

## Yerma-Lorca's Portrayal of a Tragic Woman

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### Abstract

This research paper traces the factors that lie behind the psychological and physical agony of a humble peasant woman in rural Spain with reference to Lorca's play, *Yerma*. The unfortunate Yerma craves for self realization in the form of maternity, but her barrenness becomes a source of unending torture for her in a traditional society that denies women social equality. After five long years of fighting a losing battle against a relentless fate, Yerma finds out that honest means do not give her the fulfillment of her dreams and it would be utterly unacceptable for her to go beyond the boundaries of her own sense of honor. In a way, the story of Yerma reflects the agony of the present day women, who, like Yerma undergo the same torment of repressed desires and are, either driven to insanity or condemned for ever.

**Keywords:** *psychological; barrenness; relentless fate; insanity; condemned*

*Yerma* is the story of an unfortunate, humble peasant woman, who rises out of anonymity to tragic stature. Lorca presents Yerma, who is experiencing identity crises in isolation and torment. She obsessively craves self realization in the form of maternity. Her suffering encompasses her whole life, in which she fights a solitary struggle between her own sense of honor and her dreams. This research explores the various factors that make Yerma suffer endlessly. The play represents a struggle between freedom and repression, or a conflict between the individual and society, or between natural law and social law. If Yerma cannot bear a child, it is because a rigid code of societal honour prevents her from abandoning her husband Juan or taking advantage of the fertility rites conducted by the Pagan Woman. Besides the social fabric, another very obvious factor that affects the life of Yerma, is the presence of a much larger force in the form of fate.

This psychological drama has a universal appeal, as it tends to address some age old issues regarding the role of a woman in home and society. The moral dilemma which makes Yerma suffer consistently, and her agony at the domestic and social level, find their parallel in the modern day society. It is a play about all the women, who, like Yerma, do not rebel and find it difficult to conform to the existing norms of moral behavior and are thus caught in a highly intense emotional web. However, at the very heart of this tragedy, there is still a consolation in the fact that, Yerma's honor, virtue and integrity remain undefeated and lift her up to make her a heroic figure.

In his play, Lorca presents this woman as the love bearer of all passions and frustrations. Fate places her in Juan's household, where her yearning for motherhood stands in sharp contrast to her husband's passive attitude. She seems to stand on one extreme of desire and longing while Juan on the other. It is largely this clash that puts Yerma in an endless agony. The only aim of existence for Yerma is to conceive a child, and this utmost desire in her is obvious in her song; "I tell you, my child –it's true, it's true / I am broken and torn for you. / My womb aches for you - / An empty cradle craving for you" (1.1.69). On the other hand, Juan's indifference to this matter adds to her misery when he says, "The work is going well, and we have no children to waste money on" (1.1.68). From the very beginning, it is clear that both the husband and the wife are poles apart in their conception of a married life. Thus Yerma has to fight single handedly against the forces within her home as well as those outside it. The entire social structure around her seems to join hands with her fate to unleash endless torment on the poor soul. Here one cannot but agree with Lorca's statement that, Yerma is an essentially tragic figure that I have put in modern dress. She is, above all else, the image of fertility condemned to remain sterile. A soul singled out by destiny to be a victim of sterility. And it is this contrast between sterile and life giving principles which give the play its tragic tension(qtd. in Rio 153).

The suffering of Yerma seems more poignant when seen in context of her vain endeavors against a relentless fate. In the course of the play, she is driven from sanity to a frenzied state, and unconsciously becomes one with fate by strangling her husband to death her only hope to conceive a child is destroyed at her own hands. She saves her honor and family name by abiding the moral code of society but all this is done at the cost of her own self. Yerma is a peasant, earth bound being, with the basics of material life yet childless and thus incomplete. Her desire to bear a child transforms itself into a passion that holds all the significance of life for her. She speaks her heart out to Dolores, "I will have one because I must. Or else the world makes no sense" (3.1.100). The beginning scene is a dream of a man and a child: what is denied to Yerma. This is to distinguish the disparity between her reality and her dream. The choral voices of the washerwomen, the silent but spying Sister in Laws and the Pagan Woman constantly make Yerma suffer. Their ironical remarks prick the already sore wound of sterility in Yerma and thus do not allow her to have a single moment of peace in her life.

It is a realistic tragedy of everyday occurrence located in a domestic surrounding. Yerma is tortured by a society which has double standards of moral judgment. If Juan had been in her place, he would have no social restriction. But here it is Yerma, who goes on striking her head against a rock - her husband. Her pain can be noticed in her words spoken with Dolores, "When he takes me, he is doing his duty, but his body feels as cold as a corpse..., but at that moment I would like to be a mountain of fire!" (3.1.101). Although she is free to follow her natural instincts in the company of the Pagan Woman yet she could not break the strong moral code. She slams the offers of the old Pagan Woman and bears the cross of her strong natural urges all by herself when she says to her "Go away! I'll continue on the road I have chosen... know who I am, so that you will never speak to me again / I am not looking for anyone" (3.2.112). In this way the social set up around her increase her agony. Nicholas Round, in the introduction to Lorca's *Four Major Plays*, comments on the role society plays in Yerma's tragedy, "She is caught in a moral dilemma, within herself and also a victim of social norms, tyrannous for women and their hopes. She would not leave niggardly Juan for free spirited Victor" (xxii).

Yerma finds herself caught in the classic bind of a shame culture: the more she talks to the sympathetic neighbors, the village as a whole starts to gossip. Her tragedy is hers to bear alone; "...I feel hurt, hurt and utterly humiliated to see corn always ripening, springs always giving water, sheep giving birth to lambs by the hundreds... as if the whole countryside... standing up to show me its sweet, sleepy offspring" (2.2.94). Yerma remembers and calculates the days, she he has been waiting for a child from the first day of her marriage as she touchingly remarks, "... the moment I got engaged to him, I began to think about having children" (1.2.76). She accepts an arranged marriage out of obedience, hoping to find fulfillment in becoming a mother, but even that is denied to her and the society mocks her for a failing, which, she is incapable to correct by all means.

The sterility of Yerma is highlighted in the play by the presence of abundance around her. All the women who interact with her are reflective of life's continuity and their fertility makes her suffer as she expresses her utter dejection in these words, "You women who have children, you cannot understand those of us who don't! You stay fresh, ignorant-like people who swim in sweet water with no idea what thirst is" (2.2.94). Water to Yerma is a life giving force. She says to her husband in the very first lines of the play, "I'd like to see you swimming in the river, and climbing on to the roof of the house when the rain is streaming down" (1.1.67). The sustained use of water symbolism keeps reminding one of fertility and procreation. She lives in a rich, lush countryside where nature's law of growth and fertility mock her efforts to bear a child. Her helplessness is depicted in her words, "I want to drink water but there is no glass and no water" (2.2.92).

It is in Yerma's fate to be married to a man like Juan, her destiny is to be childless and it is her choice not to sin. Their marriage is an incompatible match as Yerma comes from a large and respected family whereas Juan's family is degenerate and of meager lineage as described by the Pagan Woman, "... a poor sort of breed, every one of them. Heaven and earth had to come together before they could father a child" (3.2.112). And Yerma says, "A curse on my father for giving me his blood that could have fathered a hundred children" (3.1.112). In their married life, both the husband and the wife are poles apart. There is a sharp contrast in their attitude and their mental approach towards the issues that govern their everyday lives. Juan is a devoted farmer, overly concerned about his land's productivity and increasing his flocks, irrigating the land, staying at his fields all night long but is unconcerned with making his wife happy or enlarging his family. Juan's lack of concern for being childless and his incapacity to look beyond the physical is what makes Yerma suffer endlessly. He says to Yerma, "What matters is what I can hold in my hands ... without children life is sweeter" (3.2.112-14). Juan is scared of gossip and cares more for public respect, while Yerma's sense of honor is on private level, governed only by the highest standards that she expects of herself.

It is on these grounds that Yerma cannot love Juan, who is like a wall to her where, she has "to smash her head to

bits” (3.1.104). When the Pagan Woman asks Yerma if she loves her husband, she says, “I don’t love him and yet he is my only hope for salvation. For my own good name and my family’s” (3.1.102). Similarly, instead of being able to look deeper into his wife’s problem, Juan feels threatened by her obsession and says to her, “Looking at me with eyes like needles ... with her eyes wide open and breathing wicked sighs all over my pillows” (3.1.102). This lack of understanding on the part of Juan makes Yerma an outcast even in her own house. If Yerma was not inhibited by her inner sense of honor, there would not have been any conflict, because she would have either left her husband or conceived a child through illicit relationship. But the social, religious and moral standards prevent Yerma to exercise a free will and it is a fact that she is a willing victim of this code.

Yerma is raised in a society which taught her to put aside her physical and emotional needs. Yerma herself says: “Country girls like me find every door closed against them. All we get are hints and gestures because they say that all things are not for us to know” (1.2.77). Being born and brought up in the countryside, Yerma holds very simple notions about life. She thinks that the only reason for a woman to exist in this world is to be a mother and if that is denied to her, then the very sense of her identity is lost. Yerma’s self respect is dashed to the ground when her two Sisters in Law follow her everywhere like shadows. She is a woman who is already haunted by a strong sense of her family honor as she expresses it to the Pagan Woman, “You know I am the daughter of Enrique, the shepherd” (1.2.75). Her husband is worried only about the apparent situation while she is being eaten from inside.

In Lorca’s world of the play, man, in the context of a patriarchal society, dominates with unquestioned authority. Woman’s duty is only to procreate children and for her, to love outside marriage is a crime. But love is often stronger than the social order. In Yerma’s case, this all important emotional outlet has been cruelly denied. Yerma’s dream at the beginning of the play shows her psychological rather than physical struggle of attraction towards Victor. Before her marriage, Yerma had felt her heart go out to Victor who is a strong and healthy man, clearly the shepherd of her dreams- the only man who attracts her and she admits it to the old woman later. When she meets Victor, she hears a child crying in her imagination. Yerma conveys her yearning to him in these words, “Some things don’t change. There are things locked away behind close doors that can’t change because nobody hears them” (2.2.97). When Victor comes to bid farewell and afterwards when Yerma disappears into the night, the stage is set with the shadows of darkness and light and there are constant melancholic sounds of the shepherd’s conch and the sheep bells. In this context, Francisco Garcia Lorca writes in his prologue, “In Yerma, the conflict is determined by a force that struggles against itself within the soul, a violent anxiety of fertility and sterility or on another plane of life and death” (22).

The characters in the play are portrayed in a way that they highlight the suffering of Yerma. The washerwomen are fertile, earthly, passionate women and their songs are full of rhythm. They personify the public curiosity and speculation about a married, childless couple. The fourth woman says, “If a woman wants children, she has them” (2.1.83). They gossip and make veiled accusations that Yerma is looking at another man. There is another contrast between Yerma and the other two young wives. The first who left her sleeping baby at home alone with the pigs and the second wife who enjoys a healthy relationship with her husband, even though she, also does not have any children. Unlike Yerma she is not restricted by any social norms and her positive attitude towards her own condition of childlessness is a strong contrast to the melancholy in Yerma.

The dream and the lullaby in the beginning of the play is the first manifestation of an ironic situation in which Maria who knows nothing about motherhood, is expecting while Yerma, who seems to know a lot, is childless. Yerma is nowhere at peace. She is frustrated at home and the abundance in the world outside her home mocks her. The Pagan Woman marries twice and has fourteen sons. She immediately senses that Yerma is repressed and that is the cause of her sterility. It is a matter of repressed creative energy turning into destructive forces. Yerma, in a state of desperation says, “To want something in your head is one thing, but it’s another thing when your body - damn the body, - won’t do what you want” (3.1.104). Eroticism is an evil force to her. The only form of love she can recognize is the love of a mother for her child.

The play *Yerma*, works on two levels of morality. On one hand, there is a rigid world of work, order and responsibility represented by Juan, Victor and Maria while on the other, there is the pagan world with all its temptations to follow - a code that contrasts strongly with Yerma’s sense of honor and self respect. In a state of desperation, she goes to the village Pagan Witch, who helps women conceive through strange rites. The presence of songs, dance and music, turns into an excuse for debauchery. But when the Pagan Woman offers her own son to Yerma, she is filled with disgust. This is the final moment of realization for Yerma. The very thought of entering into a relation in this manner to fulfill her life long cherished dream disgusts her. She turns to Juan as her only refuge but his response is loaded more with worldly advice than with any genuine concern for her state. He embraces her

passionately and tries to convince her with these words, “these are shadowy things that have nothing to do with real life, phantoms in the air” (3.2.113). Yerma is shocked at his words and she breaks into a thousand fragments. With a loud scream from within her torn soul, she strangles Juan with her bare hands, “... with my own hands I have killed my son” (3.2.115). Through Yerma, Lorca shows us the path of human soul, full of good will yet declining towards hopelessness until the admission of the final defeat at the hands of fate. Five years of agony and torture accumulate and result in complete destruction. The murder portrays Yerma’s downfall as she says, “Barren. Barren, but sure. Now I know it for certain. And alone” (3.2.115).

Yerma’s tragic story is not an unfamiliar one in our time and environment. In our society, a woman with suppressed natural instincts usually adopts one of these two ways; being torn from within, either she abides by the social taboos, suffers endlessly and consequently driven to insanity like Yerma or being tempted by the environment around her; she succumbs to the fulfillment of her desire and is condemned forever like Radha in the film named *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta. The agony of Yerma, in many ways reflects the tormented life of Radha in the film. But it is different in some other aspects. The two women in the film, Radha and her newly wed sister-in-law, Sita are abandoned by their husbands in pursuit of other things. Radha, like Yerma has been bearing the pangs of childlessness and a suppressed sexual life and there is no comforter in her life. Her husband tries to make her look things from his perspective and therefore all hope of revival is lost. On the other hand Sita, being an embodiment of lust and desire, like the Pagan Woman in *Yerma*, tempts Radha to attend to her desires. Unlike Yerma, Radha sets her long suppressed desires free and forms a lesbian relationship with Sita. Burning from within, she cannot restrain herself and destroys her self respect and honor in the fire of desire. Unable to admit his own fault in this respect, Radha’s husband, Ashok throws her out of the house and she is condemned forever.

Like the patriarchal setting in Lorca’s play, women in our society do not dare to break the man made rules. Their honor and security are assured only if they lead their lives within a prescribed mode. Unlike Radha, Yerma retains her honor and dignity. It is this integrity and sense of self respect that makes Yerma heroic but the same thing comes in the way of her happiness. The murder of Juan is also a suicide for Yerma as he is her only hope to conceive a child, “only hope of salvation” (3.1.101). It is utterly destructive for her to find out at the end of five long and tiresome years that she has been fighting a losing battle against a relentless fate. The society only adds to her suffering by offering her a choice which she would never take. Her desperate action of murdering her husband, in a way, is the death of her desire to bear a child, end of a farce as was her marriage and a stop to her agony. At the end, she breaks the barriers of her soul to do something that finishes her torment. Although she kills her husband in a desperate state yet what raises her to a heroic stature is her strong adherence to her honor and chastity. Christopher Maurer, in the introduction to the book, *The House of Bernada Alba and Other Plays*, sums up the factors that bring havoc in Yerma’s life in these words, “In *Yerma*, desire is frustrated violently and fatally by social forces. Authority appears to triumph over freedom, society over personal instinct and the social law over the deeper imperatives of nature” (xxiii).

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