

Crushed Identities in Jean Genet's The Maids

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Abstract

The present study sheds light on Jean Genet's craftsmanship of transforming a simple story that revolves around the love-hate relationship between two housemaid sisters and their mistress into a complicated philosophical issue vis-a-vis the crushed identities of the play's characters: Claire, Solange, Madame and Monsieur. The study also shows that the identities of the play's characters are already crushed beyond repair. So they are no longer in search of identities as some critics would like us to believe. Genet's dramatic achievement lies in his genuine move to elevate the reader to be able to catch the message of the Absurd. As the paper will argue, the two maids represent human's vain attempts to reach any sense of identity. Every human is always a potential candidate to become Claire, Solange, Madame or Monsieur.

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شخصيات مسحوقة في مسرحية "الخدمات" ل (جان جينيه)

ملخص:

تناولت هذه الدراسة الضوء على براعة الكاتب المسرحي (جان جينيه) في تحويل قصة بسيطة تدور احداثها حول علاقة الحب والكره بين سيدة وخدامتها الاختين الى موضوع فلسفي معقد يتناول شخصيات المسرحية المسحوقة: كلير, سولانج, مدام, و مسيو. تظهر الدراسة بأن "الهوية الذاتية" لدى شخصيات المسرحية قد سحقت بالكامل ولا يمكن اصلاحها. فشخصيات المسرحية لم تعد تبحث عن هويتها كما يحاول بعض النقاد اقناعنا بذلك. ان من انجازات الكاتب المسرحي (جان جينيه) هو رفع مستوى القارئ ليتمكن من التقاط رسالة "العبث". كما ستوضح هذه الدراسة فالخدمات في المسرحية يمثلن المحاولات اليائسة لدى البشر للوصول الى مفهوم واضح للهوية. وكل انسان هو مرشح محتمل ليصبح كلير, سولانج, مدام, او مسيو.

Crushed Identities in Jean Genet's *The Maids*

Like all great plays, Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947) opens up for all kinds of interpretations: psychological, political, Marxist and others⁽¹⁾. The play could also be looked at as a case study in psychology, master-servant psychology to be more precise, dealing with perversion, violence, murder, fantasy and delusion. And, like all great artists, Genet detaches himself from any such interpretations and makes an argument for one thing only that is revolt. In doing so he presents the darker side of society and gives a new definition to the theater which had hitherto been used as a different world, completely detached from the real world. Genet uses theater to jolt the audience out of the real world which is largely cruel and oppressive. In doing so, he goes with the theater of cruelty, surrealism and absurdist to make his point. In his "critical survey" of Genet's drama Richard Coe says that "Genet comes to link hands with the absurdists, with the neo-Surrealists, and with all the other leaders of the revolt against naturalism in the theater. His characters are never stable with the stability of day-to-day existence" (P. 3).

Genet's *The Maids* is a masterpiece in what we might call the very meaningful Absurd. Trying to make it meaningful, the reader's first resort is to what he has traditionally been trained to as some kind of looking for identities. Soon a reader finds such an idea as Absurd. Upon deeper thinking, the reader starts to realize how the identities of all the characters are already crushed and beyond repair. Azzi Boros goes to the extent of saying that the maids "Solange and Claire are nothing; they have no real being, except what Madame, their mistress, makes them" (P. 1). The feverish attempts of the characters, especially the maids, to do any repair to their identities proves a hilarious laughing matter, and thus helps Genet elevate the reader to be able to catch the message of the Absurd. As the paper will argue, the two maids represent human's vain attempts to reach any sense of identity. Every human is always a potential candidate to become another Solange, Claire, Monsieur or the Madame. The identity crisis in trying to answer the ever hanging question "who am I?" hovers endlessly over every human. To save themselves, most humans



choose to always delay answering the question. They are naïve enough to sometimes think that delay or forgetting might make the question vanish or die. Obviously unmarried, the two maids who are in their thirties have been into this business of “who am I?”, and “who are we?” long enough to reach the point of severe schizophrenia. By now, the beginning of the play, they are confused and confusing like hell.

Jean Genet’s play *The Maids* revolves round the love- hate relationship between two housemaid sisters and their mistress. The play has only four characters: the maids Solange and Claire (30 to 35 years old), Madame (25 years old), and her lover Monsieur. The mistress and her lover are unnamed. Monsieur, the only male character in the play, does not physically appear on stage. His presence is dramatically concretized on stage by a very short phone call heard by the maids. In the so called ‘plot’ of the play, Monsieur was accused by the maids of a crime which he has not committed. “Upon learning that he is to be released for lack of proof, they (the maids) realize that their betrayal will be discovered, and they try to murder ‘Madame’. They fail and want to kill themselves. Finally, one of them, Claire, ‘takes her life’, and the other, Solange, is ‘left alone’ to face her destiny” (Sartre P. 8)⁽²⁾

A quick reading of the play will show that the play starts with a murder, planned by the two sisters to kill their mistress, and ends with a suicide case. But a more serious reading of the play will reveal that *The Maids* goes beyond the ordinary murder case or even the complicated philosophical concept of the self and the apparent human’s search for identity. As a matter of fact, the playwright deals with the crushed identities of his characters. The characters of the play are no longer in search of their identities. The damage that had happened to them over the years is now beyond repair. It is, perhaps, for this reason none of the characters of the play is presented as him/her self. They are represented as the ‘other’. In the presence of Madame the maids show some kind of “fake submission, fake tenderness, fake respect,” and “fake gratitude” (Sartre 20). And when alone, the two housemaid sisters are presented as either a mistress or a maid. Not only that but also in their game of Madame and maid one plays the role of the mistress and the other plays the role of her sister

as a maid. They are never themselves whether they are alone or in the presence of their Madame. The mistress or Madame plays the role of the beloved and her Monsieur is introduced to us as a lover only. In Genet's *The Maids* "every character must play the role of a character who plays a role" (Sartre P. 20). Thus the audience discerns a sense of otherness at the very outset. Needless to say, this is an absurdist feature.

Genet's *The Maids* is based on the one-act play structure. It is set in the bedroom of a certain 'Madame' at an unknown place. 'The time is evening' and the 'action' of the play lasts till about one after midnight (P. 35)⁽³⁾. Like many plays in the theater of the absurd, the unities of time and place are very much observed. Because plays of this kind do not focus on logical acts, realistic occurrences, or traditional character development; they instead focus on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence no matter how illogical. The theme of incompressibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful connections. *The Maids* does not have a plot in the traditional sense of the term because nothing happens externally. It starts and ends with the maids playing the role of their mistress. While doing so the idea of killing their mistress, and later the actual self immolation of one of the sisters, flashes into their minds. Here it would be worth mentioning Martin Esslin's definition of the 'Absurd drama':

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these (the plays of the Absurd have no story or play to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerism of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings (21-21).

Therefore, the absurdist elements in the play cannot be ruled



out. There is no ‘plot’ in the traditional sense of the term, no flesh and blood characters, themes are not very clear and the dialogue is an “incoherent babblings”. But that does not mean that the play does not have a dramatic structure of its own. It starts at a certain point and ends at another. *The Maids* ‘plot’ could be divided into three parts: the exposition part starts from the very beginning of the play till the phone call of Monsieur, the complication part starts from the phone call till the appearance of Madame and her discovery of Monsieur’s release from jail, and the final part or ‘the resolution’ starts with the departure of Madame till the end of the play or the death of Claire. In other words *The Maids* has a dramatic construction of its own, in the tradition of the Absurdist Drama, rather than a traditional one. On account of this, striking common features between Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Genet’s *The Maids* are quite discernable. Both plays can be labeled as ‘absurdist’ in that they lack the traditional plot, characters and clarity of themes. Like the tramps Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*; the maids, Solange and Claire, keep indulging themselves and the audience with what seemed ‘nonsense games’. They play games, tell stories, abuse each other, shout at each other, and show their love and hate to one another. Both the tramps, as well as, the maids are caught in a ‘no exit’ situation interrupted by external intruders. In *Waiting for Godot*, it is Pozzo, and his servant Lucky, who interrupt the tramps, while in *The Maids* it is Madame and the phone call of her lover, Monsieur. Both plays seem to be a prolonged pieces of ‘silence’ filled with games and interruptions. If this shows anything, it shows the deep estrangement of these characters to their surroundings, consequently making them the other, rather than their own selves. They remain outsiders, ‘Others’ in other words. Therefore, not only do they not belong to the place where they find themselves in, but also they do not know where they belong. More importantly, the maids are no longer interested to know their true place in this world. They have passed the point of searching for their identities. For many years, every day, the maids would get up and play the same game. At first, they may have been in search for identities, but eventually suffered an eclipse. As a result their characters were completely crushed and distorted. In his book *The Theater of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin points out that Genet’s plays are

concerned with expressing his own feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition, inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images that are merely his own distorted reflection-lies covering lies, fantasies battering upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares (151).

Therefore, the maids' distorted image, loss of identity and the restless and pointless search for one seems to be the center of action. For, all the characters do not stop being the other. Solange and her sister Claire did not stop playing the roles of either the mistress or the maid. At times, the maids find it too difficult to get out of the role they are playing. In her final speech, the character of Solange 'the maid' merges with the character of Madame that it becomes almost impossible to separate them. For one becomes the other. But we should not overlook the fact that for the maids this is the only way they see themselves, or see each other i.e mistress or maid.

CLAIRE:-----Make yourself quite at home. Preen like a peacock. And above all, don't hurry, we've plenty of time. Go!

[SOLANGE's posture changes and she leaves humbly, holding the rubber gloves with her fingertips. CLAIRE sits down at the dressing table. She sniffs at the flowers, runs her hand over the toiley articles, brushes her hair, pats her face.]

Get my dress ready. Quick! Time presses. Are you there? [She turns round.] Claire! Claire! [Solange enters.]

Solange: I beg Madame's pardon, I was preparing her tea. [She pronounces it "tay."]

CLAIRE: Lay out my things. The white spangled dress. The fan. The emeralds.

Solange: Very well, Madame. All Madame's jewels?

CLAIRE: Put them out and I shall choose. And, of course, my patent-leather slippers. The ones you've had your eye on for years. (P. 36).

Such a great pain is to a great extent due to the long-term tormenting outcome of servant-mistress relationship. In her role-play



as a mistress, Claire expresses the poignant feelings of being a mistress. For Claire to be a mistress is a 'burden' and a 'terribly painful' experience. She also talks about the fire of 'vengeance' within her. That is why Claire did her best to forge a letter without 'mistakes in spelling' or 'syntax' to send Madame's lover to 'prison'. Claire says:

And I contain within me both vengeance and the maid and give them a chance for life, a chance for salvation. Claire, it's a burden, it's terribly painful to be a mistress, to contain all the springs of hatred, to be the dunghill on which you grow. You want to see me naked every day. I *am* beautiful, am I not? And the desperation of my love makes me even more so, but you have no idea what strength I need! (P. 43).

Every day, the two maid sisters pass their time by playing the role of their mistress. By doing so, Solange and Claire get rid of the tension and depression that build up during the day. They express their hallucination, obsession, love and hate for their mistress. The world of the mistress is the only world they know. They cannot see themselves out of it. To them 'existence' is reduced to the level of being either a 'maid' or a 'mistress'. They always confine themselves to these roles. They also played "the murder of Madame, a murder always being interrupted, always uncomplete" (Sartre. 23). And, to avoid being caught red-handed by their mistress, the maids set the alarm clock half an hour before her arrival. Half an hour is enough for them to set things in order and retain their 'characters' as maids.

CLAIRE: Danger is my halo, Claire; and you, you dwell in darkness. . . .

SOLANGE: But the darkness is dangerous.--- I know. I've heard all that before. I can tell by your face what I'm supposed to answer. So I'll finish it up. Now, here are the two maids, the faithful servants! They're standing in front of you. Despise them. Look more beautiful. -- We no longer fear you. We're merged, enveloped in our fumes, in our revels, in our hatred of you. The mold is setting. We're taking shape, Madame. Don't laugh-- ah! above all, don't laugh at my grandiloquence. . . .

CLAIRE: Get out!

SOLANGE: But only to be of further service to Madame! I'm going back to my kitchen, back to my gloves and the smell of my teeth. To my belching sink. You have your flowers, I my sink. I'm the maid. You, at least, you can't defile me. But! But! . . . [*she advances on CLAIRE, threateningly.*] But before I go back, I'm going to finish the job. [*Suddenly an alarm clock goes off. SOLANGE stops. The two actresses, in a state of agitation, run together. They huddle and listen.*] Already?

CLAIRE: Let's hurry! Madame'll be back. [*She starts to unfasten her dress.*] Help me. It's over already. And you didn't get to the end.

SOLANGE: [*helping her. In a sad tone of voice*]: The same thing happens every time. And it's all your fault, you're never ready. I can't finish you off (PP. 45-46).

In his article "The Maids" Henry Joyce states that:

At the core of the play is an exploration of the nature of identity, of self. In Jean Genet's thought, identity is ineffable; one knows the self only as an image reflected by the other, an image that quite likely is unreal. In the opening scene of *The Maids* the exaggerated, theatrical style of Claire the maid playing Madame commands attention with its obvious artificiality. When the alarm clock rings, the audience becomes aware that things are not what they appear, that they have perceived an illusion, and that the reality beneath the elaborate costume of the aristocratic woman is that of a servant playing a role (3).

As part of the endless inner and outer conflict Claire, at one point, finds it too difficult to get out of the mistress's role that she is playing. Her sister, Solange urges her to be quick and be herself again before the arrival of Madame:

SOLANGE [*sternly*]: Watch at the window. Thanks to you, the whole place is in a mess again. And I've got to



clean Madame's gown. [*She stares at her sister.*] Well, what's the matter with you? You can be like me now. Be yourself again. Come on, Claire, be my sister again (P. 48).

But all in vain, for this day seems to be different. "It's been close all day" and it is "killing" as Solange puts it (P. 47). They remembered how much they hate their mistress. Solange goes to the extent of saying that Madame loves her "armchair" more than her maids (P. 52). In an atmosphere that is filled with hatred and envy, and accusations, talking of murder becomes acceptable for the characters. Therefore, we as audience and readers, are not surprised to hear Claire describing Madame's lover's alleged crime, which he did commit, as "a good job". She says:

CLAIRE: I envy you; I wish I could have seen the expression on her face when she heard about her lover's arrest. For once in my life, I did a good job. You've got to admit it. If it weren't for me, if it hadn't been for my anonymous letter, you'd have missed a pretty sight: the lover handcuffed and Madame in tears. It's enough to kill her. This morning she could hardly stand up (PP 49- 50).

In the middle of their happiness for succeeding in sending Monsieur to prison, the maids unexpectedly, receive a phone call from Monsieur telling them that the police did not find him guilty and freed him on bail. He also requested them to inform Madame that he would be waiting for her at the Hong Kong bar. This phone call was only enough to disturb them, but they can never free themselves of the schizophrenic state of mind. Although they are very much aware of the consequences of their conspiracy, they are never back to their normal senses. The return of Monsieur means that their plot has not worked. Not only that, very soon the police will find out that the letter is written by one of the maids with the help of the other. In short, they will find themselves in jail sooner rather than later. It is because of this fear, the fear of what might happen to them, the maids' next move is to kill Madame. Their 'own devil' simplified the matter for them; "Ten sleeping pills" in "a cup of tea" will do the job (P. 66).

Upon Madame's arrival, Solange and Claire continue what



they have been addicted to, conspiring: Claire hurries to make her a cup of tea. Madame finds it shameful to drink or “ask for tea when Monsieur is all alone, without a thing, without food, without cigarettes.” She promises not to “desert him” and she would “follow him” to any prison they send him to even if that was the “Devil’s land” or “Siberia”. (P. 67). She denounces her “worldly life” because this is practically impossible as long as Monsieur is behind bars. Under such a fit of grief and melancholy, Madame bids “farewell to parties and dances and theater.” She even tells her maids that “you will inherit all that” (P.70). All of a sudden things change, Madame just by chance notices that the receiver of the telephone is left off. She enquires “who left the receiver off?” “It was Monsieur...” Claire answers (P. 71). She was so happy to hear that her lover is out of jail that she refused to have the tea prepared to her by Claire.

The crushed identity in the other characters like the ‘real’ mistress, so to say, thinks that she is not herself without Monsieur. Monsieur is of no identity if he is detached from Madame. Surprisingly enough, Genet gives names to the (supposed to be outcasts), the maids, but deliberately deprives the ones who enjoy certain social positions such a privilege and is satisfied in just calling them Madame and Monsieur.

There is definitely an under streak of otherness dexterously interwoven into the texture of the play. This is perhaps the reason why some of the leading contemporary men of letters were touched by this idea. Jean-Paul Sartre in his introduction to *The Maids and Deathwatch* has been very outspoken and elaborative about his views on the idea of alterity of roles in the play in question. He says that both maids are “Others” in that they oppose all social convention. Thus, they are others to the society they live in. They are others to themselves. They are others to the Madame. In the course of the play they play each others’ roles. And sometimes, they are so much into the roles of others that it becomes difficult for the playwright to disengage them. They are completely merged. Each becomes the other. Sartre also posits that their identities follow the course of a “whirligig”. That is, they alter positions in a circular pattern, the first sister adapting herself to the second sister's behavior until the second then adapts



herself newly to the first, and so on (P. 8).

Genet's use of the oblique portrayal of the play's characters Solange, Claire, Madame and Monsieur is important. From the very beginning of the play till the very end the maids, in turns, play the role of their Madame. We are not given the chance to see or hear them except through the roles they assign to themselves. Not only the maids whose identities are crushed, but also their Madame and her lover. She too appears to be fond of role-playing. She plays the role of the beloved and very much ready to play the role of a widow when her lover was sent to jail. We as audience / readers have not seen her as a mistress. We saw her only as Monsieur's beloved, or as lady whose mind fluctuates between dejection and happiness. In her short appearance, Madame, in a Hamletian attitude expresses "how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to [her] all the uses of this world!" without her lover (Act I, ii, 25). From this dejected and melancholic attitude to a very jovial and worldly reaction when she learned that her lover who was accused of theft is set free. She tells her maids to go to bed and not wait for her, because she will be drinking and enjoying herself and will not show up before morning. Sartre believes that "the most extraordinary example of the whirligigs of being and appearance, of the imaginary and the real, is to be found in [Genet's] play, *The Maids* (PP 7- 8).

Monsieur who does not appear in person on stage is introduced to us as Madame's lover. Like Madame he, too, has no special qualities, no name and no family. The moment he was released from jail he phoned his beloved and left a note to see her at Hong Kong bar. Like Madame, his character does not stand on its own. Both are dependent on each other. Both feel alone and vulnerable. Both are presented as 'others.'

Henry Joyce believes that "in the final moments of the play, fantasy and illusion merge and become real. With Claire's suicide the fantasy of Madame's murder is achieved, and Solange's fantasy of being a murderer becomes reality. The total fusion of self with illusion and self with other is realized in death" (*The Maids* 3). Therefore, in her last speech, Claire gets delirious. It is her turn to play the role of the mistress. She melts in the character of Madame and is unable to get out of it, "One of the two maids is about to immolate herself..."

she says. In a prophetic way she continues, "She will be led in procession by all the maids of the neighborhood, by all the servants who accompanied Claire to her final resting place" (P. 94). Like a real mistress, she orders her 'servant' Solange to bring her "a cup of tea". Solange refuses her order by telling her that "it is cold", but upon her repeated orders that "Madame must have her tea", she brings it to her (p.98). Claire immediately drinks it leaving her sister alone and "awake" to face her destiny. The curtain descends after Solange's short speech which is full of madness. She imagines Madame enjoying herself with Monsieur, but, she is unable to smile to Monsieur's "whispering sweet nothings in her ear" because she (Madame / Claire) is dead. Solange goes on to say :

Madame goes up the stairs. She enters her apartment---but 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 (99 -100) .

In her article "Maids" Harris Gregory believes that "the maids, being outcasts, society's "distorting mirrors," have two ways of becoming a society of their own: through imitating Madame's gestures and words or through her death. Madame is a fake, however, so the maids are doomed to failure. This is why the maids never succeed in killing Madame, and why Claire ends up killing herself while playing Madame — it is the closest she will ever get to becoming the mistress" (P. 2.)

Thus, the maids' sadomasochistic role playing and the alienated pathology of the artist behind it had electrified audiences in 1947, though the novelty of the subject matter is now long gone for obvious reasons. But, back then, the audiences came to the theater to see imitations of themselves to reassure the 'Otherness' on stage. They see the sisters emerge as cons pirating monsters with an abnormal fantasy which leads to schizophrenic, homoerotic actions. But then, Genet seems to be justifying their actions on account of his own perception of the world which is mad. The monster of the sisters is



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clearly created by their master, who represents a certain social class. The fact remains that the theme of the play is and will remain new and sensational to us in the 21st century and forever and ever. The twisted psychology of the oppressed versus the oppressor and a situation never ceases to be a situation of class struggle, where maids strived, relentlessly to be 'Others'. In their strive, they reach a point of no return and it is there that they are caged. Some modern directors of Jean Genet, such as Jessie Berger, has designed the set as a large box around which the audience sit. It evokes the maids' psychological cage that forces them so much to be 'the Other', rather than their own selves⁽⁴⁾



Notes

1. Jean Genet (1910-1986), poet, novelist, playwright, and political essayist, was one of the most significant French writers of the twentieth century. His work, much of it considered scandalous when it first appeared, is now placed among the classics of modern literature and has been translated and performed throughout the world” See Jean Genet by Baker&Taylor Biographies. 2000, p1. For more biographical details and also a brief critical analysis of Genet’ major works, see Richard N. Coe “Jean Genet” Salem press. P1-10.
2. For details on Jean Paul Sartre views on *The Maids* and other Jean Genet’s plays, see Sartre’s introduction to *The Maids and Deathwatch*, Grove Press. PP 7-31.
3. All quotations are taken from Jean Genet’s *The Maids and Deathwatch*, Grove press. 1962
4. For more details see *The Maids*; Written by Jean Genet: Directed by Jesse Berger: Red Bull Theater: Theater at St. Clement’s 423 West 46th Street, New York, www.redbulltheater.com

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