

Women as “Dasein”: A Philosophical Approach to Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends*

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Abstract: From the perspective of the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger's "Dasein", this paper is to explore the American avant-garde dramatist Maria Irene Fornes' masterpiece *Fefu and Her Friends*. It maintains that the characters in the play are not merely victims of the patriarchal society, but also a mirror to "Dasein", suffering from anxiety and searching for the authenticity of Being in the process of being-toward-death.

Key words: Fornes; Heidegger; women; Dasein; death

The year of 1927 witnesses Martin Heidegger astonishing the German philosophical world with his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, Eng.1962); half a century later, the important avant-garde dramatist Maria Irene Fornes stirred American theatre with her tour de force *Fefu and Her Friends*. Notwithstanding the tremendous gap of time and space between the two incidents, the German philosopher's insight revealed in his work may shed light on the American play.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's declared purpose is to study what it means for a man to be. The most important of the terms he invented is "Dasein". Literally in the German language, "Dasein" means existence, that is, being there in space and time as contrasted with not being at all. To Heidegger, however, the term refers to human being, the entity whose being consists in disclosing and understanding being, whether the being of itself or that of other entities. (See Sheehan 1998) "To Dasein's Being, an understanding of Being belongs." (*Being and Time*, p118) Dasein has been cast into the world. In a sense, Descartes' dogma has been inverted like this: "I exist, therefore I think". Unfortunately, Dasein tends to become excessively absorbed in everyday concerns and oblivious to its own being. He loses the sense of its "authentic" self, and becomes one of the "they" (das Man), one of the anonymous crowd, taking the "they"'s values and incorporating its ways of thinking and acting.

Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* (*man*) take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The "they", which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.

(*Being and Time*, p164)

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* Received 15 January 2010; accepted 14 April 2010

This is the present crisis of human being. This crisis, in accordance with Heidegger, results from a deep fall which Western thought has experienced due to a one-sided technical development that leads to a "highly inauthentic way of being", or more plainly expressed, alienation. Inauthenticity belongs to the inescapable way of human existence.

But there is a unique mood, anxiety or dread, that functions to disclose authentic being and recall human being from betrayal to self-knowledge. "...But the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety." (*Being and Time*, p310). In anxiety, Dasein faces the whole structure of being-in-the-world itself and then is taken hold of by a sense of nothingness. He discovers that life in its entirety is "Being-towards-death", and he is set free from the illusions of the "they", in an impassioned, self-assured, and anxious freedom to death. As Schulz (2000) interprets, "Death is neither a biological phenomenon nor a universal fate; dying is Being-towards-death, to which the particular individual has to call himself up for.....As man carries out his 'Being-towards-death', he understands himself from this end and only so does he becomes *whole*."

Drukman (2000) contends, "The best way to wrap your mind around the prayers of Maria Irene Fornes is to abandon all hope of understanding it." By considering woman as Dasein, however, we are able to look into the depth of the life of Fefu and her friends and then have a better appreciation of Fornes' work. The play, set in New England in the 1930s, presents women living a highly "inauthentic" life, as they are being on the point of being submerged in the society. They struggle to show their authentic selves that are different from the anonymous crowd, experiencing anxiety and going towards death. In a nut, the characters lead an existence that is quite the same as Dasein does. What should be born in the mind is that Heidegger's Dasein refers to human being regardless of sex, but woman as Dasein needs to be considered in a more specific context.

Fefu and Her Friends, displays everydayness that surrounds its eight women characters, who gather at Fefu's house for a fundraising project that is connected with education. Various food, chattering, and daily routine seem to preoccupy everybody. What is more important, they are being obscured into the male-dominated society. Christina admits that she is "probably ultimately a conformist". Cecilia says, "We cannot survive in a vacuum. We must be part of a community, perhaps 10, 100, 1000. It depends on how strong you are. But even the strongest will need a dozen, three, even one who sees, thinks and feels as he does... As we grow we feel we are strange and fear any thought that is not shared with everyone." Emma recites what Emma Sheridan Fry has written, "Society restricts us, school straight jackets us, civilization submerges us." From Julia's hallucination, the reader may feel more clearly the pressure from the society presented by "they", that resembles the "they" in *Being and Time*.

In seeking her own authentic being, woman as Dasein experiences anxiety. Here, a distinction should be made between anxiety in the ordinary sense and anxiety in the ontological sense, that is the "sober" anxiety in the terms of Heidegger. The characters in *Fefu and Her Friends* are undergoing anxiety in the ordinary sense that leads to "sober" anxiety. Their anxiety results from the alienation between them and the "they", specifically, not only from the alienation between them and society, but from the alienation between them and men, between themselves, and between them and their selves.

The alienation between women and men shows itself through the play. Though the play is populated by only women and men are put off-stage in the distance, men's dominance and presence is clearly felt, as they are talked about, loved, admired, envied and feared. Fefu sighs, "They are checking the new grass mower.....Out in the fresh air and sun, while we sit here in the dark". It reminds us of the Chinese categorization of man and woman into *Yang* and *Yin* respectively. This sort of values, prescribed by the "they", takes root in the mind of women and decide their ways of thinking and acting. It seems that women do not live a life of their own, but live one for males. If one tries to show herself "in the light", however, the relationship will get tense. Fefu is convinced that her husband Philip has married her to "have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are". To act as men do, she plays the game of shooting her husband Philip. Cindy, who has been deserted by her husband or partner Mike, manages to put the slug in the gun, which might be interpreted as her motivation to kill Philip owing to a strong resentment against all men. Julia suffers psychologically from the hunter, though indirectly; and in her hallucination, she feels that men club her and pay attention to woman's anti-aesthetic image with heavy entrails. In a nut, the tension between the sexes belongs to the inevitable way of women's Being.

Ironically, the alienation between women themselves is no less serious. They live in the position of the second sex or the inferior sex and labour under the illusions of the "they". As a result, naturally, they tend to dislike and distrust one another. This is probably one of the reasons that Fefu gathers her friends. She views the relationship between women like this:

FEFU:I still like men better than women. Women are restless with each other. They are like wireseither chattering to keep themselves from making contact, or else, if they don't chatter, they avert their eyes...like Orpheus...

CHRISTINA: ...I too have wished for that trust men have for each other. The faith the world put in them and they in turn put in the world. I know I don't have it.

(Part 1, *Fefu and Her Friends*.)

Among the eight women characters in the play is a couple of ex-lesbians, Paula and Cecilia. They used to live together probably owing to their fear of men, and they separate because they are unable to stand each other. Paula has proposed a solution ---- celibacy. But she herself is convinced that it "doesn't solve anything". Even between women friends, there prevails misunderstanding. Fefu, who shows her unusualness, is considered by her friends as strange and crazy. Assuming the "they"'s values, women cannot accept what they themselves are.

Anxiety is aroused in the alienated women and is experienced in different ways in different characters. Fefu's anxiety is first demonstrated in her concern on the toilet plumbing, which is "more important than you think". Farfan (1997: p445) argues that Fefu's interest in plumbing is indicative of her male-identification as a way of overcoming her pain in marriage. To be specific, I'd point out, her pain, or anxiety also stems from her female identity. Anxiety over toilet plumbing might be associated with sexual dissatisfaction. As far as a woman is concerned, it can also be connected with menstruation anxiety. Fefu's age is not mentioned in the play itself. But according to Munk (1977), she is middle-aged. So menopause, a likely biological nuisance to a middle-aged woman, may disturb Fefu and contribute a great deal to her anxiety over toilet. Emma's remarks about her own toilet confirm that this sort of anxiety is shared by them. To Fefu, what is worse is "her constant pain", which is owing to herself, symbolized by the black cat starting to come to her kitchen.

Here self-alienation pushes her to undergo "sober" anxiety. By becoming one of the "they", she assumes the values that she, as woman, is loathsome and awful; on the other hand, however, she longs to display her uniqueness and show her authentic self. She must struggle against men represented by her husband, but she also has a strong desire for his love, his touch and his kisses. She is eager to be reassured by man, but she is not willing to pay the price of "the mind and the spirit". She leads a life alienated from herself. This kind of schizophrenia is best expressed in the black cat, which she is afraid of, but which she must feed.

The nightmare Cindy has had is another good sample of women's anxiety. A dream, as the existentialist psychotherapist Medard Boss (See Hall, C. S.: 1994) maintains, should be taken at its face value and bring to light the way in which the dreamer views existence. In the dream, she doubts that Mike minds her, which reflects the tense relationship between her and Mike. "Then he (the singing professor) grabbed me and felt my throat from behind with his thumbs while he rubbed my nipples with his pinkies" indicates Cindy's sexual discontent and longing for man, which is no different from Fefu's. Likewise, her anxiety on this instinctive level culminates in anxiety over death, manifested by a young man trying to kill her in her dream. Her obsession that a person is swept off his feet further proves that she undergoes a sort of ontological anxiety.

Cindy's terrible dream is dwarfed by Julia's hallucination, which demonstrates anxiety at its apogee. The hallucination is visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual, seeing male tormentors club her, break her head and tear her eyes out; auditory, hearing men complain about women's anti-aesthetic images and give her warnings; kinesthetic, moving her head and her hand as if slapped. After examining what Hall, H. V. (1994) finds about hallucinations, we may realize that Julia's hallucination, pathologically, is caused by social isolation and rejection, and/or a severe reactive depression. This is proved by Julia's confession: "I can't spend time with others!" She is so smart and knowledgeable that she sees through how woman is alienated in the patriarchic society, and has come to a realization that the life of a woman,

whether conformist or feminist, is empty and meaningless, and that life is "being-towards-death". In her hallucination, Julia is seen struggling with herself, trying hard to get rid of her "unauthentic" self and maintaining her "authentic" self. On the one hand, she, being submerged by the "they", adopts "their" values to condemn woman as the noxious that "generates the evil herself". On the other hand, she is not willing to give in and takes a risk arguing with them.

A study of the relationship between Julia and Fefu might be helpful for us to understand the meaningfulness of Julia's preparedness to die. Elaine Showalter (Cited from Farfan 1997: p444) writes, "hysteria and feminism...exist on a kind of continuum ... if we see the hysterical woman as one end of the spectrum of a female avant-garde struggling to redefine women's place in the social order, then we can also see feminism as the other end of the spectrum, the alternative to hysterical silence, and the determination to speak and act for women in the public world." Based on this statement, it is evident that Julia is hysterical on one end of the continuum while Fefu is a feminist on the other end. Both of them have protested against the patriarchal authority. Fefu reports about Julia, "She was afraid of nothing.... She knew much. She was so young and yet she knew so much. How did she learn all that? " Combined with Julia's hallucination about her being persecuted, it might be inferred that she used to strive for women's status with determination.

Fefu, who is also brilliant, has made an influential speech on the feminist Voltairine de Cleyre, shoots her husband, and endeavors to assert herself as a woman. She looks and acts very tough, but actually feels rather weak, parallel to a stone, the exterior of which is "smooth and dry and clean", but the underneath of which is "slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms". Basically she tends to labour under an illusion that she is able to live an authentic life by treating life as a game. Besides the shooting game, she likes to play another game. Part 2 of the play shows that Fefu's talk of her constant pain, Cindy's account of her terrible dreams and Paula's lamentation on her being deserted by her lesbian partner, are all followed by Fefu's proposal for the game of croquet. This game might be interpreted as another desperate strategy to overcome anxiety.

As a matter of fact, Julia has more insight into women's existence. She has successfully suppressed her sexual and emotional needs and confides to Cindy that she has no need of love life. Fefu, however, is anxious for it. Fefu looks upon Julia as her comrade fighting against the society, taking care of and giving encouragement to her. She offers to help Julia as soon as the latter arrives. She urges Julia to stand up. But spiritually, Fefu is more seriously crippled in her admiration of men. She is in urgent need of a fellow fighter. The following dialogue between them is revealing:

FEFU: I want to rest. Julia. How does a person rest. I want to put my mind at rest. I am frightened. (JULIA looks at FEFU.) Don't look at me. (She covers JULIA's eyes with her hand.) I lose my courage when you look at me.

JULIA: May no harm come to your head.

FEFU: Fight!

JULIA: May no harm come to your will.

FEFU: Fight, Julia.

(FEFU starts shaking the wheelchair and pulling JULIA off the wheelchair.)

JULIA: I have no life left.

FEFU: Fight, Julia!

JULIA: May no harm come to your hands.

FEFU: I need you to fight.

JULIA: May no harm come to your eyes.

FEFU: Fight with me!

JULIA: May no harm come to your voice.

FEFU: Fight with me!

JULIA: May no harm come to your heart.

(Part 3, *Fefu and Her Friends*)

From the above except, we are shown the characters' destiny, which Julia faces with peace and calmness, but which Fefu is afraid of. Julia expresses her good wishes to Fefu, but she herself foretells that her wishes are in vain and Fefu will, in the feminist sense, break down as she does, and then come to

an ontological enlightenment.

The gun, which indirectly leads to Julia's death, seems to permeate the play. The scene at the very beginning is startling with the gun: "A double barrel shotgun leans on the wall near the French doors." And the play is ended with the "sound of a shot", which leads in a surreal way to Julia's death. What is more striking is that Julia's death is voluntary, like a suicide. In Fefu's house, as soon as she sees the gun, Julia "goes to the gun, takes it and smells the mouth of the barrel". This is like a kiss of death. The bedroom scene in which "*There are dry leaves on the floor although it is not fall*", and that Julia asks for a damp cloth for her forehead as Fefu gets the gun and exits, symbolize Julia's readiness to die. Her identification with the "deer" and "rabbit", which are peaceful herbivores, denotes her attitude towards the society and towards death. Julia's very clear that feminism is doomed, however women struggle. More importantly, she is enlightened about life in its entirety as Being-towards- death. Life is finite and Being-towards-death is the authenticity of human being.

What is noteworthy is that Julia's death is to exert a great impact upon her friends, especially Fefu. It will naturally increase their anxiety over death. Hayslip (1994) has found, "Relative to other conscious fears that may be repressed, anxiety over the deaths of others may be particularly difficult to deal with." In the words of Schulz (2000), the death of others makes the general determination of dying foremost tangible and concrete; the observation of the death of others is certainly a real experience of death. How Julia's dying affects her friends' state of mind can be detected from their action at the end of the play:

(Dropping the rabbit, FEFU walks to JULIA and stands behind the chair as she looks at JULIA. SUE and CINDY enter from the foyer, EMMA and PAULA from the kitchen, CHRISTINA and CECILA from the lawn. They surround JULIA. The lights fade.)

All the eight characters, with dead Julia at the center, form a tableau. They have gathered for a meeting and advocated an education that protects the usualness in everyone from perishing. But they themselves are really most educated by Julia's death. Although the play is finished, we can imagine that Julia's death will further awaken the "sober" anxiety in her friends. We may anticipate that they might be experiencing their anxious freedom to withdraw from their alienation with everydayness and the "they"--- men, women, and their own unauthentic selves.

Fornes's *mise-en-scene* is rather revolutionary, making the audience much involved in the course of the performance. Yet, the playwright sticks to classical space and time unity. The space is limited to Fefu's house, which seems to liken the stifling world where they are seeking their authentic being. The play is set in spring, a season in which every living thing is breathing for new life and anxiety is easily aroused. And the time, from noon through afternoon to evening, symbolizes a process by which woman as Dasein leads a being-towards-death.

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