. You ain't changed a bit.
> ARLENE: Same hateful brat, right? (Back to Mother.)
> MOTHER: Same hateful brat. Right (Arms full, heading for the door)
> ARLENE: (Rushing toward her.) Mama…
> MOTHER: Don't you touch me. (Mother leaves. Arlene stares out the door, stunned and hurt, finally, she slams the door and turns back into the room.) (Norman 1978: 30)

Thus it can be inferred that Arlene has finally understood that she has no possibility of establishing a bond with her own mother; indeed, Mother cannot even stand being touched casually by her daughter. Arlene learns, then, that although she has moved from imprisonment to freedom, her life has not really changed. As Spencer notes:

> Despite the apparent progress that Arlene's release from prison involves, we find that life "outside" is comprised of the same daily rituals as life inside: Arlene moves into a cell-like apartment, cleans up a mess she didn't make, eats food she doesn't want, fends off undesired sexual advances, and awakes to the noise of a loud siren. (Spencer 1992: 151)

It seems that there is no chance for Arlene to be part of the family again. Her mother distrusts her and does not want her back because she would be a bad example for the new children (one of which is Arlene's, born while she was in prison and taken away from her). In this sense, the breaking of biological female bonds here might reflect the fear that such female bonds provoke in males, being interpreted as an intrusion into and a destabilization of the patriarchal order: "if the friendships of women are considered at all, and that is rare enough, they intrude into the male account the way a token woman is reluctantly included in a male community" (Heilbrun 1990: 99). Thus, it could be thought that Norman is ringing the changes on feminist and patriarchal conventions. Indeed, it might be recalled that she was accused of anti-feminist sentiments and of using conventional values in her plays. Nonetheless, although she decided to deal with a difficult case of a mother-daughter relationship in the play, she does in fact afford the character of Arlene a chance to recover and reconstruct her life through female bonding.

3. Female Bonding as the Way towards Recovery

Although the possibility of biological bonding does not appear to be open to Arlene, and thus does not afford her a means of recovering from her traumas, the possibility, indeed the need, for establishing sociologically based female bonding seems undeniable. In this respect, I agree with Janice Raymond who insists on the fact that women can change culturally acquired habits through this sociological female bonding:

> Women bond […] not because of biological needs but because of cultural conditions […] Biological differences among the sexes are not an issue, and male dominance is not an unredeemable given inherited by humanity since the early moments of the race when the sexual division of labor resulted in the contrast between man-the-hunter and woman-the-gatherer. Culture is a construct. Constructs can be changed. (Raymond in Greiner 1993: 41)

In fact, in order to reconcile the two sides of her own self, to join together the new Arlene and the old Arlie, Arlene needs the help and the unselfish friendship of another woman. This woman, it transpires, is her neighbor from upstairs, Ruby. As Noelia Hernando-Real points out, "even though she has no family to count on, and bonding with her own mother or sister is not dramatically possible, the play ends as Arlene befriends another ex-con, Ruby, who will help her get a job" (2012: 49).

When Ruby appears on stage, looking for Candy (Arlene's younger sister), Arlene feels an immediate distrust towards this stranger, despite the fact that she comes with the offer of help. Arlene is even incapable of extending her hand to greet her neighbor, as the stage directions explain: "RUBY: […] It's Arlie, right? / ARLENE: It's Arlene (does not extend her hand.)" (Norman 1978: 46). It is important to note here how Ruby highlights Arlene's new identity, pointing out that "you [Arlene] don't seem like Candy said" (Norman 1978: 48). Ruby knows about Arlene's situation and offers her a job as a dish-washer, more decent work than prostitution although not so well paid. However, Ruby forces her to confront reality and is bluntly sincere when she tells Arlene that "[…] you can wash dishes to pay the rent on your own 'slum', or you can spread your legs for any shit that's got ten dollars" (Norman 1978: 60). Moreover, this is part of what Carol P. Christ calls "the consciousness raising ritual" and "the consciousness raising group" (although in this case it is only Ruby who helps Arlene). Through this ritual, women tell each other about their experiences, they dare to express things never said aloud before said, and it is definitely the first step to female bonding, that is, to recovery:

> The consciousness-raising group [...] can be seen as a ritualized setting in which women gather together to share their stories. In consciousness-raising, women "hear each other into speech", as Nelle Morton says. Her phrase captures the dynamic in which the presence of other women who have had similar experiences makes it possible for women to say things they have never said before, to think thoughts they would have suppressed [...] In consciousness-raising new stories are born, and women who hear and tell their stories are inspired to create new life possibilities for themselves and all women. (1995: 7)

The problem is that Arlene cannot trust anybody, a point that she admits to Ruby during the play. She rejects Ruby's invitation to lunch and her offer of bringing some groceries from the shop, and even refuses to play cards with her neighbor. Arlene is clearly unsure of Ruby's true intentions. She is a hurt being who is still not ready to believe in the disinterested offers of good people, although this attitude is not going to last forever. Arlene's understanding of Ruby's intentions changes as soon as Ruby comes and defends her from Carl, Arlene's former pimp and a mirror image of her perverse father, a man who not only exploited her but also sexually abused her, as Hernando-Real explains: "Carl [...] is a double of Arlene's father, they both abuse her and make her home a brothel" (2012: 49). This man appears on stage suddenly, and tries to force Arlene to return to her work as a prostitute, first telling her that it is the easiest way of earning money, and then using violence:

> CARL: God, ain't it hot in this dump. You gonna come or not? You wanna wash dishes, I could give a shit. (Now yelling.) But you comin with me, you say it right now, lady! (Grabs her by the arm.) Hugh?
> RUBY: (Knocks on the door.) Arlene?
> ARLENE: That's Ruby I was tellin you about
> CARL: (Catches her arm again, very rough.) We ain't through!
> RUBY: (Opening the door.) Hey! (Seeing the rough treatment.) Goin to the store. (Very firm.) Thought maybe you forgot something.
> CARL: (Turns Arlene loose.) You this cook I been hearin about?
> RUBY: I cook. So what?
> CARL: Buys you nice shoes, don't it, cookin ? Why don't you hock your watch an have something done to your hair? If you got a watch.
> RUBY: Why don't you drop by the coffee shop. I'll spit in your eggs. (Norman 1978: 57-58)

Ruby is very worried about Arlene, and Arlene comes to perceive this. She even asks Ruby to stay with her until Carl eventually gets the message and leaves her house. After this episode, Arlene discovers that Ruby has gone through similar situations to her own, and that because of this Ruby can understand her. Arlene's pain is thus eased somewhat, and she explains that she cannot go on unless she becomes reconciled with Arlie, her old, hateful self. Meanwhile, Ruby explains that, "You can still love people that's gone" (Norman 1978: 62). Both share an intimate moment of conversation and Arlene finally discovers that life has offered her another chance. Finally she accepts Ruby's friendship, having learned the importance of being together as a means of surviving her new present situation, because, as Christ observes, once women talk about their stories and find the connections, they are empowered to create a new life for themselves, taking this new chance for their survival:

> When one woman puts her experiences into words, another woman who has kept silent, afraid of what others will think, can find validation. And when the second woman says aloud, "yes, that was my experience too", the first woman loses some of her fear […] Their act creates new possibilities of being and living for themselves and for all women. With the creation of a new language, the possibility that women will forget what they know is lessened. (1995: 23)

Recovery from trauma, then, can only occur after the traumatized person feels empowered enough to talk about his or her experience: "Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (Herman 1997: 133). The presence of Ruby in the play is fundamental because, besides helping Arlene to trust again in people and to believe in the power of union, she helps her to come to a reconciliation with her own past. At the very end of the play, Arlene and Arlie are together, symbolizing that the process of recovery through female bonding is starting to work. Arlene could never set out on such a process of recovery without reconciling herself with her past, and this in turn requires her to stop denying it.

It is very important to keep in mind that, although I am speaking here of female bonding in the same terms as Robin Morgan does, the trend nowadays is to speak of female *coalition* following the research achievements of critics such as Bernice Johnson Reagon. The main difference between the two theoretical approaches is very well explained by Chandra Talpade Mohanty when she says that

> [w]hile Morgan uses the notion of sisterhood to construct a cross-cultural unity of women and speak of planetary feminism as the politics of the 21st century, Bernice Johnson Reagon uses coalition as the basis to talk about the cross-cultural commonality of struggles, identifying survival, rather than shared oppression, as the ground for coalition. (Mohanty 1992: 84)

Although some people may consider it more appropriate to use this more recent theoretical framework to analyze this play, I think that, taking into account the context of production of the play, using the analysis as female bonding is accurate. Moreover, these two women at the very end of the play represent the sisterhood proposed by Morgan since they become united by their sharing of the experience of being ex-convicts. Therefore, in this case, I prefer to use female bonding rather than coalition to refer to the relationship between Ruby and Arlene.

4. Conclusion

Bonding among women is a necessary means of survival in a patriarchal society which does not forgive women when they do what society establishes as wrong. That is to say, since Arlene is a prostitute, she has to be punished in some way for her actions. The fact that she is a traumatized, abused child, and that her conflictive behavior is a simple reflection of the enormous emotional charge that she has had to bear, is not taken into account. Arlene's only possible escape from the bad memories of her childhood was through behaving aggressively. Having been continually told that she was a bad child, she just assumed this 'evil' identity and behaved as expected. Until the end of the play, when she finds Ruby, she is incapable of speaking about what happened to her. But female bonding is not only useful as a way of recovering from trauma. This play also shows that it is necessary to help women to become reconciled with their own selves at times when this step is vital for them to take control of their own lives, though at that moment they see escape as being impossible.

Regarding mother-daughter relationships, it can be said that they have tended to be conflictive throughout literary history. Although the existence of a natural or biological bonding between mother and daughter exists, I have seen that in this particular case (as in other works, such as *Night, Mother* (1983), also by Norman) the bond is completely broken. Arlene's mother prefers to go on believing in the supposed badness of her own daughter, rather than listening to her and providing her with support. Yet despite the disappearance of this biological bond, the existence of a different, sociocultural bond is affirmed. And it seems that this type of bonding proves to be more effective when it comes to dealing with cases of recovery from gender violence.

In summary, then, with respect to female bonding this play bears out the insistence of feminists and sociologists on the importance of bonding with one's fellows. The female bonding depicted proves to be the only possibility of renewal and redemption for the protagonist, and opens her eyes to a new chance in life outside prison, one which prevents her from a return to her old sordid and traumatic existence.

It should also be noted that what Norman has achieved with this play is, first of all, to place 'the woman question'[5] as the main focus of its attention. However, there is no real and unmitigated forgiveness for Arlene in the play, and its ending is both open and extremely ambiguous. It is not known whether Arlene ultimately follows Ruby's advice. Nonetheless, after the many adversities she has faced, it is preferable for the audience to believe that she is in fact redeemed, and that she has a real chance to survive in a world that has constrained her so absolutely for so long. The success that Norman achieved with *Getting Out* is not only a result of the experimental technique used. It has to do with the fact that she chooses everyday characters, ones that are easily identifiable to the audience, as are the emotional responses which these characters provoke:

> Norman's plays are woven from conventional material, using traditional forms, and embedded in cultural assumptions that both the form and content carry with them. Moreover, their emotional effect depends on an immediate recognition of reality on the part of audience members, and Norman goes out of her way to maintain that illusion with onstage clocks keeping real time, familiar sets and dialogue, and the tempo of domestic routine. (Spencer 1992: 162)

To conclude I would like to borrow the words of Maria Dolores Narbona-Carrión, in her reflections on the role of literature and the issue of gender violence, words which I feel accurately summarize the content and intentions of Marsha Norman's play:

> Literature in general and theatre in particular has the responsibility of portraying, promoting, and stimulating the creation and reinforcement of female bonds, because they have the possibility of constituting one of the political means of neutralizing violence against women. (2012: 64)

Notes

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[1]. My translation: "la disparidad de términos empleados para referirse a la violencia contra las mujeres —violencia doméstica, machista, sexista, patriarcal, de género— tienen el efecto y la intención de confundir más que de clarificar".

[2]. The most accurate term to use in the nineteenth century context would probably be marital cruelty. I use the term gender violence here because it is perhaps the best known nowadays, and includes a wider range of abuses, including domestic violence within the broader term violence.

[3]. Although the term used in this essay will be gender violence, at the time Judith Herman first published *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence —from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) the most common term used was domestic violence. For more information about the chronology and use of terms see Johnson 2005: 1126-1130.

[4]. For more information about this author's research on trauma, see Freud 2003 (1920).

[5]. 'The Woman question' is the term used by Betty Friedan in her feminist volume *The Feminine Mystique* to refer to those situations, especially of abuse, which confronted women and which were not taken into account by society.

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